


## Factors Affecting Students' Attitudes towards Learning English as a Foreign Language in a Tertiary Institution of Vietnam

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### ABSTRACT

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The factor of students' learning attitudes undoubtedly affects their learning outcomes. This study investigates factors influencing Vietnamese students' attitudes toward English learning in a tertiary institution in the Mekong region to help local educators enhance the quality of teaching and learning English in this region, considered a "low-land" in the education of Vietnam. This study was conducted qualitatively, using structured interviews to collect data from 69 first-year students. The study revealed that internal and external factors affected the students' attitudes. Regarding the internal factors, students' self-confidence, risk-taking willingness, anxiety, curiosity, and awareness of the importance of English in their future considerably impacted their attitudes towards English learning. On the other hand, the study found some external factors, including teaching and learning materials, content, curriculum design, and teacher-related factors, including teacher personalities, professional knowledge, teacher communication, and teacher attitudes. Some discussions, pedagogical implications, and recommendations were displayed at the end of the current paper.

### Introduction

Nowadays, English as an international language plays an essential role in all parts of the world. Remarkably, English is a compulsory subject at all levels of education in the Vietnamese context. The importance of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) requires the Vietnamese government to implement several educational reforms. However, the results of the reforms have been under-expected (Nguyen, 2013; Le & Nguyen, 2017; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Pham & Bui, 2019). Many reasons have been discussed to explain the causes why the interventions were unsatisfactory, such as student personality context, social context, educational context, and some other factors. The similarity of these factors is that they all affect students' attitudes towards learning English. Notably, several previous studies (e.g., Abidin et al., 2012; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010; Choy & Troudi, 2006; Getie, 2020) indicated that students' negative attitudes toward learning English are also the main reason why they lower their learning outcomes. There have been some studies examining the factors affecting EFL students' attitudes towards English learning (e.g., Abidin et al., 2012; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010; Choy & Troudi, 2006; Getie, 2020), but few of them investigated Vietnamese university students'

internal factors and external factors. As a result, the research team employed this current study to determine the factors affecting Vietnamese students' learning attitudes. After the study, some factors affecting students' attitudes towards English learning were found, including student-related factors, teacher-related ones, and others. Significantly, the research team chose a tertiary institution located in the Mekong region, considered a "low-land" in the education of Vietnam. The tertiary institution is expected to become one of the leading universities in the region and the country. Therefore, the teaching and learning quality has received much attention from local educators. Generally, sixty-nine EFL students agreed to participate in the current research. The findings of this study bring a glimpse of hope that it would help EFL teachers reduce negative factors affecting their students' English learning and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the Mekong Delta.

## Literature Review

### *The Conceptualization of Attitude*

Undoubtedly, students' attitudes are necessary for their language learning. According to Weinburgh (1998), the attitudes toward English learning affect EFL students' behaviors in choosing books to read or practice English. Also, students' attitudes significantly impact their learning achievements (Weinburgh, 1998). Therefore, there is a strong connection between students' English learning and their attitudes towards language learning.

According to Triandis (1971), the conceptualization of attitude is a manner of consistency towards an object. Brown (2000) characterized the term attitude by several emotions, such as feelings, self, and relationships in the community. Otherwise, Ajzan (1988) defined attitude as a disposition to respond to an object, a person, an institution, or an event in positive or negative manners. Baker (1992) explained the concept of attitude as a hypothetical construct of human behaviors in accepting or rejecting something. In conclusion, attitude is an engine to drive someone to do something. In language learning, students' positive attitudes affect their willingness to try their best to improve their English, and vice versa. Therefore, it is recommended to foster the understanding of what factors affect EFL students' attitudes to help educators deal with the factors causing the students' negative attitudes towards their language learning and then enhance their positive attitudes towards it.

### *Factors Affecting EFL Students' Attitudes*

According to Getie (2020), several factors affect EFL students' attitudes towards language learning. The current study's framework was developed by considering Getie's study. After the data analysis, there were two main factors affecting EFL students' attitudes towards their English learning in this study, namely internal and external factors.

### *Internal Factors*

Students' confidence is defined as their beliefs in their capacities to do or complete tasks (Brown, 1994). According to Krashen (1998), students' confidence fosters learning achievements. Students' self-confidence and self-efficacy are often used interchangeably (Ehrman, 1996). Regarding the interaction between students' self-confidence and their attitudes towards English learning, Skehan (1989) indicated that EFL teachers who can encourage students' self-efficacy could boost their motivation for and positive attitudes towards English learning. Additionally, students' willingness to take risks and their learning achievements are positively associated (Dulay, 1982; Skehan, 1989; Larsen & Long, 1991; Brown, 1994). Students' willingness to take risks affects their tendency to participate in in-class activities (Larsen & Long, 1991). Specifically, students who fear disapproval from their friends and

teachers will reject participating in discussions or expressing their ideas. Therefore, students' risk-taking willingness affects their attitudes towards English learning. Besides, students' anxiety may decrease their positive attitudes towards English learning (Ehrman, 1996).

