

Attitudes of Nursing and Business Students of Asia-Pacific International University Towards English Language Learning

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the attitudes towards English language learning of nursing and business students at Asia-Pacific International University. It looked into difficult language learning skills as perceived by the students and examined the significant correlation between academic achievement (GPA) and attitudinal level. The subjects were 275 students comprising 214 students from the Faculty of Nursing and 61 students from the Faculty of Business Administration who enrolled in general English courses. The research instrument used in this study was a modified 20-item attitude survey adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/ Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The data was analysed using SPSS version 16 and the significant correlation was analysed using Two-Sample T-test. The findings of the study revealed that the nursing and business students in the Thai-medium program of Asia-Pacific International University had positive attitudes towards English language learning. Students perceived listening and speaking to be the most difficult language skills to acquire. The study also showed that there was no significant correlation between students' academic achievement (GPA) and attitudinal level. Following the findings some pedagogical implications were discussed.

Keywords: Attitudes, Language attitudes, English language learning, Learning

Introduction

There is an increasing number of high school graduates choosing English as their major when pursuing their tertiary education. These students perceive that English is an international language for communication and a vital tool for better career prospects (Chaihiranwattana & Nookua, 2010; Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai, 2012). Furthermore, the Thai government has been actively encouraging young learners at all levels to learn English in order to prepare for the ASEAN Community 2015 (ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook, 2012). This is due to the mandate that English will be the major language spoken in and among the ASEAN member countries, apart from other regional languages. In addition, the Office of Higher Education Commission has urged college students to develop their English competency to the highest level not only for career opportunities but also to be able to compete with rivals from other countries in the region (Kitjaroonchai, 2013). Professionals who may be directly affected by this would be those listed by the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRA) in ASEAN whereby those in medical practice, dental practice, nursing services, engineering services, architecture, land surveying, and accountancy services (Aldaba, 2013, p.2) are considered as vital human resources.

Literature Review

Definition of Attitudes

Attitude is an essential factor which plays a significant role in learners' academic experience. It influences success or failure for learners depending on how they perceive and respond towards people, objects, circumstances or incidents they encounter in and outside the classroom setting. Montano and Kasprzyk describe attitude as composed of individual beliefs regarding outcomes, or characteristics pertinent to the performance of a behaviour. Furthermore, attitude is weighted by evaluations of the outcomes and attributes (2008). For Hogg and Vaughan (2005), attitude is defined as a system of beliefs, feelings, and behaviours

towards objects, groups, events, or symbols which are considered valuable. In other words, attitude is linked to a person's values and beliefs and promotes or discourages the choices made in all realms of activity individual encounters. Individuals may develop a sense of positive or negative attitude depending on experience and challenge they encounter in life, and attitudes can be changed when stimulated by persuasion or surrounding phenomenon (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995); this change can result from changes in a cognitive component such as receiving new information and different perspectives from other people (Khunasathitchai, 2009).

After considering definitions of attitude, this study will define attitude as a feeling or perception or belief gained through past experience; the response tendency of a person through behavioural expression either favourably or unfavourably towards persons, objects, situations, or circumstances; a construct that may change through stimuli, persuasion, or momentum from surrounding circumstances.

Components of Attitude

As seen in the definitions of attitude given in the preceding paragraph, it appears that attitude is made up of different components. Gardner (1985) describes the attitude concept in three components, namely, the affective component (feelings about the attitude object); the behavioral component (predisposition to act towards the attitude object in a certain way); and the cognitive component (beliefs about the attitude object).

The affective or emotional aspect of attitude can help learners to express whether they like or dislike the objects or surrounding situations and the inner feelings and emotions of foreign language learners influence their perspectives and their attitudes towards the target language (Zainol et al., 2012). This is because learning a foreign language is "an emotional process in which the teacher and his students engage in various emotional activities in a classroom setting and varied fruits of emotion are yielded" (Feng & Chen, 2009, p. 94). Emotional expressions can be identified through facial movements such as smiling or scowling or reactions through crying or laughing.

The behavioural aspect of attitude deals with people's reaction and behavior toward situations they encounter. Their reaction can be expressed either favorably or unfavorably. According to Kara (2009, p. 102) positive attitudes "lead to the exhibition of positive behaviors toward courses of study, in that learners will absorb the acquired knowledge and put themselves into it and strive to learn more." These students will be more eager to solve problems and apply information and skills useful for daily life than those who have neutral or negative attitudes. Thus, the behavioral aspect might view any positive act toward a person or object as positive attitude. In contrast, it views any negative acts as negative attitude.

The cognitive aspect of attitude is the beliefs of the language learners regarding their acquired knowledge and their comprehension and understanding toward the process of language acquisition. According to Zainol, et al., (2012) this aspect of attitude can be classified into four steps; namely, connecting the previous knowledge with the new one, creating new knowledge, checking new knowledge, and applying the new knowledge in different situations.

Studies on English Language Learning Attitude

Much research has been done nationally and internationally over the past years on learners' attitudes towards English language learning. In Thailand, for example, Chaihiranwattana and Nookua (2010) used a sample of 388 students of Siam University to look into their attitudes towards English language learning. Their study revealed that most of the students had high positive attitudes towards English and that those who had good grades in English had more positive attitudes than their peers with lower grades. Thepsiri and Pojanapunya (2012) investigated Thai university students' attitudes towards English language learning and their causal attribution for success or failure, and their research findings revealed that students seemed to have a positive attitude towards English learning due to the importance of English for their education and career prospects.

