

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE PERFORMANCES OF THE STUDENTS AT THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG, UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES

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**Abstract** - English has become an international language, playing a more and more important role in not only science but also social aspects of Vietnam. This study analyzes attitudes toward English of the students at The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies based on questionnaire results, and compares the relationships between language attitudes and language performances drawn from students' grades. Students' attitudes toward English in general and English as a subject at school were obtained in the form of a questionnaire. Also, transcripts of students are employed to analyze their performances. Generally, students at the English Department at The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies hold high attitudes towards English. In addition to that, language attitudes go proportionally with linguistic performance, which means that the more positive the attitudes become, the better the performances are.

**Key words** - attitudes; language performance; language attitude; positive attitudes; high attitude; low attitude.

## 1. Introduction

Language attitudes are considered to be of paramount importance in the process of language learning. As the world is more and more globalized, the value of English has been recognized as *Francia lingua*, a tool for any international network. People, therefore, tend to hold English more importantly.

People in Vietnam have mixed attitudes toward English education. Many say it is hard and should not be included in the curriculum, others think conversely. When students enter university level, most of them still have to carry on studying English as required. So how do Vietnamese university students think of English after many years of learning?

The primary goal of this study is to discover language attitudes of students at the English Department at the University of Foreign Language Studies, Danang University toward English, which can be positive or negative, and then compare students' attitudes toward English with their conducts in English study reflected by grades. In other words, this paper measures and evaluates the corresponding relationship of language attitudes and language performances of students studying at English Department in The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies, where English is studied as a foreign language.

### *Research Questions:*

1. What are the attitudes of students of the English Department at The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies toward English?
2. How do students of the English Department at The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies perform in English learning?

3. Do students' attitudes toward English and their language performances match?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Language Attitudes

Language attitudes have been variously defined according to the purposes of the studies. In terms of human behavior, attitude is considered to be "a hypothetical construct" (Baker, 1992). Ajzen (1988) said attitude is "a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event" (in Baker, 1992: 11). Allport (1992) considered attitudes to be the readiness for responses. From the perspective of language learning, attitudes are also variously defined. For example, Gardner and MacIntyre viewed attitudes as one of the several components of affective variables of language learning (1993). Crystal gave a slightly different definition and described attitudes as the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others (1992). Attitude is also considered one of the components in learner individual differences in SLA (Locastro, 2001).

In the book *Attitudes and Opinions*, Oskamp (1977) claimed that:

"Attitudes are an "intervening variable: that is, an attitude is a theoretical construct which is not observable in itself, but which mediates or helps to explain the relationship between certain observable stimulus events (the environmental situation) and certain behavioural responses."

An example of this claim was made by McGuire (in Oskamp, 1977:14) that if a person is prejudiced against black people and he is put to seat next to a black one, the common response is getting up and moving to a different chair.

According to Baker, attitudes are comprised of three components namely cognition, affect and readiness for action (1992). He explained that cognitive and affective components do not necessarily have to be in harmony and readiness for action is an intended behaviour or a plan of action under defined contexts and situations. For example, a person with a favourable attitude to a specific language might indicate their willingness to take that language class.

### 2.2. Language Performance

Fromkin, Robert and Hyams (2007:555) considered linguistic performance as "the use of linguistic competence in the production and comprehension of language". According to Lehmann (2007:224), competence refers to the "knowledge and ability and disposition to solve problems in that domain." He also put forward that

competence is gained through practice and experience and language competence can be standardized in the form of language tests for both native and non-native speakers. According to Fitzpatrick and Morrison (in McNamara, 1996), performance assessment includes both *processes* and *products*. For example: in second language contexts, speaking and listening is considered processes and writing is products.

In the book *Measuring Second Language Performance*, McNamara evoked the issue of measuring language performance through test. She compared two types of language tests, namely *typical second language performance test* and *traditional pencil and paper language test*. The former is distinguished from the latter by the presence of two factors: a performance made by candidates and judgments made by observation and an agreed judging process.

### 3. Research Methodology

This is a quantitative research in which three methods of research were utilized to gather data. The first method was gathering information from questionnaires, which were given randomly through emails to second year students at the English Department of The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies to measure their attitudes towards English.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections I, II, III. In section I, four types of students' information were collected, namely age, year of study and gender. The second part was used to collect information regarding students' attitudes toward English. The researcher adapted this section from Ardeo (2003). Ardeo adopted and adapted these questions from Lasagabaster (2001) and Baker (1992). Baker was the one who originally used this questionnaire to investigate students' attitudes toward bilingual education of English and Welsh in Wales. The scores range from the minimum of 1 and the maximum of 5, by which students can manifest their attitudes by five accelerating degrees. Section III was developed for further investigation into students' attitudes toward different English skills that they possess. These questions aim to convey what students think about speaking, listening, reading and writing. The answers are designed in four levels from none to "I like it very much."

The second research method was collecting data supporting Vietnamese students' linguistic performances involving in the four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing. First and second year students of English in Danang University are required to take these classes, therefore, the results of all participants in the questionnaires were available. Hence, students' final scores of writing, reading, listening and speaking from universities' database were retrieved.

