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Research paper



Motivation and attitudes towards learning english: the case of first-year AP students in mechanical engineering at TNUT

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Abstract

The study aimed at investigating motivation and attitudes towards learning English of first-year Advanced Program students in Mechanical Engineering at Thai Nguyen University of Technology in Vietnam. The participants were categorized into two groups according to their English proficiency. Attitude / Motivation Test Battery was employed in the study. The findings revealed that the students were motivated and held positive attitudes towards learning English. Specifically, the students of higher English proficiency had higher motivation and more highly positive attitudes towards learning English in comparison with those of lower English proficiency. Additionally, the students' motivation and attitudes were found to affect students' beliefs, learning strategies, learning outcome, etc. Some recommendations have been introduced to help teachers develop students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English.

Keywords: *Attitude; Higher English Proficiency; Language Learning; Learning English; Motivation.*

1. Introduction

Attitude and motivation appeared in language research in the middle of the last century and have always attracted the attention of researchers since then. Numerous researches on motivation and attitude have been conducted ([1], [2]; [3], [4]; [5]; [6]) which demonstrates the significant role of these two factors in language learning. McDonough claims that motivation is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning the language" [7]. Correspodingly, it is considered one of the key factors driving language learning success ([8]; [9]). [10] reports a comparable opinion according to which a learner will be successful with the proper motivation" [10]. The role of motivation is also confirmed by Dörnyei [8], who states that motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the second language and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. Specifically, Gardner explains that "if one is motivated, s/he has reasons for engaging in the relevant activities, expends effort, persists in the activities, attends to the tasks, shows desire to achieve the goal, enjoys the activities, etc." [11]. With regards to learners' attitudes towards learning languages, Nunan [12] states that learners' attitudes, skills and strategies determine their underachievement or accomplishment. Attitudes towards a particular language might be either positive or negative. Brown [13] reports that positive attitudes towards the self, the native group, and the target language group enhanced proficiency. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, can impede the learning of that language ([9]).

1.1. Motivation

Gardner [11] defines motivation as "a very complex phenomenon with many facets". According to Dornyei, Csizer, and Nemeth [14], motivation is humans' behaviour, which is mentioned as the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it and the effort expended on it. Regarding language learning, motivation is "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" [1]. Gadner [11] also emphasizes that in order to understand why learners are motivated, it is necessary to understand the learners' ultimate goal or purpose for learning the language. In studies on motivation of second or foreign language learners, motivation is commonly distinguished between two main types including instrumental and integrative motivation. Integrative motivation is defined as "learning a language because the learner wishes to identify himself with or become integrated into the society of the target language" [15]. According to his definition, a learner might want to "fully integrate" and become, perhaps, completely passable as a native speaker of the language" [16]. Gardner also defines instrumental motivation as "learning a language because of someone or less clearly perceived utility it might have [15] for the learner". In other words, a learner wants to learn English because he/she wants "to pass an examination, to use it in one's job, to use it in holiday in the country, as a change from watching television, because the educational system requires it" [17].

1.2. Attitude

Bidin [18] defines attitudes a mental or neural state of readiness, shaped through experience or dynamic influence on the response provided by an individual to situations and objects. According to Gardner [19] attitudes can be seen as "the sum total of a man's instinctions and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic". He also emphasizes that attitudes are a component of motivation, it is thus linked to a person's values and beliefs and promotes or discourages the choices made in all realms of activity, whether academic

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or informal ([1]). In a similar way, Petrides [20] states that an attitude is a part of motivation. Specifically, motivation is classified in relation with two factors: the needs of the learner and the attitude towards the second language and second language community.

A broader definition of attitudes has been proposed by Wenden [21]. He categorizes the term attitude into three components namely cognitive, affective and behavioral. According to his definitions, cognitive component involves the beliefs, thoughts or viewpoints about the object of the attitude; affective component refers to the individual's feelings and emotions toward an object, whether he/she likes or dislikes. Finally, behavioral component involves the tendency to adopt particular learning behavior [21]. Regarding to learning of languages, Lopez [22] refers to attitudes as sets of beliefs possessed by learners about such factors as the target language culture and the learners' own culture.

