

Environment and Attitudes Towards HUFU Non-English Majored Students in Learning General English

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ABSTRACT

English language perception is still an unlimited issue among teachers around the world. Similarly, teaching and learning this kind of language at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUFU) is a challenging matter to solve the problem: How to enhance students' learning of English. The objectives of the study were to find out the leading causes for the problems in learning English as a foreign language of HUFU students during two and three semesters and the role of foreign teachers of English in students' progress. The methodology employed in gathering information was a survey conducted via an online Google form questionnaire. Participants were 200 HUFU second-year and third-year non-English major students. The result of this study demonstrated that subjective and objective factors including the environment, students' attitudes and preparation were the leading causes of problems in learning English. Therefore, if students have good management in learning and are assisted in an English-speaking environment by teachers, they can make progress in their English perception. The data collected from this research might be necessary for later papers discussing more effective ways to help learners enjoy learning English. Recommendations in the light of findings are also discussed in this article.

Keywords: the subjective and objective factors, environment, attitudes

1 Introduction

English is becoming more and more vital and even survival in modern society. It is not only especially necessary for students of all levels to pass the compulsory English exam but also for the youths who are going to as well as are looking for jobs. In the case of employment, English is one of the prerequisites for applicants to be recruited. Since then, learning English is an extremely important issue nowadays. However, learning English as a foreign language is not an easy process as there are a variety of factors influencing it including both subjective and objective factors. There have been a lot of discussions about English learning difficulties so far such as learning environment, attitude, self-confidence, motivation and duration of exposure to the language, classroom conditions, curriculum and availability of both teachers and students (Raja & Selvi, 2011).

As an executive teacher of English language at HUFU, the author recognized that there has been a change in the scores of students during three to four years at HUFU. There are three semesters of English for non-English major students categorized as English 1, English 2 and English 3. In the first semester of English 1, a lot of students could not speak English rather well. Some of them even were afraid of speaking English when being called. They felt embarrassed and anxious. On the other hand, some students showed their confidence when they volunteered to answer questions in English.

When asked about this difference, students living in urban areas were found to have the tendency to be better at English than ones in rural places where there is a lack of a good environment for them to practise English. In addition, those students' parents who survive by doing gardening do not pay attention enough to their children's learning as they don't have time. Some are too poor to pay for their children at English centres. In a parallel way, most schools in the countryside could not get regular support from foreign



teachers of English. Hence, the fact that English learners in these places cannot reach the EFL environment since their early school time is one of the difficulties they encounter when going to university.

Another difficulty that non-English major students at HUFU revealed is their attitude. It cannot be denied that attitude towards work is really important. A positive rather than a negative attitude in work, in study or any other field, can bring people to success. Similarly, a positive attitude plays an important role in language acquisition. According to Lennartsson (2008), obstacles can be caused by learners' negative attitudes toward learning a language. However, these negative attitudes can be changed and turned into positive ones, which helps them attain positive results. In his research, owning a positive attitude towards learning a language can be a good start that facilitates students to do well during the course. With attention towards students' attitudes, the author recognized that this is quite true for HUFU students who have positive attitudes and are well-prepared for the assignment by teachers. Although their English language learning at the beginning of the semester didn't seem good, there was a clear advance later due to positive attitudes.

It is clear that students' advance is due to a variety of factors, some of which have been mentioned above. Learning procedure is similar to a journey of knowledge seeking. This journey is really difficult and challenging without learners' effort as well as educational assistance. In recent years, HUFU management has tried to facilitate students in English learning via a lot of communication and academic activities like seminars, conferences and contests which are greatly welcomed by students. In fact, these are convenient kinds of environments for English learning where students can practise, exchange and compete with each other for making progress. With these two difficulties that HUFU non-English major students face including the learning environment and learners' attitude, this research was carried out to find more details for these causes, and then suggest more appropriate solutions to help them get advanced in the English acquisition process. There have been a lot of similar surveys in this field, yet no one has been implemented in HUFU. The findings of the study can be useful for HUFU managers, especially for the English department manager to conduct more successful English teaching strategies in the future.

