An Investigation on English Language Learning Attitudes of Siam University Students

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Abstract

This paper outlines the results of a survey which was carried out to identify Siam University students' attitudes towards English language learning. The participants were 388 undergraduate non-English major students who took fundamental English 1-4 as parts of the required University curriculum. A questionnaire consisting of two parts was used as the data collecting instruments for the research. In the first part of the questionnaire, there were questions related to personal traits of respondents. In the second part, there was a Likert-type attitude scale. The data related to the overall picture of students' attitudes were analyzed by utilizing frequency distribution on percentages. The significance of differences between means was analyzed using ANOVAs and Scheffe test. The finding of the study revealed that most of students had high positive attitudes at overall mean of 1.94 towards English learning. Interestingly enough, the results indicated that good students’ attitudes have significant difference from the other two groups.

Keyword: attitudes, English language learning

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Introduction

There are many factors that might cause the students' proficiency in English. One might be attributed to their attitudes towards the English language and English learning. The new National Education Act adopted in 1997 and 2004 regulates three objectives in either core or elective English courses namely; knowledge, skill and positive attitudes towards English (ONEC, 2002). This means we conform that in addition to knowledge and skill, attitudes therefore affect the rate of development and the proficiency achieved in the target language.

From several years of teaching, the researchers have noticed that learning English is closely related to the attitudes towards the English subject. On the other hand, proficiency in acquiring a second language may also be influenced by attitudes. Besides, it is the researchers' belief that a better understanding of language learner's preferences and learning attitudes can have a benefit effect on the process of helping and assisting language learner in learning English. Attitudes do not remain static; they can be changed by identifying the sources of negative attitudes and correcting them. Additionally, they can be changed through the learning process by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques. Attitudes also improve as a result of language learning as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes. All in all, a better understanding of students' attitudes may assist teachers to select activities and tasks that generate the attitudes most conductive to the production of more successful learners.

Objectives of the study

The objectives to investigate Siam University students' attitudes towards English language learning are as follows:
1. To study students' attitudes towards English language learning.
2. To determine whether there are significant different attitudes among the different groups divided by their last English grade.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The survey was conducted in non-English major students in the researchers' classes in the second academic year 2009. The total number was 388 (male = 158, female = 230). The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 25. For their English background, all of them had studied English formally at least six years in schools and had taken either English 1 or English 2 and 3 at the university. The subjects were divided into three groups according to their last English grade. Group 1 were students who got grade A and B+(n=56), group 2 were the ones who got grade B, C+ and C(n=230) and group 3 were of grade D+ and D(n=102)

Data collection procedure

The survey questionnaire was adapted from Gardner's (1985) "Attitude/motivation Test Battery (AMTB) including some statements compiled by researchers' teaching experience. All twenty statements were composed in English and if necessary, the researchers explained some statements in Thai.

Questionnaire consisted of two sections (1) Subjects’ personal information, (2) Twenty closed-ended questions. The survey first section was concerned with students' background on age, sex as well as their English grade from former course taken in the first semester.

The second section investigated students' attitudes towards English language. The students were asked to rate each item so as to determine their level of agreement with each item statement in the following Likert-type scale: (1) very agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) neutral, (4) somewhat disagree and (5) very disagree. Questionnaire was completed in class and collected immediately.
Data analysis Procedure

The first section was analyzed through percentage to explore the participants’ personal information. The second section was analyzed through statistical analysis to explore attitudes students’ general attitudes and significant differences among the groups of different last English grade. Firstly, the five rating scales were analyzed by frequency distribution on percentages. Secondly, we recoded the negative attitudes rating scales to conform positive attitudes rating scales. (rate 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2 and 5 = 1 respectively) and computed the overall means. Thirdly, we divided the questions into positive and negative attitudes and calculated the means of the respondents’ answers. The mean levels were: 1.00 – 1.80 = very agree 1.81 – 2.60 = somewhat agree 2.61 – 3.40 = neutral 3.41 – 4.20 = somewhat disagree 4.21 – 5.00 = very disagree. Fourthly, we performed repeated measured analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on students’ responses to the attitude questions, using last English grade as the independent variables. Finally, Scheffe tests were conducted to find out the patterns of significant difference among the three groups.