1.3. The correlation between motivation and attitude

Motivation is closely related to attitudes. A learner's motivation in language learning is influenced by his/her attitudes towards learning the language. Gardner and Lambert [4] state that "his (the learner) motivation to learn is thought to be determined by his attitudes towards the other group in particular and by his orientation towards the learning task itself". Lifrieri [23] claims that "attitudes are necessary but insufficient indirect conditions for linguistic attainment". He emphasizes that only when paired up with motivation proper do attitudinal tendencies relate to the levels of student engagement in language learning, and to attainment (ibid.). Gardner [1] designed a test battery known as the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (henceforth AMTB), in which some items measure all factors that affect attitude and motivation. In Gardner's AMTB the idea of attitude is incorporated in motivation meaning that positive attitudes increase motivation.

1.4. Need for the study

The Advanced Programs (henceforth AP) in Mechanical Engineering imported from an American University has been conducted at Thai Nguyen University of Technology (henceforth TNUT) since 2008. Consequently, the lectures are delivered in English, which has been a considerable hindrance to the successfulness of a number of students. A variety of factors have been said to be in the relation with the reason why those students have not gained satisfactory results in learning English. They might include learner autonomy, beliefs in language learning, differences, learning styles, etc. Among those, there exist predominant grounds related to students' motivations and attitudes towards learning English [24]. However, no research on students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English has been conducted at TNUTsince then.

From what has been mentioned, an investigation into motivation and attitudes of the AP students in Mechanical Engineering towards learning English at TNUT should be carried out with the hope that it could bring useful information about the students, based on which the teacher could find effective ways to improve her teaching and give the students a help in improving their English learning. To fulfill the study's purpose, the following questions were addressed:

1) Are the students highly interested/motivated in learning English as a foreign language?
2) What are the attitudes of the students towards learning English and English-speaking people?
3) Are there any differences between the students of higher and lower English proficiency?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 27 first-year students majoring in Mechanical Engineering. They were all male students, who have learnt English at university for a shool year and they have taken the TOEFL ITP exam (Test of English as a Foreign Language - Institutional Testing Program).

2.2. Instruments

A 64-item questionnaire adopted from Gardner's AMTB [1] was employed in the study. The questionnaire consists of two main sets of questions concerning evaluation of attitudinal and motivational variables in second and foreign language learning. The questionnaire was applied since it is reported as "an impetus to the study of language attitudes and motivation that had previously been lacking" [25]. For the purpose of the study, which focuses on the two most important sociable psychological variables: motivation orientations (instrumental and integrative) and the attitudes of the students toward the language learning, the items of the AMTB are made of 8 scales (instead of 12 scales) including Interest in Foreign languages, Parental Encouragement, Motivational Intensity, Degree of Integrativeness, Degree of Instrumentality, Attitudes towards Learning English, Attitudes towards English-speaking People and Desire to Learn English. In addition, a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) was appplied.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The AMTB in English was administered with all the 27 participants. The participants were informed of the purpose of the survey and they were given time to ask the teacher or their classmates for comprehension of the questions. Also, they were noticed that no names would be given, and the information would be kept confidential. However, they were asked to provide their results of the TOEFL exam. It was believed that the students would give their answers fully and completely. The questionnaires were returned within three days with 27 copies. The data were gathered then categorized into two groups: the lower proficiency group including 13 students who got under 450 TOEFL ITP (Group 1) and the higher proficiency group which consists of 14 students with the scores from 450 TOEFL ITP to 577 (Group 2). The data were analyzed through SPSS Version 20 (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences). The descriptive statistical procedures and one-way ANOVA were applied.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results and discussion

The data collected from the questionnaire are reported and discussed in eight categories representing the motivation and attitudes of the students regarding the language, speech community and its culture.

3.1.1. Interest in foreign languages

The students' interest in foreign languages is presented in Table 1. It is revealed that most of the students agreed that they were highly interested in learning a foreign language. The students of both groups thought that if they planned to stay in another country, they would try to learn their language (M=4.14, SD=1.064). Also, they wish they could speak many foreign languages perfectly at a high rate (M=4.33, SD= .679). It is rather obvious that those students from the higher proficiency group showed that they would more like to learn foreign languages that the other students (M= 4.36, SD=.633 vs. M= 3.85, SD=.801). There were more students from the higher proficiency group who wish they could read newspapers and magazines in many foreign languages than the others (M= 4.21, SD=.801 vs. M=3.85, SD=.899).