Additionally, anxiety, which often occurs in listening and speaking classes, hinders students' participation in English classes (Spolsky, 1989). Furthermore, according to Alemi et al. (2015), lacking sufficient vocabulary caused several problems with students' anxiety. Therefore, EFL teachers are challenged to create a supportive and collaborative to decrease students' anxiety and increase their positive attitudes toward their English learning.

### *External Factors*

Learning time affects EFL students' learning outcomes and attitudes (Getie, 2020). Specifically, Getie (2020) claimed that the number of hours available for running English classes would affect students' attainment. In another aspect of the learning situation, students' opportunities to practice their English as the target language strongly affect their learning attitudes toward English (Pride, 1979; Krogh, 1990). For instance, the students who have more opportunities to practice English tend to learn it better than those who lack chances to use the target language.

Undoubtedly, the teacher plays a highly essential role in students' learning process. First, good interaction between students and their teachers can forge their attitudes towards English learning (Day & Ford, 1998). According to Spolsky (1972), teaching could not be effective if it lacked communication between teachers and students. Second, in addition to the interaction between students and teachers, other teacher-related factors, including their personalities, professional knowledge, enthusiasm, and commitment, strongly affect students' attitudes towards English learning (Spolsky, 1969; Dornyei, 2001; Getie, 2020). Dornyei (2001) explained that teachers are often considered a model for their students to follow. Therefore, students often adopt teachers' beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and associated behaviors. Third, how teachers perceive their students also affects students' feelings and attitudes towards English learning. According to Larsen and Long (1991), students tend to be grateful to their teachers when they feel their positive attitudes. Eventually, they will be more motivated to participate in in-class activities and improve their learning outcomes. In reverse, students' attitudes towards their teachers also affect their attitudes towards English learning (Krashen, 1998). Students' positive attitudes towards the subject would occur if they liked their teachers and accepted them as a knowledge source. As a result, students' learning outcomes and love for English learning will increase. Finally, a teacher's classroom management skills play an essential role in determining whether students are willing to learn or not. In some countries where the teaching and learning condition is not good, it highly requires teachers' abilities to deal with big or small, hot or cold adequate and functioning equipment, bright or dark class, airy or steady, students' misbehaviors, and more (Wilkins, 1974; Conteh, 2002). Consequently, the teachers capable of dealing with these problems may bring more effective teaching to the class and enhance students' learning attitudes towards the target language.

Getie (2020) ascertained that they are the stock of resources teachers use to exploit and transmit knowledge regarding teaching and learning materials to their students. Teaching and learning materials directly affect students' learning achievements (Wilkins, 1974). These materials include textbooks, workbooks, writing paper, pens/pencils, chalk, blackboard, wall pictures, tapes, tape recorder, television, radio, reading material, and a library. All those materials affect students' attitudes towards English learning (Wilkins, 1974; Wlodkowski, 1993; Tomlinson, 1998; Guariento & Morley, 2001). Consequently, developing materials to meet students' demands or needs may increase their attitudes towards English learning.

### *Related Studies*

Several studies have investigated the students' attitudes towards EFL learning worldwide. Choy and Troudi (2006) employed a study in a Malaysian College to investigate its students' attitudes towards English learning. Furthermore, the study also attempted to check whether there is any change in students' attitudes when they move from secondary schools to college. A sample of 100 students was recruited to collect data using students' weekly journals and interviews. This study was designed as an interpretive approach. The study results found that students' attitudes towards English learning had changed. Specifically, these students showed more positive attitudes towards English learning in college than in secondary schools. They perceived the college social and classroom environment to be more conducive.

Chalak and Kassaian (2010) investigated factors affecting students' attitudes towards English learning in the Iranian context. The study included 108 students majoring in English translation. The authors used the Attitude, Motivation Test Battery consisting of eight domains: interest in English, parental encouragement, motivational intensity, attitudes towards learning English, attitudes towards English-speaking people, integrative orientation, desire to learn English, and instrumental orientation. The findings were that the instrumental and integrative orientations had highly affected their desire to learn.

In the Libyan educational context, Abidin et al. (2012) aimed to explore whether there is any difference in students' attitudes towards English learning regarding their demographics, including gender, field, and years of study English. There were 180 secondary students taking part in this study. The study results revealed that these Libyan students showed negative attitudes towards learning English. Besides, the study found that gender and field had affected the participants' attitudes.

Getie (2020) studied factors affecting Ethiopian high school students' attitudes towards English learning. The study used a questionnaire to gather data from 103 students. Moreover, group interviews were also employed to discuss the topic. The study found that these participants had positive attitudes towards English learning. Social factors were perceived to affect students' attitudes positively. On the other hand, educational context factors, such as EFL teachers, and learning situations, decreased students' positive attitudes towards English learning. However, textbooks encouraged students to gain higher learning achievements.