Results and Discussion
The preliminary basic information of the participants was that 40.7% were male and 59.3% were female. 33.0% were in age of 17-19, 57.2% of 20-22, 9.5% of 23.25 and only 0.3% were over 25.27%. 8% were first year students. 60.8% were the second year and 11.4% from the other years. 37.6% were from Business Administration faculty, 25.0% from Communication Arts, 16.8% from Information Technology and students from the other faculties were less than 10%.

To identify the students’ attitudes towards English language learning, the subjects were asked to rank a list of twenty statements in the second section of the questionnaire. The results showed that 80.6% of students strongly agreed with the item: “Studying English should start as early as the first grade in schools”. Over half (64.1%) considered “Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job” and this strong agreement was supported at 38.7% with the idea: “I should learn English so as to be a successful learner and worker”. Moreover, 46.1% judged that studying English was important because it made them more educated. All items aforementioned indicated that the majority of the sample was aware of the importance of learning English. However, only 7.8% very agreed with the item: “I would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject in university. Additionally, only 5.7% stated that they read English books which did not relate to their study.

Another positive response indicating was elicited by the item: “If I am good at English, it will help me study other subjects well”. The percentage of 28.6% very agree and 29.1% somewhat agree indicated that students recognized educational value of English. Unfortunately, a quarter of students (very agree plus somewhat agree) admitted that they tended to give up and did not pay attention when they did not understand English teacher’s explanation.

For negative statements, only 3.6% showed very agree whereas strong disagreement (49.2% and 44.1%) was expressed with the statements: “Studying English is a waste of time” and “Studying English is not important because it is not my native language”. 50.0% never thought about dropping English. On the other hand, only 4.2% admitted that they sometimes daydream about dropping English. The survey also revealed that 36.8% of the participants very disagreed with the item: “I do not like English class and have no desire to learn English.

Interestingly, 52.2% of students showed neutral agreement to the item: “I would rather spend my time on subjects
other than English”. Nearly three out of ten (very agree plus somewhat agree) admitted that they found difficulties in learning English. They also accepted that the more they learn English, the less they understand it and they thought that they were not able to learn English because they did not understand grammar. It reflected that students believed (or teachers oriented them to believe) that grammar is the most important aspect in language learning. Actually, Thai students wish they could speak English fluently but most of them think that English is too challenging for them to competent because of some difficulties such as: lack of opportunities to use English in their daily lives; unchallenging lessons and much more difficulties are of the learners’ personality characteristics; being passive learners and lack of responsibility for their own learning. These negative personality characteristics are absolutely detrimental to successful language learning.

Due to the fact that all respondents are non-English major so there were only one fifth of them had a strong desire to learn all aspects of English and less than that, only 6.5% intended to spend all of their time learning English. And for the item: “Studying English is important because it will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people”, 27.1% very agreed with the item but more students weighed up on somewhat agree (32.5%) and neutral (31.2%). It is widely known that although English is the leading foreign language enjoys a prestigious position in Thailand, it is neither the second language nor the official language. Because of this, Thai students lack of opportunity to use English in their daily lives. Nevertheless, only 8.1% very agreed that studying English caused fear and unpleasant and 20.6% felt uneasy and lack of confidence when they were speaking in class.

After seeing the overall view of attitudes in percentage, mean values were depicted to represent the subjects’ responses. Students were divided into three groups according to their last English grades in order to investigate the different attitudes among the successful and unsuccessful English learners.