In China, a case of Chinese college students' attitudes towards English was researched by Yu (2010) and the study showed that Chinese college students have positive attitudes towards the English language and that the longer these students studied English, the more likely they are to have positive attitudes towards the language; further, their experience with native-English teachers also contributed to their positive attitude toward the language.

In Kuwait, Ahmed and Lamees (2009) investigated non-English major ESL college students' attitudes and preference towards learning English at Kuwait University. The study indicated that the majority of the

samples realized the importance of English. The findings also revealed that there was a relationship between the negative past high school English learning with the negative attitude of female students toward English language learning. In addition, most of students preferred learning English through discussions, multimedia and computers.

In Turkey, Inal, Evin, and Saracaloglu (2005) investigated the relation between students' attitudes toward foreign language and foreign language achievement. Their research findings showed that there is a significant relation between student academic achievement and student attitude towards foreign language.

In Japan, Kobayashi (2002) looked into Japanese female students' attitudes towards English learning and her study revealed that young Japanese women had positive attitudes towards English language learning in and outside the country due to social status and educational elements such as opportunity for life planning and effective tools for their achievement of better lives and professions.

Since it is assumed that individuals may have different attitudes towards languages and their attitudes may serve in different aspects or useful functions. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the attitudes towards English language learning of nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University with a belief that when language teachers have a better understanding of students' attitudes they may select appropriate materials or relevant activities that stimulate learners' language learning experience so that language acquisition can be enhanced.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions and hypotheses are as follows:

This study endeavours to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University towards English language learning?
2. What is the most difficult language skill perceived by nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University?
3. Is there any significant difference between nursing students' attitudes and business students' attitudes towards English language learning?
4. Is there any significant correlation between the students' GPA and their attitude level?

H_0 : There is no significant difference between nursing students and business students' attitudes towards English language learning.

H_a : There is a significant correlation between the students with higher GPA and their attitude level.

Research Methodology

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 275 students, studying at Asia-Pacific International University. Of these participants, 214 students were from the Faculty of Nursing and 61 from the Faculty of Business Administration. Students from these majors were chosen because their area of study is within the seven vital professions mentioned by ASEAN. They were in different levels of study ranging from freshman to senior with age ranges between 18-25 years old. These students are required to take three general English courses which contribute to 9 study credits in their study programs. These general English courses are administered under the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The nursing students are required to complete all the three courses within the first two years in college before they transfer to the Bangkok campus, whereas the business students may put off completion of the English courses until they are in their senior year.

Design

The design of this study was quantitative in nature. Adapted questionnaire items were employed as a measuring instrument. The questionnaire items were translated into Thai and the reliability of the questionnaire was tested with 30 nursing and business students to determine Cronbach's Alpha value. The reliability coefficient was 0.82. Having obtained the value of reliability, the questionnaire was passed out. The participants were asked to answer all the items in the questionnaire honestly, giving their own perceptions

about their attitudes towards English language. They were asked to respond to the questionnaire while the researcher administered the classes to ensure that the respondents understood the statements clearly. The respondents were given 25 minutes to fill out the questionnaire during their class hours. Data were collected shortly after for further analysis.

Instrument

The measuring instrument used in this study was an attitude questionnaire which focused on the attitudes towards English language. The questionnaire items were adapted from the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner (1985). They questionnaire method has proved to be a “useful way(s) of gathering information about affective dimensions of teaching and learning such as beliefs, motivation, attitudes, and preference” (Richard, 1995, p.10) There were 20 five- point Likert (1932) scale items on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA) where 1 meant strongly disagree, and 5, strongly agree, applied on the positive statements. For the negative statements, 1 meant strongly agree and 5 stood for strongly disagree. There were 11 positive statements and 9 negative statements.

The open-ended question was used to obtain supplementary information concerning the respondent's perception of difficult language skills in English language learning and reasons or causes that contribute to the difficulty that they perceived. This would help the researcher to better understand the barriers in acquiring the language skills.

The questionnaire consisted of the following parts:

Part I: Demographic profile of the respondent: gender, year of study, age, grade in English from the previous semester. Some of these demographic characteristics in this study would be partially used for analysis.

Part II: Twenty close-ended attitude questionnaire items for examining attitudes of the respondents toward English language learning in general. These questionnaire items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree for positive statements, and vice versa for the negative statements).

Part III: Three close-ended questions concerning the respondent's frequency of using English and level of English communication skills. One open-ended question was to investigate the respondent's perception of difficult language skills.

It should be noted that the questionnaire items were translated into Thai in order to ensure that all the participants would be able to understand the statements correctly.

It is worthwhile mentioning that apart from the questionnaire, interviews were also used to obtain data to supplement and cross-validate the participants' responses to the questions. The students were asked questions related to their attitudes towards English language learning. They responded to questions such as a) What is your attitude towards English language learning?; b) Do you think the current study program provides adequate English courses?; and c) What do you think is the role of the English language when ASEAN Community 2015 is merged?

Data Analysis Procedure

The first section of the questionnaire was analysed through percentages to explore the participants' demographical profile. The second section was analysed through statistical analysis in terms of percentage, means, and standard deviations by using SPSS version 16, to explore the nursing and business students' attitudes towards English and any significant difference between the nursing and business students' attitudes towards English, and correlation between students' high grades with their attitude level. The Two-Sample T-test and Correlation Coefficient were conducted to answer the third and fourth questions. The additional open-ended question in Part III of this questionnaire was analysed to examine the respondents' perception on reasons or causes contributing to the difficulty of acquiring of language skills.

