



## **Understanding University Students' Attitudes toward English Language Learning in Thailand**

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### **Introduction**

The English proficiency levels of Thai EFL students have reportedly slipped from the designated targets and consistently fallen below those of the neighboring countries annually. At the university level, a recent study from Waluyo (2019) pointed out that based on the results of a standardized test of English proficiency, 77.3%/2248 Thai first-year university students were identified as basic users of English or considered A1 and/or A2 levels in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); such levels of proficiency are considered equal to the abilities of primary and junior high school students in the current Thai educational system; similar findings were obtained by Luksup and Chaisoda (2019). Meanwhile, the Thai Ministry of Education set up targets that senior high school and university graduates should acquire the levels of independent users of English, which are B1 and B2 levels in the CEFR (Anantapol et al., 2018). In the latest report from Education First (EF) (2020), one of the well-known educational institutions focusing on English learning, it was disclosed that the proficiency index of Thailand was at the Very Low Proficiency band, ranked at 20/24 in Asia and 89/100 countries in the world. Thailand has occupied such a band since 2011, implying insignificant improvements of the teaching and learning of English for almost a decade.

All these concerns of low English proficiency levels among Thai EFL students have made researchers reflect on the question, "if the English curriculum and teaching and learning processes in Thailand failed to deliver significant improvements, could the main problem reside inside the students themselves?". At this point, attitudes have long been suggested to be among the learners' variables influencing success in English learning (Gömlöksiz, 2010). Foley (2005) argued that understanding English learning in the Thai formal education system requires us to delve into the basic tenets of the culture as the country itself has a complex sociolinguistics context. Researchers assumed that such complexities may also have been instilled inside Thai students that affect their success in English learning, yet empirical evidence is still scarce in this matter. Preceding research has documented the effect of students' attitudes toward foreign language learning on the success or failure in achieving competence in the target language; students' positive or negative attitudes toward their foreign language learning are likely to have similar positive or negative effects on their learning outcomes (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Piquemal & Renaud, 2006). Therefore, the present study intends to inquire into Thai EFL students' attitudes toward English language learning at a university level. Understanding the students' attitudes may reveal another way of looking at the low proficiency issue currently encountered by Thailand.



This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are the university students' attitudes toward English language learning in Thailand generally?
2. How different are the students' attitudes by gender?
3. What are the key factors that underlie the university students' attitudes toward English language learning in Thailand?

## Literature Review

### Attitudes toward English Learning

Attitudes have been defined as favorable or unfavorable responses to a specific entity involving feelings, thoughts, and predispositions to act in a particular way (Hyrkstedt & Kalaja, 1998). Such responses are presumed to be found in people's minds and influential to people's external behaviors toward the assigned entity. When the entity is an L2/foreign language, based on the ideas of the socio-educational model of second language learning from Gardner (1985), Baker (1992) contended that the growing interest in researching attitudes is due to the significant influence in L2/foreign language attainment or performance; as illustrated in Figure 1, the success of a student who is learning an L2/foreign language is affected by five variables, including attitude that is crucial in determining proficiency and non-linguistic outcomes.

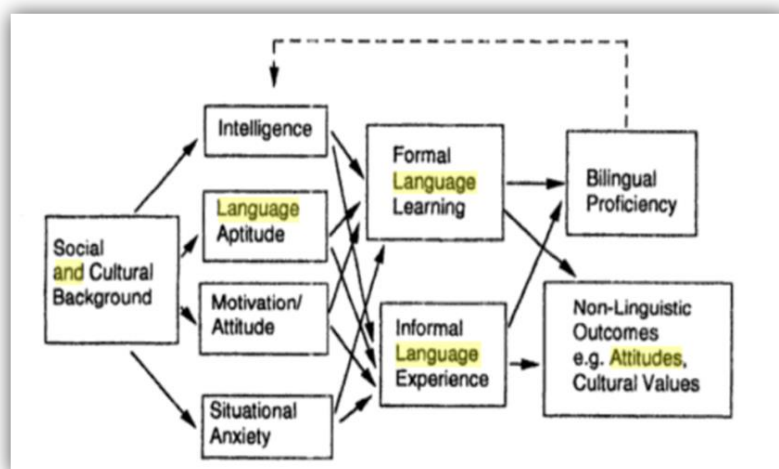


Figure 1. Illustration of the influence of attitudes in L2/foreign language learning.

