**MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE OF TERTIARY STUDENTS LEARNING EFL IN VIETNAM:**

**A CASE STUDY OF DANANG UNIVERSITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the field of Second Language Teaching and Learning (ESL), motivation is of great importance. By understanding learner motivation and attitudes, ESL teachers can design and carry out lessons that nourish and capitalize on the motivation of each student to learn English.

The central concern of this study is the motivation and attitudes of Vietnamese tertiary students toward learning English. The study seeks to determine what makes tertiary students in a Vietnam university learn English and how they think about the current English teaching and learning processes at their institution.

Subjects for this study are 240 students from two member universities of Danang University, Vietnam. A questionnaire, an adapted version of Gardner's Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (1985a) was administered to the students to collect data. Classroom observations and focused interviews are also conducted to better interpret the data. The study reveals 1) The motivation is more instrumental than integrative; 2) A range of attitudes towards teaching and learning English is evident and 3) Students’ suggestions for improvement in English teaching at their institutions are worth considering.

**Key words:** attitude, motivation, English as a foreign language, Vietnam, tertiary students

**INTRODUCTION**

What makes people do the things they do and how are they doing them? These two questions are both simple and sophisticated because motivation and attitude are two intricate and abstract concepts. In the field of Second Language Teaching and Learning (ESL), motivation and attitude are of great importance. By understanding learner motivation and attitudes, ESL teachers can design and, accordingly, carry out lessons that nourish and capitalize on the motivation of each student to learn English. In addition, according to Hargis (1989), Ames (1992), and Long (1997), students are the most logical evaluators of courses and teacher performance. They objectively evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and general satisfaction of the courses and their feedback can be used to encourage educational improvement.

**Theories of Motivation and Attitude in ESL**

According to Hammerly (1982), among the many factors which affect second language learning, a high degree of motivation and positive attitude are the most facilitating and influential. Gardner and Lambert (1972) also suggest that "The learner's ethnocentric tendencies and his attitudes toward the members of the other group are believed to determine how successful he will be, relatively, in learning the new language" (p.3). These opinions are supported by Dulay and Burt (1977), who claim that attitudinal variables may affect the language acquisition process significantly. In addition, Ellis (1994) emphasizes that most Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research "views motivation as a key factor in second language learning" (p.508).

The domain of the study of motivation is large and the literature in this area is huge. Motivation is consistently defined in the literature as the internal knowledge and will of the individual to act (Wlodkowski, 1999). Morris (1970) states that motivation is "an incentive, inducement, or motive, especially for an act" (p.856). According to Cantor (1992), motivation is the inner drive that, from birth, causes people to act. Wlodkowski (1999) also defines motivation as "a concept that explains why people think and behave as they do" (p.l). Common to all these definitions is the reference to a goal-directed purposeful behavior or act. Applying this understanding of motivation to adult education, Wlodkowski (1999) examines the concept *motivation to learn* which is described as "a person's tendency to find learning activities meaningful and to benefit from them" (p.4). In the field of second language (L2) education, Gardner (1985) defines a *motivation to learn* an L2 as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (p. 10).

Like motivation, attitudes are complex and many definitions have been used to describe them. Attitudes in second and foreign language acquisition have been a point of much interest and discussion in the past decades. (Crookes & Schmitd, 1991; Dornyei, 1990a; Oxford & Shearin, 1994, 1996). Gardner's (1959) results indicate that the second language learners’ attitudes play an important role in the process of his or her second language acquisition. Gardner (1985a) uses the term *attitude* as referring to the mental and neutral state of readiness organized through experience, which exerts an influence on the individual's response to all objects and situations to which it is related. Language attitude refers to affective reactions toward the language learning situation. As such, this concept is assessed in the AMTB (Attitude/Motivation Test Battery) by two measures, (a) Evaluation of the language teacher, and (b) Evaluation of the language course. In other words, attitudes toward the language learning situation may involve attitudes toward the instructor, the class, and the textbooks.

**THE STUDY**

The study reported in this paper is the first part of the researcher's planned longitudinal research exploring the patterns of motivation for and attitudes toward learning and teaching English as a foreign language in selected countries in the area.