To interpret the mean score, the researcher adopted the interpreting procedure developed by Chaihiranwattana & Nookua (2010) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interpretation of mean score of nursing and business students' attitude towards English language learning

| Mean levels: | Score Range |
|---------------|-------------|
| very positive | 4.21 - 5.00 |
| positive | 3.41 - 4.20 |
| neutral | 2.61 - 3.40 |
| negative | 1.81 - 2.60 |
| very negative | 1.00 – 1.80 |

The mean score for each item indicated the level of the students' attitude: the higher score indicated that they had positive attitude, while the lower score indicated a negative attitude toward English language.

Findings and Interpretations

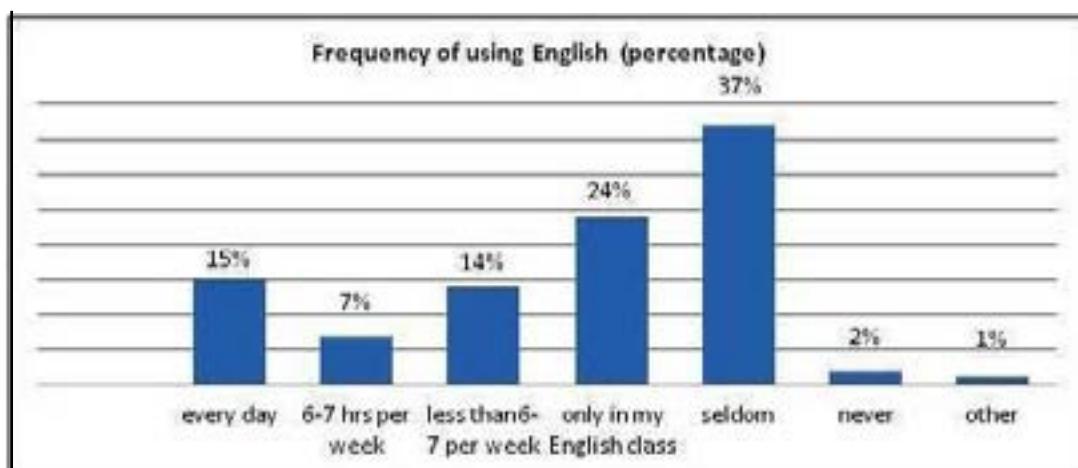
The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of participants divided according to major, gender, and year of study (N=275).

| Major | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Nursing | 214 | 78 |
| Business and Administration | 61 | 22 |
| Total | 275 | 100 |
| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
| Male | 51 | 19 |
| Female | 224 | 81 |
| Year of Study | Frequency | Percentage |
| Freshman | 105 | 38 |
| Sophomore | 52 | 19 |
| Junior | 75 | 27 |
| Senior | 43 | 16 |

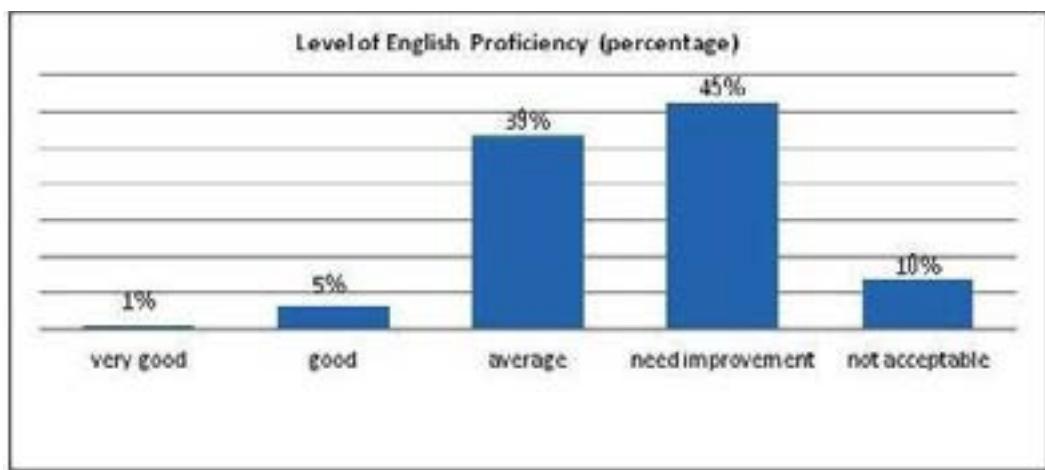
Figure A shows the frequency of the participants using English. As can be seen, the biggest group, over 1/3 of the total, seldom used English, while the second biggest group used English only in English class. Of these 275 respondents, 6 of them (2%) stated they never used English although they were required to take English courses. This implies that these students, despite registering for the English courses, didn't use English at all.

Figure A: Percentage of frequency of using English (N=275)



As seen in Figure B below, close to one half of these students admitted that their English proficiency needed improvement. It can be concluded that those who could use English well or average were less than those who needed improvement or used unacceptable English.