2 Literature review

2.1 Definitions of Foreign Language

There have been a lot of definitions of foreign languages. Aleidine & Theresa (2015) said a foreign language is one which is learned in classrooms and is not spoken in society. According to Cambridge (n.d), English is a kind of foreign language as it is taught to people whose main language is not English. As a result, a foreign language is not a native language that is spoken nation-widely. English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam as it is not spoken naturally and not as an official language in daily life, communication or business while Vietnamese is. Hence, it can be said that learning a foreign is a hard and long-term procedure because there is a limit of the environment where it is spoken full-time.

2.2 Difficulties in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

2.2.1 Environment to Learn EFL

Agarwal & Krishan (2014) said that the environment consists of a vast of factors like physical, geographical, biological, social, cultural and political conditions that surround an individual and determine his performance. The school environment is the result of the interaction of teachers-students relationship, teachers' academic and professional qualifications and teachers' teaching. School environment is the sum of all physical, emotional, social, mental, organizational and instructional factors that contribute to the total teaching-learning process which has maximum influence on the quality and quantity of students' actions and has also facilitating effects on the achievement of students. Hence, the environment has a broad

meaning. To be able to make progress in learning English, these researchers emphasized that there should not be a first language in the classroom environment, but an English atmosphere should be created to force students to listen to and speak English in class.

Similarly, Kiatkheeree (2018) noted that a learning environment has a vital effect on language perception. Therefore, creating an effective learning environment seems to have a great influence on second-language learners. In his opinion, one aspect related to the environment is the academic environment where teachers are key factors. Moreover, technology environment has a great impact on learners where they can access apps, videos or information. Lodhi *et al.* (2019) claimed that environmental factors including school and classroom environments affect students' learning. A better school environment not only improves their learning but also helps with students' drop-out. A similar view by (Wu & Wu, 2008) discussed that changing the learning environment would improve students' motivation and thereby students' proficiency and achievement.

2.2.2 Students' Attitude Towards EFL

Another difficulty that students usually have when learning English is attitude. An attitude based on the Cambridge Dictionary is defined as "a feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by this." Hence, if a student thinks that English learning is really necessary and helpful in his or her life, then he or she will set up a target for learning. According to Lightbown & Spada (2006), if a learner has a positive attitude towards a language, he can become more interested in that language and have the motivation to study it. He will do that job with his enthusiasm. A study by Noursi (2013) about technical high school students' attitudes towards learning English showed that a majority of them had positive attitudes towards English learning due to teachers' assistance.

Robbins (1994) said that both negative and positive attitudes affect learners. He claimed that the important factors influencing language acquisition were interests, beliefs and attitudes. Students with desirable interests, beliefs and attitudes in the target language are likely to be more motivated to manage their own learning and develop the essential skills to become effective learners. Hence, English proficiency and efficiency can be improved when motivation and attitudes are paid attention to. According to Donna & Brian (1994), language learning is closely related to attitudes towards languages because language attitudes let learners have a positive orientation towards learning English. As such, attitudes may play a very crucial role in language learning as they would appear to influence students' success or failure in their learning.

According to Lubis (2015), possessing a positive attitude towards learning a language is an important contributor to that success. A positive attitude can enable learners to communicate with native speakers, which in turn increases the amount of input that learners receive. It often leads learners to use a lot of learning strategies that can facilitate skill development in language learning. A positive attitude brings out greater overall effort and also helps learners maintain their language skills to work out their target.

2.3 Research Questions

Both environment and attitudes have influences on English learning. This study aimed to find out if non-English major students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry are interested in English and to take into consideration how environment and attitude factors affect their English learning. With the collected results, some suggestions for this problem will be given.

3 Materials and Methods/ Methodology

The descriptive research approach of quantitative was used by answering an online questionnaire. This section details the research technique, including the study subjects, instrument, and data-collecting procedure.

Towards the frequency of lesson preparation, the outstanding percentage of 57.7% was “Sometimes”. The number of students who ticked “Yes” for this item was only 36.5 %, and “No” was 5.8%. The time most of them spend on English every day below thirty minutes was the highest which accounted for 55,8% and over three hours was only 3.8%. The number of responses of 83% explained whether students were interested in working with foreign teachers. They said that foreign teachers help them in a variety of ways like being more confident, improving speaking skills or getting acquainted with native accents. With question 7 if students made progress during two or three years at HUFU and in which skill, most of them said “Yes” and the dominant per cent is grammar progress at 23,5%, then speaking and confidence at 15.4%. However, there is a percentage of 14% showing there is no progress in English learning.