In English learning, Smith (1971) claimed that students' attitudes, perceived as the range of individual preferences, beliefs, and values, are what make student learning easy or difficult in language classes. Coupled with the language learning skills and strategies, the attitudes of students may determine the extent of the complexities of the target language that are absorbed and comprehended (Nunan, 2000). As well, empirical studies carried out in different countries have noted students' positive (Ahmed, 2015; Berowa, 2018) and negative (e.g., Abidin et al., 2012, Lin & Warden, 1998) attitudes.

## Attitudes and Gender

Attitudes and gender in L2/foreign language learning, have always been intriguing and part of the discussion. Norton and Pavlenko (2004, p. 3) argued, " ... there is an array of gender discourses closely linked to English, which have great potential to influence learners' investments and decisions. These discourses shape learners' desires as well as their images of themselves, their futures, and their social, educational, and economic opportunities". Such desires and perceptions shape learners' attitudes that may strengthen their learning agency or fuel their resistance to English learning. Some early empirical studies conducted in several countries in Asia have confirmed that female students have more positive attitudes toward English learning than their counterparts. In Japan, for instance, Kobayashi (2002), discovered that arguably due to the Japanese social elements, e.g., the status of English in academic and professional contexts and women's marginalized status in the Japanese mainstream society, females were reported to view English learning more positively than males. Lai (2007) uncovered that female university students were consistently more positive than males in their attitudes towards the three official spoken languages used in postcolonial Hong Kong including Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. The socially constructed gender identities and the limited actions and interactions with the textbook, peers, and teachers were what made female students tend to challenge themselves in studying English at a public sector university of Pakistan more autonomously and exercise their choice of and agency for learning (Rind, 2015). However, a study from Berowa et al. (2018) exploring Vietnamese university students studying in the Philippines did not find gender differences in the students' attitudes. Similar findings were also obtained in a recent study by Orfan (2020) in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, in Thailand, Hayes (2014) examined the value of learning English among university students in Thailand and noted that the students embraced the notion of English as a tool for personal economic advancement; nevertheless, gender differences in the attitudes toward English learning are still insufficiently researched in Thailand.

## Factors Underlying Students' Attitudes toward English

Baker (1992) elaborated three factors underlying attitudes, involving: 1) cognitive components, which include thoughts and beliefs, 2) affective components, which are concerned with the feelings toward a particular object, which, in this case, is a foreign language such as English and 3) behavioral components, which refer to the actions taken as the result of the held beliefs or thoughts. These three components are regarded as the hierarchical forms of attitudes. Meanwhile, Cargile et al. (1994) placed the three components of attitudes into a social process encompassing immediate social situations (including speaker and hearer) and interpersonal history (involving speaker evaluation, communication strategy, and other behaviors). These factors underlying attitudes have been examined by early and recent researchers, yet most of the carried-out studies have only explored students' attitudes in the key factors. The present study, on the other hand, attempts to explore what factors are underlying university students' attitudes toward English learning in Thailand. At this point, the underlying factors may or may not be the same as the hierarchical model of attitudes.

## Related Studies

Thai learners have mixed feelings towards English learning and the learners who have low English competence have negative attitudes with low motivation but learners who have high English competence have positive attitudes with high motivation (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). Learners who have a positive attitude towards English language learning and receive support from their instructor are likely to boost motivation, strengthen their performance greatly, and achieve their goal in language learning (Nayos & Chuaychoowong, 2017). Ghazali (2016) also mentioned that learners' positive attitudes are linked to their competence in the process of language learning. On the other hand, learners who have performed poorly and received poor grades have negative attitudes towards language learning; these students would likely

display no mood to learn English (Thepsiri & Pojanapunya, 2012). Furthermore, Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012) also pointed out that the poor mastery of English had caused Thai learners to discourage from progressing in the field of science and technology. It is further discussed that the Thai learners are too shy to speak English with their schoolmates, being passive learners, Thai learners are less motivated, and they are not taking up the responsibility for their learning, which might have accounted for the unsatisfactory proficiency levels.

## Method

### Research Design

The design of this study was quantitative using quantifiable data for the data analysis. It was designed to examine university students' attitudes toward English language learning in Thailand by using various statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, t-test, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which have been considered applicable in applied linguistics research (Fryer et al., 2018). The research design is illustrated in Figure 2.