Finally, the connection between students' attitudes and their linguistics performance was analyzed to measure the relationship between language attitudes and language performance. The data gathered from the third part of the questionnaires and students' scores were manipulated in four different categories conforming to the four basic

English skills. This study did not aim to measure general linguistic performances of students but rather to evaluate specific skills because students' attitudes towards each skill varied considerably. In each category, students who possess better attitudes toward the targeted skills determined by their responses of 3 (I like it) or 4 (I like it very much) are sorted out. Their scores were also scrutinized and calculated to an average figure. Hence, the average of the remaining scores by those whose responses were 1 (Not at all) or 2 (It is okay) are also determined. The corresponding relationship between these two average figures reflects one of the two following possibilities:

High attitudes = good performance; lower attitudes = bad performance.

High attitudes = bad performance; lower attitudes = better performance.

### 4. Results and Discussions

Section I of the questionnaire elicits background information of students including name, age and gender. Students' ages fluctuate between 19 and 21. Among 30 participants, 27 are women. Since the questionnaire is conducted at a language university, the overwhelmed proportion of women to men is inevitable.

In the second section, participants' attitudes toward English were obtained through the use of a five point scale: (5) Strongly agree, (4) Agree, (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (2) Disagree, (1) Agree. Although (2) takes the largest proportion, the sum of (4) and (5) are considerably higher than that of (1) and (2), inferring that students generally have a favorable attitudes toward English learning. About 53% of participants agree and strongly agree with all the statements in section II of the questionnaire, 20% neither agree nor disagree, and 27 % do not agree. Figure 1 illustrates the proportions of responses from participants:

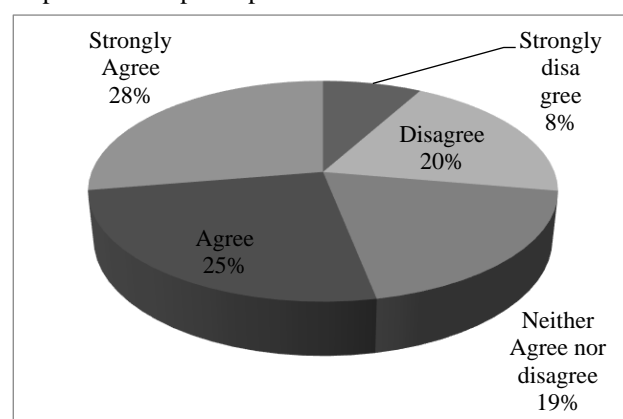


Figure 1. Participants' Attitudes toward English

In this section, participants were asked to provide their opinions of English language through the nine statements. The first five statements obtained participants' opinions of English as a subject in education. The last four statements elicited responses about English in general contexts. The interesting point is that although a majority of participants (53%) regard English as a difficult subject, nearly 87% of them hold to the opinion that English is a language worth

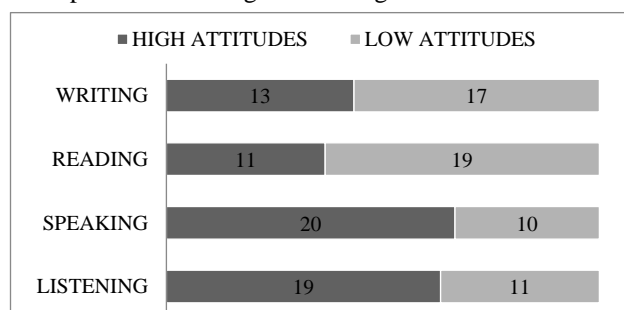
learning, which implies that students value the importance of English. More than half of participants evaluated English as important as other major subject at school such as Math, Physics, or Sciences. Only 3% of students agree or strongly agree to have all subjects taught in English. This is the smallest sum of proportion, followed by statements number 9, by which only 7% agree. Almost all of the participants think English is important for their careers (97%), which is close to the number of participants who think English enriches their cultural knowledge (87%).

**Table 1. Students' Attitudes toward English**

STATEMENTS	1	2	3	4	5
1. English can widen my knowledge.	0	220	227	545	8
2. English is a language worth learning.	3	7	3	220	67
3. The English subject at school plays as important a role as math, physics or science.	3	13	117	447	20
4. All subjects should be taught in English.	3	60	33	3	0
5. I prefer to be taught in English.	7	7	223	337	227
6. Learning English enriches my cultural knowledge.	3	3	7	447	440
7. I prefer lectures in English.	7	27	50	7	10
8. English is important for my career.	3	0	0	115	82
9. I want English to be the prevailing language used at school.	43	37	3	7	0
	<b>8.1</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>5.6</b>

It can be inferred from this research that students in this study understand the importance of English. However, they do not want English to take the place of the main language used in both education. Though a high percentage of participants like English, there exists a considerable number of students who do not like it, implied that English is only popular to a certain extent in Vietnam.

The third section of the questionnaire results reflects students' attitudes toward each language skills through four statements asking for opinions of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students have four options to opt for, namely (1) I do not like it, (2) It is okay, (3) I like it, and (4) I like it very much. Below is the chart illustrating the proportion of responses across four skills. Almost two thirds of the participants like to hear spoken English and speak English while slightly higher than one third of the students like to read English and write in English. In short, communicative skills appear to be more preferable among the investigated students.