Participants in this study are 120 male and 120 female randomly selected from two members of Danang University, Vietnam, namely the University of Technology (UT), where English is studied as a non-major and the College of Foreign Languages (CFL) where English is studied as a major. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis.

***Methodology***

The methodology for this study includes the use of personal observation, document review, a motivational/attitudinal questionnaire and follow-up focused interviews. Primary and secondary document sources are obtained from the Vietnamese MOET (Ministry of Education and Training), General Library of Danang City, Higher Education Project Office of Danang University and professional journals.

The questionnaire is in English and was administered to 240 English-major and non-English major students in the two universities. Upon completion of the questionnaire, many students volunteered to be interviewed but only 10 (five from The University of Technology and five from The College of Foreign Languages) were randomly selected for this purpose. The interviews took place in a friendly atmosphere and helped clarify some important points in the questionnaire.

Non-English major

English major

1-2 year

3-5 year

Male

Female

18-20

21-23

*Figure 1: Participant description*

***Measurement instrument***

The questionnaire is an adaptation of the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), which has been translated and employed to describe students learning ESL in many countries. AMTB consists of a series of Likert scale items such as "*I would like to know more about English speaking people*" to which students indicate one of several responses from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

In this study, AMTB was revised and constructed for use in the Vietnamese educational context. Care was taken to ensure that the questionnaire was properly understood by the participants. A draft version of the questionnaire was prepared and piloted among students learning English in three classes (ECE English, Intel Scholarship English at UT and the same number of English-major students at CFL). The questionnaire was then reworked based on this input.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

In total, 240 returned complete questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed. Percentages, means, and standard deviations for the individual items were calculated.

* **Motivation**

From the results of the questionnaires, it is found that the students have all types of motivations. The differences in motivation for learning English of the two groups of students can be seen in Figure 2. Of the 120 UD English-major students in the survey, 83 students (69 %) strongly disagree with the idea of learning English just to finish university/college. For item 2 and 3, most English-major students recognize that they will be able to gain social recognition and to get a good job with their fluent English. According to the results of the follow-up interviews, English is both a real career and a proper means to assist them to get good jobs. Interestingly, up to 73.3% of the students think that the purpose of their learning English is to get a good job. In addition, 108 out of 120 students feel that no one is really educated unless he/she is fluent in English.

For the integrative motivations (items 5 - 8), the means are about one point lower than those of the instrumental motivations except for item 8. This difference suggests that although they are specialized in English, English-major students in Vietnam still learn English more instrumentally than integratively. However, they do have a wish to better understand the English-speaking people and their way of life (item 6 with the highest mean).

Like English-major students, non-English-major ones also have strong instrumental motivations to learn English. However, there is a big difference between the two groups regarding item 1. While no English-major student (0%) either agrees or strongly agrees that they learn English to finish university/college (item 1), there are 50 non-English-major students (41.7%) agree with this idea. On the contrary, the later have lower means for integrative motivations than the former do.

*Figure 2: Motivation for learning English of UD students*

In short, it has been proved in the study that the English-major students are more motivated to learn English than the non-English major students. The motives for learning English of the later are more limited. Their motivation is more instrumental. For example, they may learn English because knowledge of English is valued in Vietnam. With the same university degree, if a person knows English, it is more likely for him/her than others to be chosen to work in representative offices of international or transnational companies in Vietnam. For those who work in government institutions and companies, English is one of the requirements for their being chosen as subjects for further education abroad and promotion.

In addition, to help readers better interpret these findings of the study; the researcher would like to share a personal observation of the history of foreign language education in Vietnam. It was in 1947 that foreign languages were first taught as an official subject in Vietnamese schools. Then, it would be fair to say that the choice for which foreign language to study was based on the relations Vietnam had at the time with other countries. This is largely why Vietnamese students have learnt many kinds of foreign languages: French, Russian, English, Chinese, and Japanese, etc. However, it has been English that has developed on a large scale according to public demand, while other languages have fallen behind.