Figure B: Percentage of level of English proficiency (N = 275)



To further probe into the nursing and business students' attitudes towards English language learning, the participants were asked to rate a list of twenty statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale in which their attitudes were ranked from (5) strongly agree and (1) strongly disagree for positive statements, and vice versa for the negative ones. Percentages of the respondents' attitudes in a 5-point Likert rating scale are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The percentage of nursing and business students' attitudes towards English language learning

| Items on Attitude | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. I like to speak English. | 16.4 | 31.3 | 36.0 | 10.9 | 5.4 |
| 2. I do not like someone who speaks to me in English. | 13.8 | 16.0 | 22.2 | 25.1 | 22.9 |
| 3. English is a universal language for communication. | 58.9 | 19.6 | 10.9 | 2.9 | 7.6 |
| 4. Knowing English is beneficial for me to find a good job. | 56.0 | 24.7 | 7.3 | 4.0 | 8.0 |
| 5. I am not interested in taking additional English lessons. | 20.0 | 16.4 | 15.3 | 15.6 | 32.7 |
| 6. Learning English is important because it will help me become more knowledgeable. | 57.1 | 23.3 | 9.1 | 2.5 | 8.0 |
| 7. I think studying English is boring. | 16.0 | 13.8 | 25.5 | 18.9 | 25.8 |
| 8. English is a fun language to learn. | 30.9 | 33.1 | 24.7 | 6.2 | 5.1 |
| 9. I will never be able to learn English because I do not understand grammar. | 12.7 | 22.5 | 31.3 | 20.0 | 13.5 |
| 10. I think I can still find jobs without knowing English. | 18.5 | 14.9 | 24.0 | 18.2 | 24.4 |
| 11. I really work hard to learn English. | 26.5 | 33.8 | 24.7 | 6.9 | 8.0 |
| 12. I enjoy meeting people who speak English because I can practice the language with them. | 26.9 | 28.4 | 31.6 | 8.4 | 4.7 |
| 13. English should not be made compulsory at school or college. | 20.0 | 12.4 | 21.1 | 19.6 | 26.9 |
| 14. The teaching and learning of English should start as early as nursery school | 60.4 | 20.7 | 7.6 | 2.5 | 8.7 |
| 15. To be honest, I really have no desire to learn English. | 18.9 | 13.1 | 13.5 | 14.5 | 40.0 |
| 16. More English courses should be added in the nursing program / the business program | 44.7 | 28.0 | 18.5 | 2.5 | 6.2 |

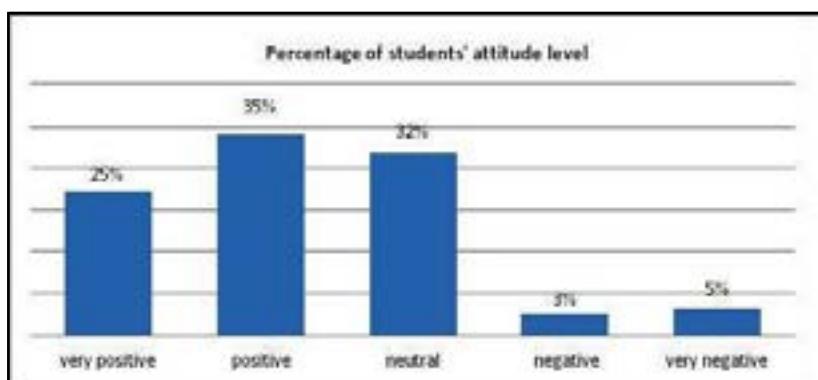
| | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| 17. English should be emphasized in all college classes including general education courses. | 47.3 | 30.5 | 12.7 | 4.4 | 5.1 |
| 18. Knowing English will not help the country to move forward when AEC 2015 is established. | 24.4 | 15.3 | 12.0 | 10.9 | 37.5 |
| 19. English will not be as important as Mandarin in this part of the region when AEC 2015 is established. | 20.4 | 16.0 | 19.6 | 16.7 | 27.3 |
| 20. High English proficiency and language skills will definitely help me to find job in other ASEAN member countries. | 63.3 | 18.9 | 6.9 | 2.5 | 8.4 |

As seen in Table 3, about 79% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that “English is a universal language for communication” (item 3), and about 81% admitted that knowing English will be beneficial for them to find a good job in the future (item 4), whereas 80.4% agreed and strongly agreed that learning English is important because it will help them become knowledgeable people (item 6). This agreement was supported at 81.1% and 72.7% with the idea that “the teaching and learning of English should start as early as nursery school” and “more English courses should be added in the nursing/business program” (items 14 and 16). Over 80% of these students agreed and strongly agreed that high English proficiency and language skills will be very helpful to find jobs when the ASEAN community is merged and this agreement was supported at 77.5% with the idea that “English should be emphasized in all college classes including general education courses”. However, less than half of the respondents (47.7%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement “I like to speak English.” This finding conflicts with the statement “I enjoy meeting people who speak English because I can practice the language with them” in item 12, in which 55.3% showed agreement and strong agreement. Such finding needs further analysis. One possible explanation is that over half of these students want to practice English with foreign friends when they have opportunities for career prospect and knowledge advancement, while less than half of them do not regularly use English so they do not like to speak with someone in English and they think that the language grammar is difficult to acquire and they lack ambition to learn it (items 2, 9, and 15) although they perceived its importance. Additionally, of these respondents, 64% of them perceived that English is a fun language to learn whereas a quarter of them neither agreed nor disagreed with this.

For some of the negative statements, it is interesting to know that 36.4% agreed and strongly agreed with the statement “I am not interested in taking additional English lessons” (item 5), and 30% agreed and strongly agreed that English is a boring subject to learn (item 7). About 33% showed agreement and strong agreement that they could still find jobs without knowing English (item 10), supported at 40% with the statement “knowing English will not help the country to move forward when AEC 2015 is established” (item 18). Such finding implies that English knowledge alone cannot drive the country forward to optimal development but highly skilled labor is also counted (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Additionally, 36.4% perceived that Mandarin will surpass the English language in terms of business and communication in Southeast Asia when AEC is merged in 2015 due to the rapid growth of the Chinese population and their language becoming popular (CILT, 2007). However, 44% disagreed and strongly disagreed with this (item 19).