Obviously, Group 1 students who got last English grade A and B+ have higher positive than group 2 who got B, C+ and C and group 3 who got D+ and D in eight of ten positively implied meaning items. Different means of the item: “I am interested in reading English books, even those not related to my study” (Group 1 = 2.89, Group 3 = 3.51) confirmed that students with higher positive attitudes spend more effort to learn the language.

Nevertheless, group 2 and 3 students showed higher positive attitudes for certain items. For the item: “Studying English is important because it will make me more educated”, it is surprisingly that group 2 and 3 ranked their opinion under the same mean (M=1.83) whereas group 1 slightly less agreed with this item (M=1.91). The more agreement revealed that the weaker students (group 3) more respected the one who was good at English as an educated man than the good students (group 1). Additionally, students in group 3 showed the highest agreement (M=1.26) for item: “Studying English should start as early as the first grade in schools”, group 2 and 1 showed less agreement (M=1.34 and 1.80 respectively). It is possible that the students in this group thought that they had started to learn English slower than their counterparts which led to the different English proficiency in the present.

Likewise the positive questions, Group 1 students expressed less negative attitudes than the other two groups on every negatively implied meaning item. The higher means showed the less negative attitudes. For the item: “Studying English is a waste of time”, means of Group 1 is 4.20, Group 2 is 4.14 and Group 3 is 3.89 respectively. The different means obviously reflected that Group 1 very disagreed with the statement whereas Group 2 and Group 3 showed less disagreement.

The highest mean of group 1 (M=4.33) revealed the disagreement for the item: “English is not important because it
is not my native language". Nevertheless, this is not significantly different from the other groups (group 2, \(M=4.07\), group 3, \(M=3.94\)). This statement indicates that the negative attitudes towards English learning in Thai students do not come from the racial bias as in certain countries. The least mean (\(M=2.13\)) for the item: “I feel uneasy and lack of confidence when I am speaking in my English class” of group 3 showed that they had the least confidence in expressing themselves in English.

Similar to all above, the least mean (\(M=2.68\)) of group 3 students showed their frustration that “The more I learn English, the less I understand it”. It should be the teachers’ commitment to enhance students’ concept of language learning that “Good language learners are not necessarily those to whom a language comes very easily; but they have preserved, have overcome frustrations, and have, after many trials and errors, achieved a satisfactory level of achievements”. (Naiman et al., 1978)

To determine whether there are significantly different attitudes among different groups divided by their last English grades, ANOVAs and Scheffe test were used. First, we performed repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) on students’ responses to the attitude statements, using their last English grade as the independent variable. It is found out that only six statements showed non significant differences at .05 level whereas fourteen items showed significant difference.

Then Scheffe post-hoc multiple test was used to find out the patterns of difference among the three groups for determining which group was significantly different from which other groups. The test showed that Group 1 was significantly different from other two groups. Group 1 was classified in different subset while Group 2 and 3 were in the same subset. (Subset for alpha = .05). The interaction between attitudes and last English grades indicated that the more positive attitudes towards English language learning were accounted for more by the students who got better grades (A and B+) than the ones who got worse grades.

To address the question of why different English learning achievement learners hold different attitudes, we concentrated on the view that “there are certain personality characteristics which are helpful or detrimental to successful language learning” (Stern, 1983). The sample mean differences were discussed under Stern’s thought frame introducing that, “One group of personality variables that distinguishes successful from unsuccessful learners is likely to be such characteristics as: positive task orientation, ego-involvement, need achievement, high level of aspiration, goal orientation and perseverance (ibid). In this study, Group 1 students who got English grade A or B+ may be classified as successful English language learners in Siam University and Group 3, who got D+ and D may be classified as the unsuccessful.

Nine out of fourteen items showed the same patterns. The item, “I should learn English so as to be a successful learner and worker” was a good statement to show ‘need achievement’ which Group 1’s means showed significant difference from group 2 and 3. It is accordance with the item: “I have strong desire to learn all aspects of English”, the mean difference between group 1 and group 2, 3 indicated that the successful students had ‘higher level of aspiration’ than unsuccessful students. Likewise the item: “I would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject in university” which the sample mean difference confirmed that successful students were more willing to take English than their counterpart.