**Figure 2. Students' Attitudes toward Four English Skills**

The second part of the study collected students' final scores from the university's database. Below is the table indicating students' scores in four subjects. Participants' names were edited to ensure confidentiality. Among four skills, the highest average score is speaking, the lowest is reading.

**Table 2. Students' Final Scores**

Name	Li.	Sp.	Re.	Wr.
BùiThịMỹ H.	6.9	5.7	8	7
NguyễnThịHoàng L.	7.4	8.7	.2	7
HuỳnhPhạmTuyết L.	4.8	8	5.3	6.6
NguyễnThị H.	4.7	7.3	7.7	7.6
NguyễnThị T.	7.3	6.5	5.6	6.1
HàThị U.	4.1	6.8	5.7	7.3
TrầnThị Thu H.	6.1	8.3	6.5	7.9
PhạmThị Thu T.	9	9	7.6	5.9
NguyễnThịTiểu M.	6.8	7.7	7.3	8
VươngThị H.	6.6	6.7	5.8	5.8
TrầnThịThuý H.	3.9	7.4	4.8	7.3
TrầnPhuongTrúc L.	5.4	6.8	4.2	6.6
PhạmThịHồng L.	4.2	7	4.9	5.1
Nguyễn Tri S.	6.2	7.1	2	6.5
NguyễnThị Thu T.	10	9.9	7.7	7.3
NguyễnThịLệ H.	6	6.8	5.9	6.1
NguyễnPhuong D.	8.9	7.8	7.8	7.2
NgôThị M.	4.1	7	6.3	5.8
LêThịTuyết M.	6.9	8.9	6	7.5
LêThị T.	4.1	6.6	4	6.6
LêThị T.	5	6.7	5.4	6.3
HồThị Kim N.	6.4	6.4	4.5	5.2
HồĐắc M.	8.2	6.6	7.5	7.3
Hàánh N.	6.4	7.7	6.8	7.7
BùiThị Thu L.	6.7	6.3	4.8	6.7
BùiĐức H.	7.1	6.4	6.6	6.9
HồThịThục N.	9.7	8.9	7.5	7.9
HồThị N.	3.9	7	5.5	7.7
VõThị H.	6.9	7.7	5.2	7.2
HồThị H.	8.5	8	6.3	6.5
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>6.8</b>

The scores were calculated in the scale of 10 points from 0 to 10. 8 to 10 is equivalent to A, 6 to 8 is B, 5 to 6 is C, 4 to 5 is D and 0 to 4 is F. It is clear that the most common score is B. No F is found in all categories and a very small portion of participants achieved As.

The final step of the research was to sort out the average final scores of students who possess high attitudes and those who possess lower attitudes. High attitudes belong to those who chose responses (3) or (4), the rest of participants have lower attitudes.

Generally, students with higher attitudes received better scores across all four investigated skills. The most significant discrepancy in performance lied in the listening group, by which the average score of high attitude students are 7 while that of lower attitude ones is 5.4. Though writing is not as favored as listening and speaking, the

average score of writing was still higher than listening in both high and low attitude groups.

Like other Asian countries, English education in Vietnam is likely to emphasize grammar, which explains the high writing scores among the participants, even though writing is the second least preferred tasks. Being the least favored subject, reading also receives the lowest average score in the high attitude group. Generally, students in Vietnam, or at The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies in particular still have limited access to English texts involving in their daily activities. Though the Internet is extensively available, learning English through the Internet has not been widely disseminated among students. Books and magazines are hardly available in English. These facts have partially precipitated the poor performance in reading.

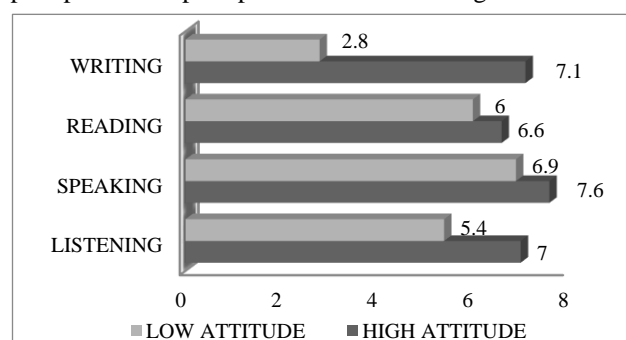


Figure 3. Students' Attitudes versus Language Performances

## 5. Conclusion

The various data sources in this research prove that students at the English Department of The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies

understand the importance of English. However, on average, only 53% of the participants hold high attitudes toward English. This proportion shows that English has not been a popular language to a large extent in Vietnam.

The study results also show that communicative skills are more preferable among second year students at the English Department of The University of Danang, University of Foreign Language Studies. Also, those who have high attitudes get higher scores. It can be concluded that high attitudes result in better language performance. These findings correspond to the claims of many language teachers about the relationships between language attitudes and language performances.

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(The Board of Editors received the paper on 16/12/2013, its review was completed on 26/02/2014)