Table 1: Interest in Foreign Languages

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
11.	4.15	1.064	4.00	1.080	4.29	1.069	.496
12.	4.11	.751	3.85	.801	4.36	.633	.077
14.	4.30	.869	4.15	.899	4.43	.852	.422
20.	3.78	.751	3.69	.630	3.86	.864	.579
56.	4.04	.808	3.85	.899	4.21	.699	.244
15.	2.78	1.396	3.23	1.363	2.36	1.336	.105
22.	2.52	1.189	3.00	1.225	2.07	.997	.040
49.	2.26	1.059	2.69	1.182	2.21	.802	.227
60.	3.67	1.000	3.31	.947	3.93	.997	.110
64.	3.22	1.219	3.23	1.235	3.21	1.251	.973

Regarding the role of learning foreign languages, most of the students disagreed that it is not important to learn a foreign language (M=2.78. However, the opinions were relatively different (SD=1.396), and some of the students from the lower proficiency group seemed to doubt the important role of learning a foreign language (M=3.23, SD= 1.363). Besides, most of the students disagreed that studying foreign languages is not enjoyable (M=2.26, SD=1.059), and the higher proficiency students gave stronger disagreement than the lower proficiency students did (M=2.21 vs. M=2.69). Surprisingly, the opinions of the two groups were significantly different on item 22 (P<.05). To sum up, the majority of students are highly interested in learning foreign languages. The higher proficiency students show more interest than the lower proficiency students do.

3.1.2. Parental encouragement

Table 1: Parental Encouragement

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
27.	3.63	1.079	3.54	1.266	3.71	.971	.681
33.	3.93	.829	3.85	.801	4.00	.877	.639
36.	3.41	1.152	2.92	1.115	3.86	1.027	.032
38.	3.81	.622	3.69	.480	3.93	.730	.334
43.	3.81	.786	3.46	.877	4.14	.535	.021
46.	3.67	.784	3.69	.855	3.64	.745	.874
47.	3.04	.649	3.23	.725	2.86	.535	.138
63.	3.89	.801	3.85	.801	3.93	.829	.795

It can be noticed from Table 2 that the opinions from both groups expressed low agreement that their parents tried to help them to learn English, and that they should continue studying English all through their life (M=3.63, SD=1.079 vs. M=3.93, SD=.829, respectively). Moreover, the majority of the lower proficiency students did not think that their parents feel that learning English is important (M=3.46, SD=.877), whereas most of the higher proficiency students agreed (M=4.14, SD=.535). The difference was statistically significant (p<.05). Similarly, there was a significant difference in the students' opinions on item 27 (p<.05). Thus, the majority of participants' parents take much care about their children's learning English. The higher proficiency students receive more encouragement than the lower proficiency students do.

3.1.3. Degree of instrumentality

Table 3: Degree of Instrumentality

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
3.	4.04	.808	3.92	1.038	4.14	.535	.491
8.	3.81	.736	3.69	.751	3.93	.730	.415
10.	3.41	1.047	3.15	1.068	3.64	.1008	.232
16.	3.63	1.214	3.08	1.115	4.14	1.099	.019

The degree of instrumentality is illustrated in Table 3. Most of the students agreed that they learn English because it will enable them to get a job easily (4.04, SD=.808). Also, they agreed that studying English will help them to carry their tasks more efficiently (M=3.81, SD=.736) or because it is a university requirement. However, most of the students from the lower proficiency group did not think that they learn English to further their education (M=3.08, SD=1.115), while the higher proficiency students did agree (M= 4.14, SD= 1.099). There is a statistically significant difference between the two groups on this item (p<.05). Thus, the majority of students learn English for instrumental reasons such as getting a job easily, carrying out their tasks efficiently of implementing a university requirement. Many students hope to learn English to further their education while some others did not.

3.1.4. Degree of imperativeness

Table 4 reveals the students' opinions on the degree of integrativeness. The students of the two groups highly agreed that studying English is important (M=4.112). There is a consensus among the higher proficiency students that studying English is important because it would allow them to be at ease with people who speak English (M=4.50, SD=.519). Besides, the lower proficiency students agreed that it would be a great loss if Vietnam had no contact with English-speaking countries (M=4.15, SD=.801).

Table 4: Degree of Integrativeness

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
4.	4.19	.681	4.15	.801	4.21	.579	.823
5.	4.30	.953	3.92	1.188	4.50	.519	.110
9.	4.07	.730	4.00	.913	4.14	.535	.621
26.	3.89	.934	3.62	1.044	4.14	.770	.146

However, it can be realized that the high proficiency students agreed with this item with a higher mean score (M=4.50, SD=.519). This also occured to every item in this domain. Hence, it can be stated that the students were highly integratively motivated in learning the language and the higher proficiency students held higher motivation.