In order to obtain an overview picture of these students’ attitudes towards English language learning, the percentage of attitude level is classified based on the interpretation of mean score as defined in Table 1, page 5. The analysed result is shown in Figure C:

Figure C: Percentage of students’ attitude level



As seen in Figure C, 60% of these students have positive to very positive attitudes towards English language learning, whereas 32% show neutral attitudes, and 8% have negative to very negative attitudes toward the language learning. It can be concluded that these nursing and business students in the Thai-medium program of Asia-Pacific International University in general have positive attitudes towards English language learning although the language is not commonly used among them. The findings are congruent with those of Chaihiranwattana and Nookua (2010) who found that most Thai undergraduate non-English majors who enrolled in fundamental English courses had positive attitudes towards English language learning, and with those of Thepsiri and Pojanapunya (2012) whose research findings revealed that students had positive attitude towards English learning due to their perception of the importance of the language for their education and career prospect.

In Table 4, the statistical analysis reveals that the mean score of the nursing and business students' attitudes towards English language learning stands at 3.628 and standard deviation is 0.834. This finding implies that these students had slightly positive attitude towards English language as it refers to the interpretation of mean score defined in Table 1.

Table 4: Mean score and standard deviation of students' attitudes towards English language

Descriptive Statistics

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Statistics | Statistics | Statistics | Statistics | Std. Error | Statistics |
| Attitudes mean | 275 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.628 | .05034 | .83485 |
| Valid N(listwise) | 275 | | | | | |
| Nursing | 214 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.649 | .05524 | .80804 |
| Business | 61 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.552 | .11856 | .92599 |

In response to research question no. 3 the table below shows the analysis of the significant difference in attitudes between the nursing and business students.

Table 5: Analysis of the significant difference between nursing students' attitudes and business students' attitudes towards English language learning

Independent Samples Test: Nursing vs Business

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | T-Test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|--|---|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|-------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Attitude: Equal variances assumed.336 | 1.553 | .214 | .803 | 273 | .423 | .097 | .121 | -.141 | .336 |
| Attitude: Equal variances not assumed .357 | | | .744 | 87.709 | .459 | .097 | .131 | -.163 | .357 |

As seen in Table 5, the statistical analysis shows that there is no significant difference between nursing students and business students' attitudes towards English language learning (P-Value = 0.459) at 95% Confidence Interval (-0.163, 0.357). The finding suggests that both nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University have equally positive attitudes towards English language learning. Thus the null hypothesis is not rejected and it can be concluded that students from both programs of study manifest

positive attitudes towards the language and they recognized that English is a language for communication and career prospect.

To examine if the students' academic success had any correlation with their positive attitudes towards English, the Two-Sample T-Test was employed for analysis. As seen in Table 6, the analysis shows that there is no significant correlation between the students with high GPA and their attitudinal level ($r=.015$; p -value = .827). The data analysis was based on 221 out of the total respondents who reported their GPA in the survey.

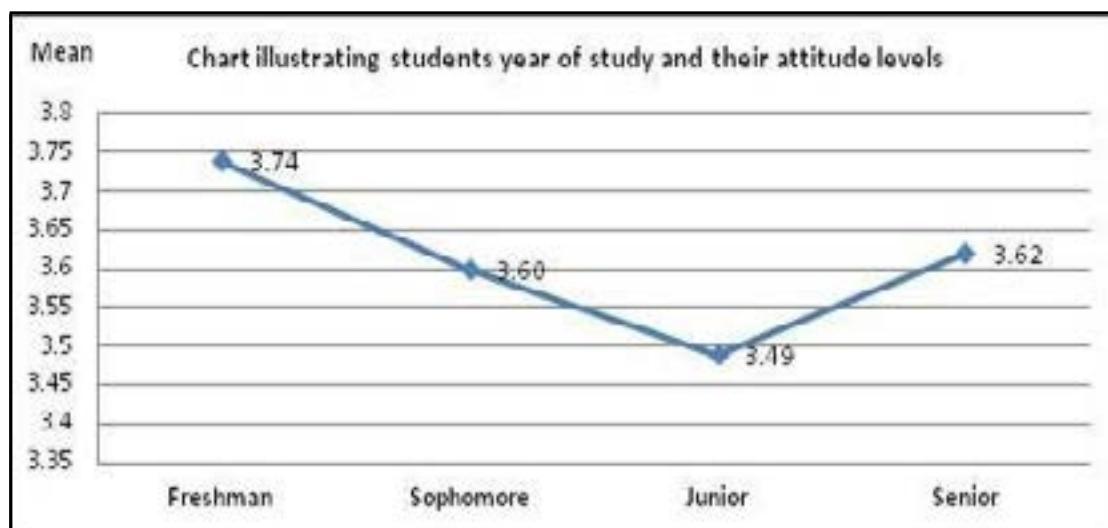
Table 6: Analysis of the significant correlation between students' academic achievement and their attitudinal level (N=221)

| Correlations | | Attitudes | GPA |
|--------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Attitudes | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .015 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .827 |
| | N | 221 | 221 |
| GPA | Person Correlation | .015 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .827 | |
| | N | 221 | 221 |

