



# Young Learners' Attitudes towards Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Study at a Primary School

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Received: 14 Apr 2023; Received in revised form: 11 May 2023; Accepted: 18 May 2023; Available online: 26 May 2023

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**Abstract**— *In recent years, English has been taught as a compulsory subject in Vietnamese primary schools. It is necessary for all EFL teachers and educators at primary schools to understand young learners' attitudes towards EFL learning. The aim of this study is to explore the young learners' attitudes (YLS) towards learning EFL at a public primary school (Henceforth called PPS) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with the participation of 133 fifth grade students. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the employment of the questionnaire and interviews. For data analysis, descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used. The results of the study revealed that most YLS have a positive attitude towards learning EFL. In addition, several pedagogical implications are provided for EFL teachers and YLS in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning English in PPS in particular and in other similar EFL contexts in general.*

**Keywords**— *young learners, attitudes, EFL, primary school, Vietnamese context*

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that attitude plays an important role in enhancing language learning (Gardner, 1985), and according to Brown (2000), high achievement in foreign language learning depends not only on the intelligence of the learners but also on their attitudes. In addition, there is a positive relationship between learning outcomes and attitudes toward learning a second or foreign language. Attitudes stem from the values assigned to objects or ideas and "values are the foundation of attitudes" (Wright, 1987, p. 21). Learners may have a positive or negative attitude based on values. According to (Wright, 1987), if a learner believes in the importance of mastering a second or foreign language and acts accordingly, it shows that the learner values language learning and therefore has a positive attitude towards it. On the other hand, if a learner does not believe in the importance of mastering a second or foreign language and acts accordingly, it indicates that he or she does not value learning that language and therefore has a negative attitude towards it; and it cannot be avoided that negative attitudes will contribute to learners' low

achievement in learning. It, therefore, cannot be denied that investigating the attitudes of foreign language learners to improve the quality of English learning for young learners (Maviş & Bedir, 2015), especially primary school learners, is considered to be a "must".

So far, a variety of studies on learners' attitudes toward English learning have been conducted at secondary and high schools, colleges and universities, but there have been very few studies on YLS' attitudes toward English learning at primary schools. Therefore, this study is considered a necessary study in the context with the aim of learning more deeply about YLS' attitudes towards learning English in a public primary school (PPS) in particular and in primary schools in general. This study attempted answer the following research question.

What are the attitudes towards learning EFL of the young learners in PPS?

## II. A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Definition of Attitudes

So far attitudes have been defined by researchers in several ways. Gardner (1980) defined attitude as "an inference made based on a complex of beliefs about the object". In addition, according to Ajzen (2005), attitude is considered a beneficial or unfavorable response to an object, person, organization, or event; or, Baker (1992) defined attitude as a constitutive hypothesis used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior. Another way of defining this term was given by (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005), showing that an attitude is a relatively persistently organized belief, emotion, and behavioral disposition toward objects, groups, events, or symbols. Similarly, Allport (2009) defined "an attitude is a mental and neutral state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual response to all objects and situations with which it is related." Regarding attitudes towards language learning, Gardner (1985) stated that attitudes are part of what motivates people to learn a language. He claims that "motivation" is the "combination of effort, desire to accomplish the objective of learning the language. Language learning is inextricably linked to attitudes (Starks & Paltridge, 1996). "Positive language attitudes enable learners to have a positive perspective toward learning", as claimed by Karahan (2007). As a result, attitudes may be very important in language acquisition as they seem to have an impact on student's success or failure in their studies. Based on the above definitions, it can be confirmed that in this study attitude is the way in which young learners view and evaluate their opinions, emotions and behavior to respond negatively or positively to their learning EFL at school. It is structured with three aspects: cognitive, affective and behavioral.

### 2.2. Aspects of attitudes

Wenden (1991) argued that attitudes consist of three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The *cognitive aspect* deals with a person's beliefs or knowledge about an object. As for the cognitive aspect of attitudes towards languages, it is language learners' beliefs about the knowledge they receive and their understanding during language learning. Cognitive attitudes can be classified into four steps including connecting previous and new knowledge, generating new knowledge, testing new knowledge, and applying new knowledge in many different situations. Another part of attitudes is the *affective aspect* which refers to a person's feelings and emotions towards an object. They may express their likes or dislikes towards surrounding objects or situations. According to Choy and Troudi (2006), it is believed that the inner feelings and

