



## The Factors Influencing Students' Attitude towards Learning English at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City Campus

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between students' confidence in their ability to successfully learn English, the values that English will bring to them, and their impact on two factors: (1) English language learning outcomes and (2) participation in English language courses based on data collected from 603 students at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City campus (UTC-HCMC campus). The article analyzes the differences between male and female students in these measurement outcomes. Confidence in the ability to successfully learn English is closely related to English language learning outcomes, while confidence in the usefulness of English is closely related to the decision to participate in English language courses.

**Keywords:** Factors, Influence, Learning English, Attitude.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is an important language in Vietnam's process of international integration and it is a primary foreign language taught in the educational system in Vietnam, especially at the university level. However, many studies have shown that the current situation of teaching and learning English in the education system is ineffective. These studies indicate that students often struggle to communicate in Basic English in their daily lives (Nguyen Hoang Tuan & Tran Ngoc Mai, 2015).

There are various explanations for the poor results in learning English and the lack of student motivation as mentioned above. To address this issue, several studies have been conducted, including research on the development of self-learning (Nguyen Cao Thanh, 2011); teaching methods (Nguyen Van Loi & Franken, 2010); and the development of the teacher workforce (Vo Thanh Long & Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, 2010). However, there are still too few studies focusing on the focal point of learning, which is the learner. This article focuses on

student motivation because research has shown that motivation is a key factor influencing learning outcomes. The article then proposes solutions to improve the current teaching situation to help students achieve better results in learning English and enhance students' motivation.

The author conducts research on students' beliefs in their ability to successfully learn English and their beliefs in the values that good English proficiency brings based on the 'Ability Beliefs - Value' model by Eccles and colleagues. The author believes that, up to this point, this is the first research work using Eccles' motivation model in Vietnam, particularly in the context of studying university students who are not majoring in English learning English as a foreign language.

The purpose of the study is to delve into two components: (1) beliefs in the ability to successfully learn English and (2) beliefs in the value that English brings among university students at UTC-HCMC campus.

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The motivation theory by Eccles (1993) and colleagues has been developed over more than 40 years to explain students' outcomes and participation attitudes in learning. Of current interest among psychologists is the Ability Beliefs - Value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995, 2002; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Musu-Gillette, Wigfield, Harring, & Eccles, 2015; Parsons *et al.*, 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2016). According to this model, Ability Beliefs are defined as students' beliefs in their ability to succeed in a subject (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). Value is defined with four components: Intrinsic value refers to the enjoyment experienced when learning the subject; Utility value relates to how useful the subject is for the learner's future (for example, a student may not find enjoyment in learning English but sees its usefulness for future career prospects, thus the English course holds high utility value for that student); Importance value refers to the perceived significance of mastering the subject; and Cost value refers to the sacrifices, hardships, and effort demanded of students to excel in the subject

The research indicates that beliefs in Ability Beliefs and Value within Eccles and colleagues' Ability Beliefs - Value model are strong influencing factors on students' learning outcomes and participation in courses (Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990).

Numerous studies (Eccles & Harold, 1991; Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Eccles *et al.*, 1998; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Parsons *et al.*, 1983) have shown that male students tend to believe in their ability to succeed in subjects such as natural sciences or sports (areas often perceived as masculine) more strongly than female students. On the other hand, females often exhibit stronger beliefs in their ability to succeed than males in subjects perceived as feminine, such as English, music, or arts and social sciences.

Watt's study (2005) found that female students have stronger beliefs in their ability to excel in English compared to male students, while male students tend to have higher confidence in their ability to succeed in math than female students. Until now, most studies using Eccles' Ability Beliefs - Value model have been conducted in Western countries. Eccles and colleagues call for research utilizing their model in cultural contexts outside of Western countries (Wigfield *et al.*, 2016)

## 2. METHODOLOGY

603 students at UTC-HCM campus (46.1% male and 53.9% female) participated in the study. All students were studying in the fields of economics,

and English was their non-major subject. Out of the 603 students who completed the survey questionnaire, 72 students (50% male, 50% female) participated in interviews after completing the survey. To facilitate students in expressing their thoughts freely without being influenced by the opposite gender, interview groups were divided into entirely male and entirely female groups. There were 12 groups in total, six male groups and six female groups, with each group consisting of six students to create a comfortable space for students to exchange ideas during the interviews.