From the overall findings, it revealed that most HUFU non-English major students are interested in English and have positive attitudes and are highly motivated towards learning English although they come from different backgrounds and levels.

In terms of the English learning environment, firstly, the number of HUFU students coming from rural areas is higher than those from big cities, so there is an unbalance of backgrounds and levels. This is one of the factors affecting English language proficiency between these two subjects. Students from urban areas have more chances to practice English as a result of studying at English centres or communicating with foreigners. Therefore, they feel more confident and better at English. Secondly, classroom environments in high school are embedded with desks and chairs. There are too many students in a class, so that should be too crowded for them to practice or to be exposed to English. Then, fewer opportunities are created for English learners to participate. In addition, space for group work or group discussion is a problem, so it’s really difficult for teachers to conduct activities to help students improve their learning.

Perceiving these disadvantages from the high school environments, HUFU English department has organized English classes in a better way including a reduction in the number of students in one class from over 60 down to around 50. Although this is not a perfect number for an English class at HUFU, it is still a noted change. Another prominent improvement is to have foreign teachers of English in classes, which helps change the learning environment. Ma’s research (2012) found that teaching English by foreign teachers can create an authentic English-speaking environment and students make progress because they are forced to communicate in English. When asked if HUFU students want to work with foreign teachers, a majority of them said that they are excited about this because it is a chance for them to utter English. Also, English teachers can help them with pronunciation or intonation. Moreover, they feel more confident and less anxious in communication with both Vietnamese and foreign teachers. This is a positive achievement for them.

Concerning the attitudes and lesson preparation of HUFU non-English major students, the percentage of 57.7 showed that they are concerned about English learning and want to get better results in English. In fact, students who are aware of the importance of learning usually do well in classes and raise their hands to answer teachers’ questions as they make plans to read the text, do assignments or learn vocabulary in advance. Once they can solve learning problems, they feel happy and that creates motivation and positive attitudes like a circular movement. Hence, attitudes have great role in increasing the proficiency and efficiency of students in language learning. While students with positive attitudes are easier to perceive English (Lubis, 2015), even brilliant and talented students with low attitudes and motivation have achieved little progress. Attitude towards learning is formed over a long time, so it can be influenced by a variety of factors including not only students themselves but also teachers, environment, motivation, material and teaching methods. Therefore, to help students maintain positive attitudes, there should be more activities

inside and outside the classroom to have a friendly environment where students feel happy to study. Moreover, students should set their own goals to help themselves make progress.

5 Conclusions

This study aims to find out the factors influencing HUFU non-English major students' English learning including environment and attitudes. It is clear to state that these two elements play crucial roles in making learning progress. This paper showed reasons for these problems and suggested some solutions. Still, there are limitations to the study. Because this is small-scale research, the author did not achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, these are just a few surveys that may not cover all elements. Therefore, future research should include additional questions and a variety of questionnaire formats. Despite these shortages, implications of the research can be found to enhance and improve the quality of English learning and teaching. Once the reasons for the learning and teaching environment as well as students' attitudes were defined, some solutions can be given. Besides having foreign teachers together with Vietnamese teachers, the study also suggests that HUFU management should spend more time training teachers with apps or teaching techniques to design more friendly learning materials and environments. Then, learners might maximize their positive learning attitudes as a result of this.

6 Declarations

6.1 Study Limitations

This is research via personal experiences, then there are some limitations. Because this is small-scale research at HUFU, the author did not achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, these are just a few survey questions that may not cover all elements. Therefore, future research should include additional questions and a variety of questionnaire formats. This is research via personal experiences, then there are some limitations. Because this is small-scale research at HUFU, the author did not achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, these are just a few survey questions that may not cover all elements. Therefore, future research should include additional questions and a variety of questionnaire formats.

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6.3 Publisher's Note

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