emotions of language learners affect their views and attitudes towards the target language. Feng and Chen (2009) stated that "learning is an emotional process" in terms of emotional attitude. It is influenced by a variety of emotional elements." In it, the teacher and learners participate in a variety of emotional activities, with a variety of emotional effects." Finally, the *behavioral aspect* refers to how the individual behaves and reacts to an object in specific situations. In the field of language learning, an individual with positive attitudes will determine positive behavior towards learning a second language. Having positive attitudes may lead to the demonstration of positive behavior toward learning, and making more efforts to learn among learners. Obviously, one of the most important elements in learning a new language is attitude (Gardener, 1985). That is why numerous research in the field of language learning attitudes has previously been conducted since attitude is one of the main variables for success in language acquisition (Saidat, 2010).

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research site and participants

The study was conducted in a public primary school (PPS) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The school has around 1,800 learners, ranging from grade 1 to grade 5. This is a large-scale school with a total number of 9 English teachers who are enthusiastic, responsible and highly qualified. Each teacher is in charge of 5 or 6 classes. In PPS English is taught to learners when they enter grade 3. The school is equipped with modern facilities for teaching and learning. In addition, it also has an English club that operates once a week for learners to improve their speaking skills and become more confident in communication.

Convenience sampling was employed in the study with the participation of 133 fifth graders coming from 5 classes. They are the 5<sup>th</sup> grade learners who have the longest study time at the school; therefore, the information they provided is accurate and suitable for the requirements of the study. Although they are YLs, most of them started learning English in kindergarten. Among 133 learners, 74 of them (55.6%) are female, and 59 (44.4%) are male. Their ages range from 10 (84.2%) to 12 years old (15.8%). They have been learning English at least for 3 years, and especially 48 of them (36.1%) have studied English for 6 years. Regarding English learning time in class, 53 of them (39.8%) study 6 hours a week (regular English classes), and 80 of them (60.2%) study 8 hours a week in intensive English classes.

### 3.2. Research instruments

Two research instruments were used in this study, including the questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 asks questions about the demographic information of the participants, including gender, age, grade level, studying English time, and hours of learning English per week. Part 2 consists of 24 items used to ask about YLs' attitudes towards English learning in the context concerning cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects. Furthermore, the questionnaire items are based on a four-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree (SD) 2 = Disagree (D) 3 = Agree (A) 4 = "Strongly agree (SA). The Cronbach's alpha index of the questionnaire is .910, so the reliability of the questionnaire is high. In addition, to deeply understand the YLs' attitudes towards EFL learning, interviews were also employed in the current study.

### 3.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Before the official data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with the participation of 20 YLs and the interview questions were piloted with 2 learners. That is because it is important to ensure that learners understand and feel comfortable to answer all the questions. After some changes were made to the questionnaire items and interview questions, the questionnaire copies were administered to 133 5<sup>th</sup> grade learners to complete and interviews were conducted with 10 young learners who volunteered to participate. It took about 30 minutes for each learner to complete the final questionnaire and 15 minutes to answer the final interview questions.

In terms of data analysis, for quantitative data collected from the questionnaire, descriptive statistics were used. Mean scores and standard deviation were carefully calculated via the use of SPSS Statistics software version 22.0. Gass et al. (2005) asserted that descriptive statistics are not only used to describe the basic characteristics of the data but also allow the researcher to better understand the

data set. Based on calculated interval coefficient for three intervals in four points (4-1=3), intervals with the range of 0.75 (3/4) were arranged. The following criteria in the Likert type scale were used to interpret the data: strongly disagree (1.00 -1.75); disagree (1.76 - 2.50); agree (2.51-3.25); strongly agree (3.26 - 4.00). To analyze the data collected from the interviews, "thematic analysis" was used. Students' answers are coded from S1, S2, S3 to S10.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results of the Study

The study attempted to explore the YLs' attitudes towards EFL learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data related to three aspects of attitudes collected through the employment of the questionnaire and interviews are presented in the table below.