### 2.1 Survey

The survey questionnaire consisted of 38 questions modeled after the questionnaire developed by Eccles and colleagues (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). These questions aimed to understand students' beliefs in their ability to succeed in learning English and their evaluation of the value of learning English well. The questions from Eccles and Wigfield were used because they exhibit clarity in factor structure, distinguishability from other measurement structures, and possess good psychometric properties (Jacobs *et al.*, 2002)

The responses were presented in Likert scale format ranging from 1 to 6. For example, 'How useful do you think learning English will be for you when you get a job after graduating from university?' For this question, students answered by selecting a number from 1 to 6, with 1 indicating 'Not useful at all' and 6 indicating 'Very useful'.

### 2.2 Interview

The interview questions comprised four main inquiries. These questions were designed to correlate with the Ability Beliefs and Value structure in Eccles' model, aiming to explore the teaching reality of English at universities from the perspective of students to gain deeper insight into the motivation of students in Vietnam to learn English, using Western motivation models. The purpose of the interviews was to reaffirm what students responded in the survey questionnaire and to further understand what the survey questionnaire, which is commonly used in Western countries, might not fully capture in terms of motivation factors related to students at UTC-HCM campus.

### 2.3 Statistic Analysis

The data from the survey questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS statistical program. The relationship between students' beliefs in their ability to succeed in learning English, Utility value, Importance value, Intrinsic value, Family value, gender, the choice of participating in extracurricular English classes outside of university-mandated classes at present and in the future after graduating

from university, and English language scores were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework.

### 3. RESULTS

All question groups yielded high results in terms of statistical reliability. Seven questions were used to measure students' belief in the ability to succeed (expectancy of success) in learning English. The statistical reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of this question group is .81. Three questions were used to measure intrinsic value, with a Cronbach alpha of .73. Eight questions were used to measure both Attainment value and Importance value, with a Cronbach alpha of .74. Six questions were used to measure Cost value, with a Cronbach alpha of .82.

The analysis of the structural equation modeling (SEM) shows that students' belief in their ability to succeed in learning English is the strongest factor closely related to students' academic outcomes. Additionally, beliefs in Utility value and Importance value are the strongest factors associated with students' participation in English language courses. These findings are consistent with the results found by Eccles, Wigfield, and colleagues when studying Western students (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2015; Trautwein *et al.*, 2012).

The interview results also indicate that 85% of students, in addition to having to study English as a compulsory subject at university, want to participate in additional English language courses outside of university because they believe that English is a necessary tool for their future careers after graduation. Students commented that they aspire to master the two most practical skills for future employment, which are speaking and listening skills in English.

### 4. DISCUSSION

The SEM analysis reveals that gender directly predicts beliefs in the ability to succeed, Utility value, intrinsic value, and participation in additional English language courses. The research results indicate that the most important factor influencing students' English language learning outcomes is their belief in their ability to succeed in this subject

Female students demonstrate stronger beliefs in succeeding in learning English compared to male students. Female students also perceive the importance of English higher than male students. Not only do female students achieve better final exam results in English courses than male students, but they also demonstrate a greater willingness to participate in extracurricular English language courses outside of university.

The most important factor influencing students' participation in English language courses is their belief in the benefits of learning English well. Interviews with the group reveal that the main reason driving students to enroll in English classes is their belief that proficient English communication skills (rather than excelling in paper-based exercises) are the means to secure good jobs in the future.

### 5. CONCLUSION

From the above results, the most important factor influencing students' English language learning outcomes is their belief in their ability to succeed in this subject. Therefore, before assigning students with tasks, organizing activities, games in the classroom, or conducting tests, instructors should pay attention to psychological factors to design activities in a way that can increase students' confidence in successfully completing those activities. If students believe they cannot successfully perform the tasks and assignments given, it may lead to poor academic outcomes and a loss of motivation to learn.

Every effort to increase students' awareness of the benefits and importance of learning English, especially listening and speaking skills, is crucial. A teaching approach that emphasizes designing ways for students to apply the knowledge they have learned in practice, especially for future employment, needs to be implemented. Interview results indicate that students believe that being able to use English proficiently, especially listening and speaking skills, would be beneficial for future employment.

When designing semester exams, the percentage allocation for each skill should be carefully considered, with emphasis placed on listening and speaking skills. When students see that focusing more on listening and speaking skills can lead to better English language outcomes for that semester, they may be more motivated to put effort into improving these two skills.

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