* **Attitude**

The second part of this study explores the students' attitudes toward English teaching and learning at Danang University. The purpose of this part is to get feedback from the students to provide English teachers at Danang University with one more information channel to know their students’ feelings and can, accordingly, improve their teaching and their students' learning English.

Firstly, looking at the means of 10 sub-items in *Table 1*, one can easily recognize that on the whole, students are not satisfied with the ways they are taught English. This is understandable taking into consideration historical and cultural characteristics of foreign language education in Vietnam. Like in most higher education institutions in Vietnam, in Danang University, the dominant English teaching method is still the traditional grammar-translation method, which hasn’t met the increasing communicative demands of the students. Students are still learning English passively as they did at high school and they do not have much opportunity to talk to native English speakers. Only for sub-item 7, "the teacher's personality" does the mean reach over 3.5. The rests are around 2.5 and especially for sub-item 10, "The teacher's availability for consultation outside the regular classroom-hour", the mean is only 1.5. However, these results are encouraging in the sense that they reflect the students' straightforwardness and openness in answering the questionnaire. This may be thanks to the method of collecting data of the researcher. In this way, students are offered a chance to speak out their mind, which ensures the validity of this study.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Sub-items** | **M** | **SD** |  | **Sub-items** | **M** | **SD** |
| No. 1 | 2.0 | 0.54 |  | No. 6 | 2.5 | 0.95 |
| No. 2 | 2.5 | 0.54 |  | No. 7 | 3.6 | 0.71 |
| No. 3 | 2.7 | 0.76 |  | No. 8 | 2.4 | 0.61 |
| No. 4 | 2.3 | 0.78 |  | No. 9 | 2.5 | 0.64 |
| No. 5 | 2.0 | 0.51 |  | No. 10 | 1.5 | 0.66 |

*Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Attitude of Students towards English teaching and learning at UD-sub-items 1-10.*

Secondly, the data from the questionnaires indicates that few students have strong attitudes either way. They seldom evaluate the questionnaire items as *Not at all satisfied* or *Quite satisfied*. The majority of them choose *Not quite satisfied*.

The ten sub-items can be mainly divided into three groups which are about English teaching method, assessment and the English teacher. For the first group, most English-major students are not quite satisfied with the skills taught and class activities hold for them. When asked about the classroom activities (Sub-item No. 2), two out of 120 students say they are not at all satisfied; 56 answer that they are not quite satisfied; and the rest 62 say they are somewhat satisfied. However, through in-depth interviews, students showed appreciation for recent changes and improvement in English teaching at UD. There have been more and more interesting English classes in which communicative demands of the students are strongly focused. The UD English teachers have designed more updated teaching materials and applied computer-assisted language teaching and learning in classes. These opinions signal promising English teaching programs at Danang University.

Thirdly, assessment is also a concern for English- major students at Danang University. There are 8.3% of these students who are not satisfied at all with the information they receive from their English teachers as to how they are progressing in studying English. Nearly 40% of them say they are not quite satisfied and 45% somewhat satisfied. In general, most of the English-major students at Danang University think that the information they receive from their teachers is just at a medium level.

However, students are quite satisfied with their English teachers' personality. In the study, 70% of the students are satisfied; 17.5% are somewhat satisfied and there is no student who feels unsatisfied with their English teachers' personality. This result is consistent with traditional values of the Vietnamese educational system. Teaching in Vietnam is considered as a noble career and teachers are highly respected.

On the whole, non-English major students at Danang University feel more satisfied with their English courses and English teachers than English-major students (Figure 3). On the contrary, they have a more negative attitude toward English learning than English-major students (Sub-item No. 6). According to most students interviewed, cheating is no longer a problem in English testing at UD. English mid-term and final tests are conducted in a fair and strict way and the teacher's assessment is mostly exact. The point that counts is the English credits of non-English major students are much fewer than those of English-major students. Thus, it is not surprising why they do not have as much regular contact with English teachers as the English-major students do. This partly leads to their receiving less information about how their progress and achievement are evaluated.