In Table 6, it can be interpreted that students' academic achievement, either low or high, had equal positive attitude towards English language learning. In other words, there is no relation between academic success and positive attitudes. The finding contradicts the studies of Gardner and Lambert (1972) who claim that there is a close relation between attitude and achievement, and of Inal, Evin, and Saracaloglu (2005) whose study indicates that there is a significant correlation between student academic achievement and student attitude towards foreign language. However, the result is congruent with Lanara (1999) whose study shows that there is no correlation between academic achievement and positive attitudes of learners who learn English as a foreign language. This might be due to the fact that the present study only examined the relation between students' attitude and their GPA, and their GPA accumulated mainly from their major courses, namely, nursing and business studies. Therefore, their positive attitude towards English does not truly count on their academic achievement (GPA) and one possible factor is learners from different cultural backgrounds may perceive English language acquisition differently from one another. This needs further analysis for other possible related factors. Additionally, Thai college students had positive attitude towards English because they perceived that English is a universal language for communication and it is important for future careers although some of them tended to dislike it or did not enjoy learning the language (Teauratanagul, 2008 ; Chaihiranwattana and Nookua, 2010 ;Thepsiri and Pojanapunya, 2012 ; Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai, 2012).

Since the study engaged students of different levels from freshman to senior, it is worthwhile analysing the trend of their attitudinal change between each level of study. The result of analysis is shown in Figure D.

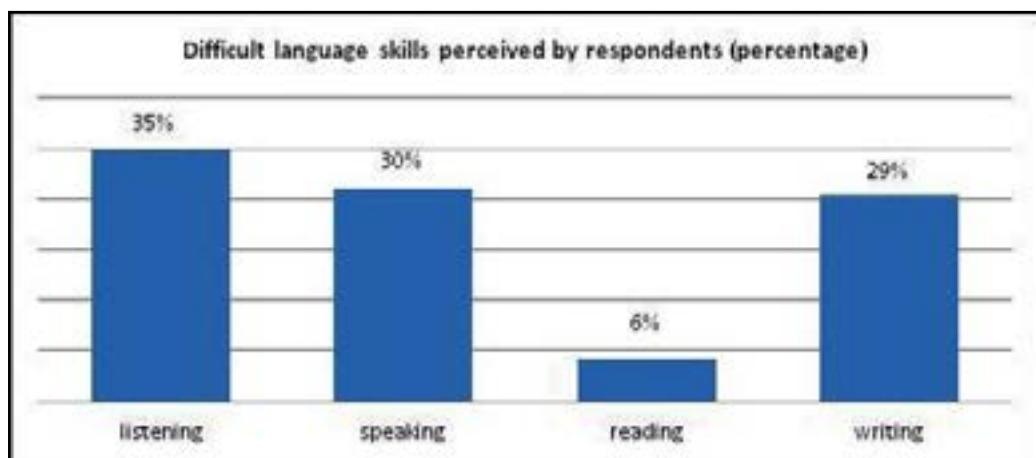
Figure D: Chart illustrating students year of study and their attitude levels



As shown in Figure D, freshman students appear to have the highest attitude towards learning the English language compared to the other groups. However, their attitude level started to decline as they progressed to sophomore and junior. Notwithstanding the downhill trend of their attitude level started to rise when they enrolled in their last year in college. The trend of attitudinal level and orientation change imply that when these students started college, they showed highly positive attitudes towards learning the English language. This might be due to the fact that they needed to adjust themselves to a new environmental setting surrounded with foreign students whose English proficiency was better than theirs. Having observed this, they might have been motivated to improve their language skills in order to communicate and be understood by those international schoolmates. However, as the years went by while numerous courses throughout their study program were taught solely in Thai, so did the classroom interactions, and their initial attitude level shifted. Nevertheless, their attitude level gradually improved in their senior year. This might be due to the fact that they came to realize that English skills are necessary and beneficial for them to find an ideal job after college.

In spite of having positive attitudes towards English language learning, the students faced challenges in learning the language. To investigate these students' perception of difficult language skills, an open – ended question in Part III of the survey questionnaire was added. The result of this study shows in Figure E.

Figure E: English language learning difficulties perceived by nursing and business students (N=275)



As seen from Figure E, the respondents rated listening as the most difficult language skill among the four language skills, followed by speaking, writing, and reading respectively. Such finding is in line with that of Suwanarak & Phothongsunan (2009) whose study results show that half of the undergraduate students participating in their study stated that they were unable to use English to communicate in real life situations for they are weak in listening and speaking skills, and that of Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012) that Thai students majoring in English perceive listening and speaking as difficult skills to acquire due to divergence of accents. However, the result of this present study contrasts with Pawapatcharaudom's (2007) whose study result shows that the most serious problem of Thai students in English language learning is writing skills.

To follow up students' answers in the close-ended question number 3, an open-ended question sought for in-depth information regarding their perception of difficult language skills. The students were required to indicate specific elements that they discerned obstructed language acquisition. Of the 275 participants, 87% of them responded to the open-ended question; however, some of these subjects indicated more than one language skill. Listening was perceived as the most difficult language skill. From the analysis of the open-ended question in the research survey, 103 comments were noted regarding problems and difficulty in listening skills. The following statements are direct quotes from the respondents who perceived listening skills difficult to acquire.

"Listening to English is difficult because people from different countries have different accents and I cannot comprehend when they speak too fast." sophomore nursing student.

"In order to communicate effectively we need to understand what people speak to us, and because of their different accents and pronunciation I cannot catch up when they try to talk to me." freshman nursing student.

"Most of the time when I listen to the audio program that my teacher uses for class activities I cannot comprehend the main ideas because the speakers speak very fast with different accents. In addition, I only understand very little when I am familiar with those words I hear." junior business student.