#### 4.1.1. Cognitive aspect

The data displayed in Table 4.1 are descriptive statistics of the cognitive aspect of attitudes. The findings revealed that most of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade learners had positive attitudes towards EFL learning. More specifically, most of them **agreed** with three items of cognitive aspect, including "learning more English every day is necessary" (item 2) with M = 3.15 & St. D = .657, "learning English needs a lot of efforts" (item 5) with M= 3.20 & St. D = .649, and "learning English makes them able to watch cartoons in English" (item 6) with M = 3.21 & St. D = .798. More interestingly, most of them **strongly agreed** with the rest 4 items, including "learning English is really important" (item 1) with M=3.33 & St. D = .612, "learning English to please parents" (item 3) with M= 3.35 & St. D = .729, "learning English helps communicate with foreigners", (item 4) with M= 3.56 & St. D = .701, and "when knowing English, learners can widen understanding and knowledge" (item 7) with M= 3.58 & St. D = .606.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics of cognitive aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St.D
1	Learning English is really important to me.	133	3.33	.612
2	Learning more English every day is necessary for me.	133	3.15	.657
3	I learn English just to please my parents.	133	3.35	.729
4	Learning English helps me communicate with foreigners.	133	3.56	.701
5	Learning English needs a lot of efforts.	133	3.20	.649
6	Learning English makes me able to watch cartoons in English.	133	3.21	.798
7	When I know English, I can widen my understanding and knowledge.	133	3.58	.606

Regarding qualitative data collected from the interviews, several learners also reported their positive attitudes towards learning English as follows: *"I learn English because it is fun and I want to learn English well to become an English teacher in the future (S1)"; "I learn English because I was encouraged and encouraged by my parents, growing up for me to study abroad, every time I spoken English, my parents were very proud and happy (S2)"; "I learn English to know more languages (S4), communicate with international friends and dream of becoming a tour guide, traveling to many countries around the world."* (S3)

**4.1.2. Affective aspect**

Regarding the affective aspect of attitudes, it can be seen in Table 4.2 that the majority of young learners participating in the study **agreed or strongly agreed** with

this aspect. More specifically, over half of the learners **agreed** with 4 items, including "feeling very proud to learn English" (item 8) with M 3.25 & St. D = .732, "Learning English makes them have good feelings" (item 10) with M= 3.23 & St. D = 0.692, and "like to participate in activities in English" (item 11) with M = 3.23 & St. D = .724. "Being interested in their English learning" (item 14) with M= 3.16 & St. D = .649. Especially, most of the learners **strongly agreed** with the remaining 5 items, including "feeling proud to speak English with others" (item 9) with M=3.35 & St. D = .640 "enjoying learning English with their teachers and classmates" (item 12) with M= 3.51 & St. D = 0.755, "speaking English so well makes them excited", (item 13) with M= 3.56 & St. D = 0.667, and "learning English makes them feel more confident" (item 15) with M= 3.29 & St. D = .774, and "enjoying their English class" (item 16) with M = 3.46 & St. D = 0.680.

Table 4.2: Descriptive statistics of affective aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St.D
8	I feel proud when I learn English.	133	3.25	.732
9	I feel excited when I speak English with others.	133	3.35	.640
10	Learning English makes me have good feelings.	133	3.23	.692
11	I enjoy doing activities in English.	133	3.23	.724
12	I really like learning English with my teacher and friends in class.	133	3.51	.755
13	Speaking English well makes me excited.	133	3.56	.667
14	I'm interested in learning English.	133	3.16	.649
15	Learning English makes me feel more confident.	133	3.29	.774
16	I really have interest in my English class.	133	3.46	.680

Regarding the qualitative data collected from the interviews, 8 out of 10 students also reported that they have a positive attitude towards learning English. For example: *"I find learning English very easy, very fun and interesting; it helps me relax after stressful hours with other subjects" (S1); "English has many fun activities, so I really enjoy learning English, I find English not difficult" (S2); "I feel very confident when speaking English" (S3). Besides, (S4) replied that: "I am looking forward to learning English because it is an interesting subject and my favorite subject is English."*

**4.1.3. Behavioral aspect**

Displayed in Table 4.3 below are the behavioral aspect of the attitudes towards EFL learning of YLs. The results showed that 100% of 5th graders either **agreed or strongly agreed** with 8 items. Specifically, most 5th graders **agreed**

with 3 items, including "learning English helps have a good relationship with their friends" (item 18), "want friends to pay attention to during English lessons" (item 20), and "they wish they can speak English well with friends and teachers" (item 23) with M=3.17 & St. D= .751; M= 2.80 & St. D = .952 and M= 3.25 & St. D= .690 respectively. More interestingly, most of the learners **strongly agreed** with the remaining 5 items, consisting of: "not wanting to miss any English classes" (item17) with M=3.32 & St. D = .774, "concentrating on all activities in English classes" (item 19) with M= 3.26 & St. D = .735, "spending more time on English subject than other subjects", (item 21) with M= 3.47 & St. D = .702, and "considering learning English well is necessary" (item 22) with M= 3.35 & St. D = .676 and "coming to the English class regularly in the future" (item 24) M = 3.41 & St. D= .836.