# CONCLUSION

# For the first research question, results show that the majority of UD English-major students have a strong instrumental motivation to learn English. They are really interested in studying English effectively. For them, English is both a proper means and an end they are aiming at. This research result is understandable and in accordance with the researcher’s personal observation of meeting job recruitment in Danang City. The majority of companies, enterprises, branches as well as representative offices under licenses and conducts of big either domestic or foreign companies or multinational corporations in Danang have put English the first employment requirement. Through personal talking to these companies’ personnel managers, the researcher understands that most of them are ready to accept and retrain the newly-graduating students from local universities for job skills, provided that they are good at English.

# For the second research question, the dominant attitude of students at UD is neutral about English teaching and learning at their institutions. Beside major findings analyzed in the above sections, it is interesting to recognize that students at UD still expect their teachers to do too much for them in learning English. Historically and culturally, Vietnam is strongly influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism. According to Song (1995), the educational systems of such countries as Vietnam stress "conformity, obedience, and passivity" (p.35) because these values are critical to maintain a structured society. Students are traditionally obedient and teachers do not encourage or appreciate students’ contribution to the learning process. This tradition is a possible explanation for the current passive English learning of Vietnamese tertiary students in general and of Danang University in particular.

However, there have been positive and remarkable changes at Danang University recently regarding teaching and learning English. The English curriculum and textbooks have been continually designed and updated and have proven to be of high quality and suitability to UD students. Programs such as getting feedback from students about courses and teachers’ performance and applying educational software like the Moodle one have been conducted seriously at UD to assure education quality. Information from focused interviews and informal talks between the researcher and the informants has shown that students appreciate these changes and express their willingness to be cooperative in improving the quality of English programs at UD. They are interested in communicative English teaching and learning and optimistic about future improvements in this field at UD.

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**APPENDICES**

**QUESTIONNAIRE:**

Instructions: This is not a test. You will not be graded and you need not put your name on this form. This questionnaire has been designed to find out from you what Vietnamese students' motivations for learning English as a foreign language and how they feel about it. Thank you for your cooperation.

*Circle the appropriate information*

You are: Non-English major student English-major student Gender: Male Female

Age: 18 19 20 21 22 23

Present year of study: 1 2 3 4 5

***I. MOTIVATION***

A. Below are eight reasons which might be given for studying English. Please read each reason carefully and rate it, indicating the extent to which it is descriptive of your own case. Circle the number that best represents your feeling.

1. *Strongly disagree*

2. *Disagree*

3. *Neutral*

4. Agree

5. Strongly agree

The study of English is important to me because:

1. I need it in order to finish university/college.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

2. One needs a good knowledge of English to gain social recognition.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

3. I think it will some day be useful to get a good job.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

4. I feel that no one is really educated unless he is fluent in English.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

5. It will enable me to make friends more easily with English-speaking people.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

6. It will help me to better understand the English -speaking people and their ways of life.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

7. It will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

8. It will enable me to think and behave like English - speaking people.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5

***II. ATTITUDE***

Indicate the extent to which you are satisfied with each of the following aspects of your English courses by circling one of the four numbers as follows:

1 = not at all satisfied

2 = not quite satisfied

3 = somewhat satisfied

4 = quite satisfied

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **No** | **Aspects of your English courses** | **Level of satisfaction** |
| **1** | The type of skills you are taught in the course | 1 2 3 4 |
| **2** | The classroom activities | 1 2 3 4 |
| **3** | The homework you are assigned | 1 2 3 4 |
| **4** | Reference materials | 1 2 3 4 |
| **5** | The outside opportunities you have to practice English (e.g. conversing with native speakers, etc.) | 1 2 3 4 |
|  |  |  |
| **6** | The way your progress and achievement are evaluated (e.g. grades) | 1 2 3 4 |
|  |  |  |
| **7** | The teacher’s personality | 1 2 3 4 |
| **8** | The teacher’s ability to speak English | 1 2 3 4 |
| **9** | The teacher’s ability to help you learn (his/her helpfulness) | 1 2 3 4 |
| **10** | The teacher’s availability for consultation outside the regular classroom-hour | 1 2 3 4 |
|  |  |  |

11. Do you think students should have a greater say in the content and method of English courses? Yes No

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION!**