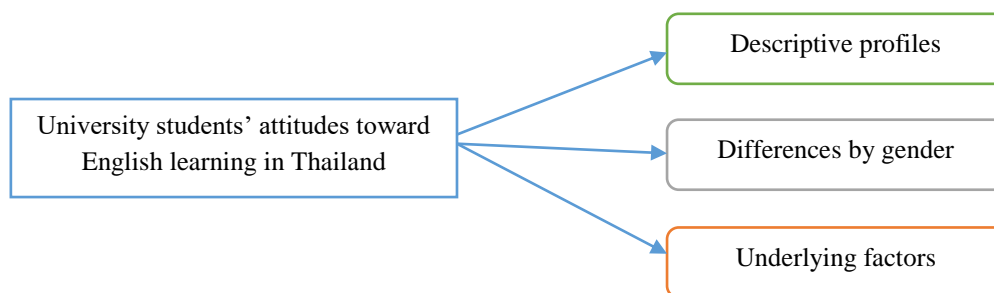


Figure 2. Illustration of the research design.

### Context and Participant

The study was conducted at a university in the south of Thailand. It involved 367 undergraduate students (82/22.3% males and 285/77.7% females). The students came from 24 academic majors (Table 1). All the participants were studying a number of General/Academic English courses over two academic years, where one academic year had three academic terms. The English courses were taught by one Thai English lecturer and 22 foreign English lecturers. The university policy required the graduates to be at B1 level or higher upon graduation. Special attention was given to the classroom facilities and teaching approaches. The classrooms were equipped with smart technology, ranging from computer, LCD projector, internet connection, smart whiteboard, and air conditioner. The teaching approaches were focused on active learning, which involved students in various collaborative learning activities.

TABLE 1  
*Participants' Background Information (N = 367)*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	82	22.3
Female	285	77.7
Academic Majors		
Tourism	33	9.0
Pharmacy	25	6.8
Nursing	17	4.6
Management	21	5.7
Accounting	14	3.8
Engineering	21	5.7
Health and Safety	26	7.1
Law	36	9.8
Environmental Health	16	4.4
Liberal Arts	4	1.1
Chinese	7	1.9
Digital Content Media	15	4.1
Public Administration	1	.3
Architecture and Design	21	5.7
English	7	1.9
Medical	4	1.1
Physical Therapy	14	3.8
Medical Technology	10	2.7
Business Administration	19	5.2
Marine Science	9	2.5
Thai Immigration	8	2.2
Asean	3	.8
Multimedia Technology and Animation	21	5.7
Communication Arts	15	4.1

## Instrument

According to Hyrkstedt and Kalaja (1998), previous studies mostly measured attitudes by using three methods, namely content analysis of documents, questionnaire and interview, and experiments with the matched-guise technique. Thus, this study utilized a survey questionnaire to measure university students' attitudes toward English learning in Thailand. The survey questionnaire was adopted from Ahmed (2015). It consisted of 19 items, covering questions and statements, such as "Did learning English at your school give you an unpleasant feeling?" and "You think that being able to actually communicate with foreigners in English is a very basic purpose of English.". The options were presented in a 5 response option Likert-scale, where 1 was disagree and 5 was agree. The survey contained five aspects in English learning: 1) attitudes toward the use of English (items 1-5), 2) experience in English learning (items 6 and 7), 3) English teaching and learning (items 8-11), 4) the focus of the English skills in the curriculum (items 12-15), and 5) choices of the English skills (16-19). To see the suitability of the instrument for the context of the present study, a pilot study was performed.

**Pilot Study.** The survey questionnaire was distributed to university students who were non-target participants. 31 students participated in the pilot study. The reliability analysis was performed to check on the internal consistency of the items. As used in most empirical studies, .70 was set up as the minimum coefficient to be considered acceptable for the study. The results displayed good internal consistency with

the alpha at .719 and the average intraclass correlation was at .719 (Table 2), suggesting no need for any item deletion.

TABLE 2  
*Results of the Pilot Study*

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.719	.762	19

#### Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation <sup>b</sup>	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.119 <sup>a</sup>	.061	.222	3.556	30	540	.000
Average Measures	.719 <sup>c</sup>	.552	.844	3.556	30	540	.000

## Research Procedures

**Stage 1 - Preparation.** Researchers reviewed related literature and constructed the survey questionnaire, then the pilot study was carried out.

**Stage 2 - Data Collection.** Researchers distributed the survey questionnaire to the target participants in March 2020. The participants were informed about the research; written and verbal agreements were obtained. Afterward, the received data were cleaned up and prepared for the data analysis.

**Stage 3 - Data Analysis.** The data analysis was performed by using SPSS software. First, the normality of the data was explored by looking at the *Skewness* and *Kurtosis* between -2 and +2 for all items (George & Mallery, 2013). The results revealed a normal distribution, then the analysis was continued to answer each research question. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first question; afterward, independent t-test was employed to explore the next question. Lastly, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was utilized for the third question.