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics of behavioral aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St. D
17	I don't want to miss any English classes.	133	3.32	.774
18	Learning English helps me to have good relationships with friends.	133	3.17	.751
19	I concentrate on all activities during English classes.	133	3.26	.735
20	I want my friends to pay attention to me during English classes.	133	2.80	.952
21	I always spend more time on English subject than other subjects.	133	3.47	.702
22	I consider learning English well is necessary.	133	3.35	.676
23	I always wish that I can speak English well with friends and teachers.	133	3.25	.690
24	I will come to the English class regularly in the future.	133	3.41	.836

Considering the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, a number of learners also indicated positive attitudes towards EFL learning, for instance: *"I'm eager and look forward to learning English (S1); S2 stated, "I am very happy, excited, and looking forwards to the English class."* Similarly, stating the same view when it came to behavioral aspect, *S5 said, "I am eager to come to English class to do group assignments and speak English with friends".* Interestingly, S5 and S7 both had similar viewpoints. *"I listened attentively to the teacher and completed all of my homework", "I am highly disciplined, and I do not play if I do not complete my homework."* (S7)

In conclusion, the data collected from the questionnaire and interviews showed that young learners at PPS had positive attitudes towards EFL learning. Most of them agreed and strongly agreed with the three aspects of attitudes. It can be seen that both quantitative and qualitative data are consistent. Young learners had very clear views towards EFL learning; they were aware of the importance of English and the benefits that it could bring to them, leading to having goals and orientations for their EFL learning.

#### 4.2. Discussion

The finding of the study showed that the young learners have very positive attitudes towards EFL learning. The research findings are consistent with those of the study by Nikolov (1999) showing that young learners have a more positive attitude to learning English. In terms of the cognitive aspect, the majority of young learners are aware of the importance of English because it helps them be able to watch cartoons and read stories written in English. Some of them have also answered that English is very important for their future, or some others have confirmed that they want to use English in other countries. They also want to learn English well to be praised by their parents and to be

allowed to study abroad, which is completely consistent with the conclusion of the study by Nguyen (2016) reporting that cognitive aspects of attitudes affect their achievements or learning outcomes. Students who have positive attitudes will be able to take appropriate actions, retain their attention, and build cognitive skills (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Concerning the behavioral aspect, according to Maio and Haddock (2009), behavior is influenced by students' attitudes and positive attitudes toward learning may help learners learn English more effectively. The findings show that the young learners in the study might recognize the importance of learning English. That is why most of them have positive behaviors towards learning English. It is evident that there is a relationship between their behavior and their actions. They always concentrate on their learning in classes and come to class regularly.

And finally, in terms of the affective aspect, the findings of the study showed that most of the participants gave positive emotional attitudes towards learning English. Learners have favorable views about learning English when they claim that they are interested, confident, and excited when they learn English with friends and teachers. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of Nguyen et al. (2022), which implies that learners' confidence and emotions are the top concerns in foreign language teaching and learning and that attitudes are important factor supporting learners' language acquisition.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate young learners' attitudes toward learning English at a primary school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that young English learners have positive

cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards learning English. This study demonstrates that most young learners are well aware of the importance of English. They know what to do to acquire the language, and their attitudes go together with actions. The findings may prove that loving English and making effort in learning are fantastic motivators to develop a positive attitude that leads to success. Teachers play an important role in teaching EFL to young learners, and have a significant impact on children's attitudes. Both teachers' teaching methods and behaviors are factors that may positively influence learners' attitudes. It is advisable that teachers should use appropriate and effective teaching strategies to maintain an even higher quality of instruction to young learners. Teachers should learn about psychological factors and attitudes of learners to help them establish a positive attitude towards learning English. Only when learners have this positive attitude can their academic performance improve and can they achieve the goals of English courses.

The current study was conducted in the context of only one public primary school, which may be considered as a small-scale study. The findings may not be generalizable to other public and private primary schools. Therefore, it is suggested that other studies be carried out in other contexts at the same level to gather more evidence to prove that positive attitudes are extremely helpful for English language learning outcomes, especially for younger learners.

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