3.1.5. Motivation intensity

Table 5: Motivation Intensity

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
34.	3.15	.770	3.00	.816	3.29	.726	.345
39.	3.96	.649	3.62	.506	4.29	.611	.005
41.	3.59	.971	3.38	1.044	3.79	.893	.292
42.	3.37	.926	3.23	.927	3.50	.941	.461
45.	3.74	.903	3.85	.689	3.64	.1.082	.569
6.	3.11	1.086	3.08	1.188	3.14	1.027	.878
50.	3.07	.675	3.15	.801	3.00	.555	.564
55.	3.11	.974	3.31	1.109	2.93	.829	.322
57.	3.00	1.217	2.85	1.405	3.14	1.167	.555
62.	3.11	1.281	3.15	1.281	3.07	1.328	.871

The students' motivation intensity is demonstrated in Table 5. The highest mean falls onto Item 39 (M=3.96, SD=.649). Specifically, the higher proficiency students strongly agreed with it (M=4.29, SD=.611), while the lower proficiency students expressed that they worked on English much less often than the higher proficiency students did (M=3.62, SD=.506). This leads to a significant difference (p<.05).

3.1.6. Attitudes towards learning English

The students' attitudes toward learning English are reported in Table 6. Interestingly, the means from the students' opinions of the two groups are similar (M=4.00). This value is equal to that on Item 44. However, surprisingly, the students' opinions on this item showed a statistically significant difference (p<.05). The higher proficiency students revealed a considerably stronger wish to speak English well in comparison with the lower proficiency students (M=4.29, SD=.726 vs. M=3.69, SD=.751, respectively).

Table 6: Attitudes Towards Learning English

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
31.	4.00	.877	4.00	.961	4.00	.226	1.000
44.	4.00	.784	3.69	.751	4.29	.726	.047
51.	3.30	.912	3.31	.947	3.29	.914	.952

59.	3.93	.874	3.54	.967	4.29	.611	.023
61.	3.96	.749	3.69	.630	4.21	.579	.034
7.	2.26	1.228	2.15	1.144	2.36	1.336	.676
28.	2.15	1.199	2.46	1.506	1.86	.770	.196
48.	2.37	1.006	2.54	1.050	2.21	.975	.413
53.	2.48	1.122	2.46	.967	2.50	1.286	.931
58.	3.26	.984	3.23	.927	3.29	1.069	.888

Concerning Item 61 "I really enjoy learning English", the students of the higher proficiency group expressed that they really enjoy learning English (M = 4.21, SD = .579) while the lower proficiency students slightly agreed with a much lower mean value (M=3.69, SD=.630). There is a statistically significant difference (p<.05). Thus, it can be summarized that the students had positive attitudes towards learning English. They wished to speak English well and believed the important role of English, especially the higher proficiency students. The majority of students thought that English should be a compulsory subject in universities, and they really enjoyed learning English. However, the students from the lower proficiency group underestimated the significant role of English in universities and they found learning English less enjoyable. Most of the students did not strongly believe that English should be the medium of instruction in the universities in Vietnam.

3.1.7. Attitudes towards English-speaking people

The students' attitudes toward English-speaking people are demonstrated in Table 7. It is realized that the students would really like to know more native speakers (M=4.63, SD=4.19). Also, they agreed that if Vietnam had no contact with English-speaking people, it would be a great loss (M=4.19, SD=.681). The other opinions received lower mean values, from 3.07 to 3.85. The lowest mean value belongs to Item 32, with which the lower proficiency students did not consent (M=2.92, SD=1.038). However, the students confirmed that native English speakers are very sociable and kind (M=3.85, SD=.770). In short, the students had positive attitudes toward English-speaking people.

Table 7: Attitudes Towards English-Speaking People

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	4.63	.742	4.54	.967	4.71	.469	.549
4.	4.19	.681	4.15	.801	4.21	.579	.823
13.	3.63	.967	3.38	.650	3.86	1.167	.211
25.	3.30	1.203	3.15	.987	3.43	1.399	.564
32.	3.07	1.141	2.92	1.038	3.21	1.251	.518
37.	3.56	1.050	3.46	.967	3.64	1.151	.663
52.	3.19	1.178	3.31	.947	3.07	1.385	.612
54.	3.85	.770	3.77	.599	3.93	.917	.601

3.1.8. Desire to learn English

Table 8 represents the students' desire to learn English. It is noticeable that the students have a strong desire to know all aspects of English (M=4.00, SD=.784). Regarding the time learning English, most of the students did not want to spend all of their time learning the language (M=3.44). In addition, there was a significant difference between the two groups on Item 29 (p<.05). It can be realized that the higher proficiency students would like to learn English as much as possible while some of the students from the other group would not (M=4.21, SD=.802 vs. M=3.46, SD=1.050). Similarly, the opinions on Item 30 were also divergent between the two groups. The lower proficiency students did not highly agree with this Item (M=3.77, SD=.832). On the contrary, the opinions from the other group disclosed high agreement (M=4.43, SD=.514). The difference was significant (p<.05). Generally, the students highly desired to learn English, especially the higher proficiency students. However, some of the students from the lower proficiency group were unwilling to spend all of their time learning English or learn it as much as possible.