Furthermore, the item: “I am interested in reading English books, even those not related to my study” emphasized that Group 1 was more ‘positive task orientation’ than the others. Mean difference of the item: “I tend to give up and not pay attention when I don’t understand my English teacher’s explanation” signaled that Group 1 had more ‘perseverance’ in language learning than Group 2 and 3. Interestingly, the
items: "I am not able to learn English because I do not understand grammar and the item: "The more I learn English, the less I understand it" showed the most significant difference between group 1 and 2, 3. These two items are useful for us to closely examine them as they reflected the respondents' self-evaluation clearly. The researchers have learned from teaching experience that many learners, especially low-achievers, have been strongly affected by years of negative self-image. This negative feeling also reflected in the item: "I feel uneasy and lack of confidence when I am speaking in my English class" which showed higher significant mean difference between Group 1 and 3 than between Group 1 and 2. The two items aforementioned provided the picture that students in Group 3 had lower 'ego-involvement' than Group 2 and 1.

The different patterns emerged when we considered other items. The item: "I wish I would spend all my time learning English" was uniquely different, the significant mean difference found only between Group 1 and 2. For the item "Studying English caused fear and unpleasant", there was a significant mean difference between Group 1 and 3 but no significant difference between Group 1 and 3. It seemed that many students who failed in learning English since the beginning tended to be fear and unhappy to study English even their study environment had been changed. As well as the item: "I sometimes daydream about dropping English Group 3 showed more uneasy in learning English significantly different from Group 1 while no significant difference between Group 1 and 2.

Another personality characteristic to be considered is 'goal orientation' from item: "Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job". It was found that Group 1 and 2 were in the same subset while Group 3 that got the worst grades (D+ and D) was in different subset.

In the item: "I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English", Group 1 and 2 were in the same subset while Group 3 was in another subset. We agreed with Stern who commented that "...the motives for and against language learning should be considered against the background of more deep-seated generalized attitudes or personality factors than as mere responses to immediate experience alone". (Stern, 1983)

However, the most interesting difference pattern was the item: "I wish I would spend all of my time learning English" there was a significant difference between Group 1 and 2 mean but no significant difference between Group 1 and 3. We assumed that Group 1 was perseverance to spend most time learning English because they liked English while Group 3 hoped to improve their weakness.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

This research aimed at examining students' attitudes towards English language learning at Siam University. Using the survey method, the tool was tailored from Gardner (1985) "Attitude/Motivation Test Battery". Of special interest was the way different student groups showed their attitudes. What this investigation has found is that the group of students who got better grades (A and B+) in fundamental English showed higher positive attitudes comparable to the groups of worse grades. There were fourteen out of twenty statements revealed significant means difference among them.

When considered the participants through personality characteristics, we have found that the weaker students have wrong belief and less self-confidence on themselves. Furthermore, their failure in English learning caused them lack of intention and had negative feeling in English learning. Teacher need to comprehend the significance of attitudes which either positive or negative impact students' language performance and achievements. Positive attitudes will be enhanced by eliminating wrong belief, building self-confidence and creating motivation by using more effective approaches to classroom teaching. It is
noticeable that to have positive towards the language learning is one of an internal motivation that will fuel the learners' desire to learn the language well. As an English teacher, we should try our best to stimulate students' enthusiasm in learning in order to improve their language competence.

Lastly, we would like to stress the point that attitude is not the single factor influencing students' language proficiency. Other factors such as motivation, aptitude, learning cognitive style or learning strategies also play important roles in foreign language learning process. In this study, we have simply attempted to explore students' attitudes towards English language learning. We hope that the discussion will help language teachers have better understanding about attitudes and their influence on language learning.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Siam University.

References