The finding of this current study is congruent with that of Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012) whose study disclosed that Thai students at Asia Pacific International University take general English courses with different teachers who come from different countries and have foreign friends who live on campus and who speak with different accents. Other factors may include listening exercises encountered in their textbooks, in which conversations or talks are voiced by different speakers both native and non-native speakers with strong and mild accents. Speaking was perceived as the second most difficult skill followed by writing. Notwithstanding, the analysis showed that these two language skills were perceived almost at equal level with frequency comments voiced at 68 and 66, respectively. Some comments from the respondents regarding speaking and writing difficulties are such as they don't know how to select appropriate words or phrases to respond to the partners while having a dialogue, or they don't know how to begin a conversation with someone. Some of them said, "I need to improve speaking with correct use of grammar because often times I tend to forget words that I need and I feel nervous when I speak wrongly." Those who perceived writing a difficult language skill claimed that writing skills require knowledge of correct grammar, syntax, lexicon, and morphology. They need to retain a large volume of vocabulary or phrases and in that they can use them correctly and appropriately in different writing contexts. Some stated that they could not string words into a proper sentence since writing needs correct grammar and appropriate words and it is different from speaking. Writing is formal and more structured whereas speaking does not require complete sentences and it is less structured.

Other language learning difficulties encountered by the respondents are such as English is rich in vocabulary and they cannot remember the words when they are not frequently used in daily life. Language structures and syntaxes are complex and when they are not regularly drilled, opportunities to master the language grow less.

Interview results

This section serves as the secondary source (student interviews) in order to support and enrich the discussion of the findings from the survey questionnaires (primary source). Twenty students were randomly chosen for interviews; nine students were from the Faculty of Business Administration and eleven students were nursing students. The interviews were conducted in Thai and transcribed and then translated into English. All students who were interviewed except one agreed that they had positive attitudes towards English. Some common reasons which attributed to their positive attitudes towards the language are such as 1) English is important for career opportunity, 2) English is a universal language for global communication, 3) English is an international language for advanced studies, and 4) English will be the language used when ASEAN Economic Community 2015 is merged. Fourteen of the interviewees expressed their perception of the significant role of the English language in the upcoming of the merging of ASEAN Community. The following statement was a direct quote from a sophomore nursing student who expressed her point of view on the role of the language in nursing profession in response to the question "What do you think is the role of the English language when ASEAN Community 2015 is merged?

"...English will be a vital language for communication in nursing profession. By the time I become a registered nurse, I will definitely work with not only local people but also foreign customers who live and work in our country. I read in research articles stating that our medical services here in Thailand meet high standard and that's why a lot of foreigners come to our country to receive medical treatment. In addition, medical expenses here are also cheaper compared to countries in Europe and many countries in Asia. Bilingual nurses will be able to cater for the needs of patients and take up their duty more effectively. ...Thai nurses are caring and service –minded to take care of patients but they lack English communication skills. Although they can do well in helping patients, they may not get to a higher position due to the lack of English skills..."

Another finding from the interview session expressed by a junior business student regarding the impact of English on her mother's current workplace is that English becomes an instrument for ranking and promotion

in career opportunity. The following statement is a direct quote from her expression.

“...I think English will be a very important language because I can see the current impact now at my mother’s workplace. My mother works in Siam Cement Factory and her executive manager asked her to take TOEIC exam as a means to upgrade her in a better position and also for incentive purposes. The manager urges employees to take English proficiency exam to measure their language aptitude in order to transfer and transact his employees in the company...”

In addition, there were students who stated that the general English courses required in their study programs are inadequate to help them master the language, when asked if their study program provided adequate English courses.

They perceived that the English lessons they acquired in class are too general and the lessons do not prepare them for the labour force. They mentioned that English lessons and class activities should emphasize more on communication skills instead of structural rules and morphology. These students mentioned that their teachers intend to follow activities defined in the textbook to fulfil the course objectives rather than discern students' learning outcome and focus on knowledge application to be used in an actual setting. Five students in the nursing program stated that due to class size, they were hardly given any chances to give short speeches to drill on speaking skills, and listening exercises were rarely practiced in class; instead the teacher required them to work out in the language laboratory. These students mentioned that often times in class they learned grammar as well as how to pronounce English words or phrases correctly. They said that many of their classmates failed to use the language laboratory and they did poorly in most of the listening tests. In their major courses of study in which the medium of instructions is Thai, they wish their teachers would integrate in the lessons more terminology or technical expressions used in the business and nursing professions. They also mentioned that group presentations can be occasionally done in English to help students gain confidence to use the language. The statement below came from a sophomore nursing student in response to the question, “Do you think your current study program provides adequate English courses?”

“I think learning only 3 general English courses are not adequate. Although we learn English in class, we rarely use them outside classroom with our classmates. At the end of the course we forget those lessons because we don’t use them. It would be nice if medical terminology or phrases associated with nursing profession were used and integrated into those Thai –medium courses that we take. When we only learn general English and those lessons have nothing to do with nursing profession, we will not be able to apply them in our future. I think we need to improve our English because nursing profession is also one of the skilled professions that have been approved to mobilize freely in Southeast Asian region. We may come into contact with foreign patients at the hospital where we work, so if those major courses integrate some English instructions or medical terminology, I think they will be very beneficial to our work...”

In summary, the students interviewed have positive attitudes toward English and they perceive English as an important means for communication although they struggle to master the language due to varied circumstances such as an unsupportive environment in that they only interact with their classmates who speak Thai, current general English courses do not solely prepare them for career path, and limitation of English instruction used in class activities and learning experience.

Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the findings. For ease of references, the study results are explained based on the order of the study objectives, which are 1) the attitudes of nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University towards English language learning 2) difficult language skills perceived by nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University.