## Results

### Research Question 1

To understand what attitudes students had towards English language learning in Thailand, three scales were used to interpret the means of the students' responses on each of the questionnaire items, including Negative (1 – 2.4), Neutral (2.5 – 3.4), and Positive (3.5 – 5). Overall, the students had a positive attitude ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .53$ ). More specifically, the students had positive attitudes toward the use of English (items 1-5) ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .49$ ), English teaching and learning ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), and the focus of the English skills in the curriculum ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = .60$ ). Meanwhile, the students reported neutral attitudes toward their experience in English language learning ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) and choices of the English skills ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) (Figure 3).

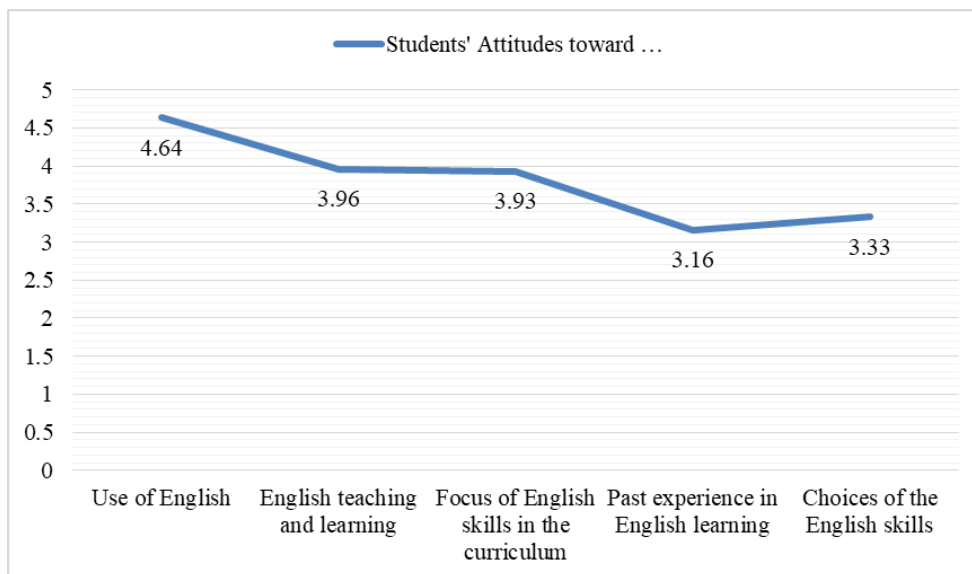


Figure 3. Summary of the students' attitudes for each aspect of the questionnaire.

## Research Question 2

An independent t-test was run to examine whether there were gender differences in attitudes toward English learning in Thailand. The results revealed no significant differences between male and female students:  $t(365) = .137, p = .89$ , with a very small effect size: Cohen's  $d = (3.88 - 3.89)/0.57 = 0.016$ . In descriptive statistics, the means of male students' attitudes ( $M = 3.88, SD = .64$ ) and their counterparts ( $M = 3.87, SD = .49$ ) appeared to be at the same numbers (Table 3). Both, nevertheless, held positive attitudes toward English language learning at the university level.

TABLE 3

Results of Independent t-test

Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	3.8870	.63569	.07020
Female	3.8779	.49454	.02929

t-test for Equality of Means							
	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.137	365	.891	.00910	.06631	-.12129	.13949
Equal variances not assumed	.120	110.708	.905	.00910	.07607	-.14163	.15984

## Research Question 3

Multiple Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA) were conducted to disclose the key factors underlying University students' attitudes toward English language learning in Thailand. Following the analysis procedures by Phakiti (2018), Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) was selected as the extraction method as it has been considered robust and commonly chosen (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2012). Then, the Kaiser Criterion eigenvalue higher than 1 was designated for acceptable factors. The sampling adequacy of .50 was applied using the KMO and Bartlett's test. The orthogonal rotation, i.e., Varimax, was chosen with the cutoff point at .30 for acceptable factor loadings (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2012).

The results of the analyses disclosed five key factors (Figure 4) that accounted for 49% of the total variance in the students' attitudes toward English language learning, validated by Bartlett's test of sphericity:  $\chi^2(171) = 2846.034$ ,  $p < .001$  with the sampling adequacy above the designated threshold at .846. The first factor included items No. 16-19 about the preferences toward the skills to be learned (*Eigenvalue* = 4.921). The second factor involved items No. 3, 4, 5, 8, and 16 concerning job opportunities, personality, academic achievement, business, and communication (*Eigenvalue* = 3.554). The next factor comprised items No. 1 and 2 regarding personality and the growth of mind (*Eigenvalue* = 1.191). The fourth factor consisted of items No. 12, 13, and 15 of English competencies (*Eigenvalue* = 1.115). The last factor covered items No. 7 and 10 about feelings in learning English (*Eigenvalue* = 1.038). The remaining items were deleted as they could not achieve the cutoff point for acceptable factor loadings.