Table 2: Desire to Learn English

Items	Total (N=27)		Group 1 N=13		Group 2 N=14		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
2.	4.00	.784	3.62	.870	4.36	.497	.011
17.	3.44	.892	3.15	.801	3.71	.914	.104
29.	3.85	.989	3.46	1.050	4.21	.802	.046
30.	4.11	.751	3.77	.832	4.43	.514	.019
35.	4.26	.712	4.00	.707	4.50	.650	.067
18.	2.67	.1000	2.92	1.188	2.43	.756	.205
19.	3.15	.907	3.08	.862	3.21	.975	.792
21.	3.07	1.107	3.23	1.235	2.93	.997	.489
23.	2.81	1.111	2.92	1.115	2.71	1.139	.635
24.	2.96	.940	3.00	1.000	2.93	.917	.848

3.2. Pedagogical implications

From the above discussion, it can be drawn that the higher proficiency students are highly motivated and they have a stronger desire to learn English. Besides, they find it more interesting and more enjoyable to learn English than the lower proficiency students. That might be some of the reasons why they got higher results in learning English as Gardner [11] affirms that "students with higher levels of motivation will do better than students with lower levels". Conversely, there are students who lack interest and motivation to learn. To help the teachers and students deal with these problems, some instructional suggestions are introduced.

In order to promote their students' motivation and positive attitudes towards learning English, teachers are first advised to set a personal example with their own behavior [26]. Teachers are recommended to prepare for lessons, be committed and motivated themselves, behave naturally, and be sensitive and accepting. Furthermore, teachers should create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom in which language errors are considered a natural part of the process of learning a foreign language [2]. This is a meaningful and important message for teachers as error correction occurs often even among students themselves. Specifically, teachers are recommended to avoid excessive, "on the spot" correction in speaking activities [27]. This might hinder learners from speaking and experimenting with new language [28]. Teachers are also recommended to present the tasks properly. Giving clear directions, providing guidance about how to do the task, and stating the purpose and utility of every task are what teachers are advised to do [26].

Another recommendation to motivate students is developing a good relationship with the students. It is suggested that a teacher 's every day classroom behavior is important. Most students consider their teacher as a role model. For this reason, in order to motivate students to learn English, teachers need to be enthusiastic, cheerful and sincere [29]]. One important suggestion for teachers is making the language classes interesting. The tasks should be interesting, challenging, and varied, which will help to build on learners' interest [5]. Authentic material is another advice for developing positive attitudes towards learning English in students since it is meaningful to them, challenges their cognitive abilities, and engages them personally. According to Tsiplakides & Keramida [27], teachers should select authentic material and tasks related to the students' interests, knowledge and everyday experiences. Also, they should promote learner autonomy by giving activities and tasks that require students to use English for authentic communicative purposes [27].

Teachers are recommended to increase the learners' goal-orientedness for promoting their motivation and attitudes towards learning English. Dörnyei and Csizér [5] wrote that teachers can do this by helping the students develop realistic expectations about their learning and by helping them set up several specific learning goals. They suggested that teachers do a needs analysis with the students, and help students design individual study plans [5]. Additionally, teachers should provide the students with different learning strategies and emphasize that they need a lot of effort to learn English and that practice plays a significant role in language learning. It is the duty of language teachers to familiarize them with language learning strategies and incorporate strategy training

into teaching programs [30]. Finally, students' parents should take their children's English learning into more consideration and give them more encouragement with higher frequency in their study.

4. Conclusion

In the study, an investigation into motivation and attitudes towards learning English language of the first-year Mechanical Engineering students of Advanced Programs at TNUT has been conducted. It was found that, generally, the students were motivated and held positive attitudes towards learning English. However, the students of higher English proficiency expressed more highly positive attitudes than the students of lower English proficiency. Also, their motivation in learning English was higher than that of the lower proficiency students. Furthermore, the students' motivation and attitudes did impact different fields of language learning including beliefs, learning strategies, learner autonomy, etc. Finally, some suggestions from researchers have been reported to help teachers enhance the students' motivation and positive attitudes towards learning English.

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