The findings show that the nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University had slightly positive attitudes towards English language learning due to their discernment of the language as a means for career opportunity, self development, and global communication. Most of the students agreed that English is “a universal language and it becomes the language widely used in skilled occupations including science and technology” (Zughoul, 2003; Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2009). English must be reinforced in classes and additional courses for professional purposes should be considered for integration into the current nursing

and business studies in the Thai-medium program at Asia-Pacific International University. The reinforcement of English-medium instruction methods will prepare these students to gain confidence in competing with people from neighbouring countries since English proficiency is an effective tool for better lives (Kobayashi, 2002).

The study revealed that there is no significant difference in terms of attitude level between nursing and business students. This might be due to the fact that these students experience similar circumstances in college and both study programs require their students to undertake general English courses taught by the same language teachers from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Learners' attitudes towards English are believed to be affected by social environment and educational elements (Kobayashi, 2002). Additionally, almost all of the participating students live on campus in the dormitory and their exposure to English via various extracurricular activities organized by the university and responsible departments may contribute to their positive attitudes towards the language. The student body at Asia-Pacific International University comprises over 20 nationalities and this may account for Thai students wanting to improve their English communication to understand foreign friends whom they come into contact with (Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai, 2012).

Listening was rated the most difficult language skill to acquire due to divergence of accents from mild to strong, spoken by individuals who are from diverse nationalities. For students with low English proficiency or inadequate training from former schools, listening to lectures in college classes would be unquestionably perplexing since listening is a receptive skill and language learners' exposure to it on a regular basis is a must in order to master the language skill since effective listening comprehension skills are essential for students' academic success (Selamat and Sidhu, 2011). The students perceive listening as the most complex skill possibly due to the fact that Thai schools under basic education do not explicitly teach students to listen to native-like accent, or their teachers occasionally if ever spoke English or used Thaiglish in the language class resulting in poor performance.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study aimed to investigate the attitudes towards English language learning of nursing and business students who enrolled in the Thai-medium programs at Asia-Pacific International University. The results showed the students to have slightly positive attitudes towards English language learning. Listening is the most difficult language skill perceived by the subjects, followed by speaking, writing, and reading skills, respectively. The findings also revealed that there is no significant difference between nursing students' attitudes and business students' attitudes towards English language learning, nor is there significant correlation between the students' high GPA and their attitude level. This implies that both nursing and business students had slightly equal positive attitudes towards English language learning, and their academic achievements either low or high had no relation to their positive attitudes. They perceived that English is an active instrument to help them to find a good job; that the language will help them become more knowledgeable; and that English is a means for global communication. Having discerned students' perception towards the language, it is necessary for teachers to provide positive learning environments to help sustain the students' positive attitudes towards the English language learning. These students' positive attitudes may be propelled by external drive or instrumental motivation; however, such motivation may also have an influence on learners' interpersonal purpose or learning process in the long run.

In reference to the students' positive attitudes towards English language learning, it is pivotal for the English language teachers to maintain students' positive view toward the language so that they will appreciate the language in the long run and make use of it more proficiently when circumstances urge them to do so. The following pedagogical implications should be taken into consideration by English teachers in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, syllabus designers, program coordinators, and individuals who are responsible for students' learning outcomes and achievements.

- a) Constructing the English lessons or class activities that respond to learners' needs. It is undeniable that students learn best when materials and instructions meet their demand or respond to their quest. The content of current general English courses seem to be less appropriate to prepare these students for their career path as viewed by the students interviewed. Language teachers might consider designing or compiling their own teaching materials related to English for occupational purposes such as English for nursing and business professions. This will encourage students to apply those lessons and knowledge acquired in classroom in real life situations.

b) Language teachers may opt to boost students' listening comprehension and speaking drill by organizing listening and speech contests on a regular basis and monitoring their progress. Award presentations may be granted to honour students for their commitment and achievement in improving their language skills. If such a scheme yields positive outcome, responsible sectors should expand the activity on a continual basis with grander scale.

c) Establishing an English Corner in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities to provide Thai students more exposure to the language on a daily basis. The English Corner should be equipped with learning facilities and resources appropriate for Thai learners of the English language. Those resources must be made accessible and usable by students who come to improve their language skills. The responsible Faculty may consider delineating some regulations for the English Corner such as permitting no other languages except English when using the English Corner, or no books or materials in other languages allowed except those in English.

d) Establishing an English Clinic to provide opportunities for Thai students to improve their language skills. This can be done through mutual consent and cooperation between the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the Faculty of Education and Psychology by requiring students with TESOL emphasis and those who undertake a teaching practicum to offer tutoring classes or voluntarily teach their Thai peers who are eager to improve their English. The English Clinic can yield a win-win situation if it is well implemented in that students who give tutoring lessons will gain valuable teaching experience while learners can improve their language acquisition without paying.

To sum up, the current study was conducted to investigate the attitudes of nursing and business students of Asia-Pacific International University towards English language learning. The findings indicated that these students have slightly positive attitudes towards the English language. The study results may provide useful guidelines for English language teachers, syllabus designers, and program coordinators who have a part in students' academic achievement to help sustain their positive view towards the language and find means and strategies as outlined above to bolster their language learning experience since positive attitudes through learning experience will help students to learn and accomplish their goal much easier. The findings may not be representative of nursing and business students in other universities due to limitation of research population and the university context where this study was administered. Nevertheless, the researcher is confident that the study results are beneficial and will contribute in some way or another to other related studies and be of value to researchers whose interest focuses on foreign language learners' attitudes toward English.

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