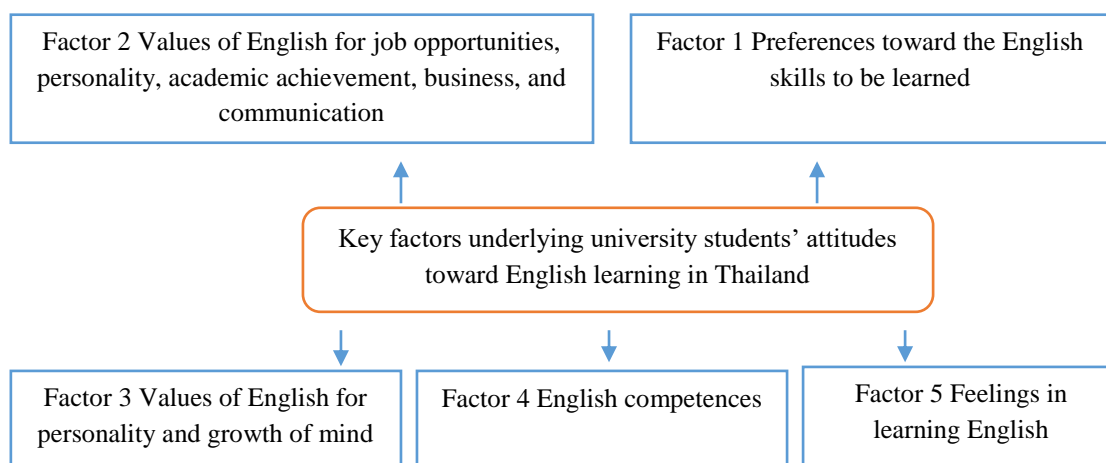


Figure 4. Five underlying factors of the students' attitudes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to understand university students' attitudes toward English language learning in Thailand. Due to the low-proficiency issues among Thai EFL students, understanding the students' attitudes may offer additional insight into our understanding. This study, first, found that the university students' attitudes were positive, sustaining the previous findings from Ahmed (2015) and Berowa (2018). Lai and Aksornjarung (2018), who researched Thai EFL learners' attitudes and motivation towards learning English through content-based instruction, discovered a mix of feelings where those who had low English competence had negative attitudes with low motivation and vice versa. Attitudes are important for Thai EFL students because negative attitudes may cause them to lose interest in English learning (Thepsiri & Pojanapunya, 2012). Secondly, this study confirmed positive attitudes, yet no differences by gender were observed. Hence, the findings do not follow the ones found in Japan (Kobayashi, 2002), Hong Kong (Lai, 2007), and Pakistan (Rind, 2015) but support the studies among Vietnamese (Berowa et al., 2018) and Afghan students (Orfan, 2020). Lastly, this study identified five key factors underlying Thai university students' attitudes in English learning, as seen in Figure 4. These five factors essentially covered the components of attitudes explained by Baker (1992). Cognitive components, which refer to thoughts and beliefs, would be Factors 2 and 3. Affective components, which are defined as the feelings toward the attitude object, would be Factors 1 and 5; behavioral components, describing follow-up actions, would be Factor 4.

These findings are implicated in the ways of understanding the low-proficiency issues among Thai EFL students. Despite the reports (e.g., Luksup & Chaisoda, 2019; Waluyo, 2019), Thai students' attitudes



toward English learning were positive, implying that the root of the problem may not be on the students' attitudes. This study had confirmed positive attitudes of university students toward English language learning, in which male and female students had the same level of positive attitudes. Therefore, this study suggests that the instructional designs of English courses at the university level in Thailand, especially regarding the teaching approaches and learning materials, should take advantage of the students' positive attitudes. The teaching approaches may involve active learning activities, e.g. pair-work, group-work, collaborative project, etc. and the learning materials can include, for instance, gamification tools such as *Quizlet*, *Quizizz*, and *Kahoot*, which can help maintain the students' positive attitudes through the enhancement of learning enjoyment.

However, it is important to mention that the participants of this study mostly studied English with foreign English lecturers, meaning that students learning English with Thai English teachers may or may not have positive attitudes. Moreover, this study has limitations in that it only utilized quantitative data due to language barriers and the Covid-19 situation and it did not include a measure of English proficiency although it discussed the concern on Thai English proficiency. It is recommended that future studies use experimental and mixed-methods research designs to see if the results stay the same for university students in Thailand.

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