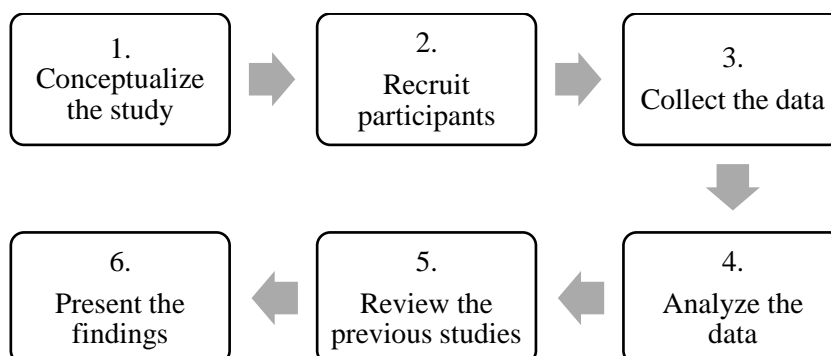
In the Vietnamese context, where students' language proficiency is not as good as expected, it is essential to conduct studies on what can help improve their language learning outcomes. As stated, the factor on students' attitudes significantly affects students' learning achievements. Therefore, the current study was conducted to understand better what factors affect Vietnamese students' attitudes towards their English learning. The study addressed one research question:

*“What factors affecting EFL students' attitudes towards English learning in a tertiary institution located in the Mekong region?”*

### **Method**

This study was conducted qualitatively, using structured interviews to collect data. All members of the research team first read through the data. Then, they categorized the data into different factors. Then, the research team discussed the factors in their data analyses and agreed on what factors belonged to what clusters of factors, namely internal or external factors. Later on, the researchers searched on the internet to find out studies in this field and compared the current findings to previous studies. The skeleton of the study was then built and presented in the literature review section. These procedures allowed the researchers to explain clearly the factors

affecting EFL students' attitudes. The figure below manifests the theoretical framework of this study.



Besides, the study was conducted in a tertiary educational institution with advanced programs and high-quality one using English to give instructions. After the first semester of learning in the new learning and teaching context, all students learning in the high-quality programs were asked to access a Google Form link and respond to two structured questions to explore the factors affecting their attitudes towards their English learning. After two weeks, the research team informed the participants to stop collecting students' responses. Sixty-nine freshmen (23 information technology-majored students, five chemical engineering-majored students, seven advanced biotechnology-majored students, 19 international business-majored students, three electrical engineering-majored students, four advanced aquaculture-majored students, five finance and banking-majored students, and three construction industry-majored students) accessed the link and answered the questions.

The structured interviews aimed to gauge insightful information about the factors affecting the participants' attitudes towards language learning, both internal and external factors. The participants could answer the abovementioned questions in English and Vietnamese through the Google Form platform. Those who were confident in their English could use English to express ideas. Those who were not confident in their English could use Vietnamese as their mother tongue to share their opinions quickly and accurately. After two weeks of collecting data, the researchers started to transcribe the responses into English. The researchers directly contacted the participants via phone calls when there were uncomprehensive or unclear responses in the translation process.

## Findings

In this section, the researchers presented the findings in orders from the most mentioned factors to the least mentioned ones.

### *Internal Factors of EFL Students' Attitudes towards English Learning*

#### *Students' Interest*

First, the most mentioned factor, twenty-seven respondents, was students' interest. The lack of interest in particular English skills led to the students' pressure and negative attitudes towards English learning.

"I do not like learning English very much. I feel tired even though I have finished all my homework. Some of my friends feel the same. Maybe, we are not interested in this subject."

"Some of my friends are stressed. They were even truant from the English classes. Poor them!"

Compared to writing and reading skills, the students were willing to learn oral skills associated

with their real lives. The students were more interested in learning communication skills than reading and writing skills.

“I like learning speaking and listening skills because I can use them in real life.”

“The classes for presentation skills are associated with real life. Therefore, it will help me deal with real situations, not just in-class activities.”

According to Zulfikar et al. (2019), there are four positive points of students' emotional attitudes: interest, feeling, preference, and enjoyment of learning English. Consequently, the EFL students tended to show positive attitudes toward the skills scoping with their interests and vice versa. Therefore, it is necessary to figure out what EFL students feel interested in. Students' needs and interests analysis should be considered better to understand these components in English teaching and learning.

### *Students' Self-confidence*

According to the student's responses, the following internal factor was their self-confidence. Twenty-five respondents related this factor.

“I feel pressured when speaking English in front of many people.”

“I am confident in my English. Therefore, I like it so much.”

“Comparing to other subjects, I learn English more quickly. Consequently, I think I am good at learning English.”

Similar to Getie's (2020) study, students' self-confidence plays an essential role in their attitudes towards English learning. Self-confidence could boost the students' motivation for their learning (Skehan, 1989). However, if EFL teachers could not encourage their students' self-efficacy, they might lose their desire to learn. There are many ways to boost students' self-confidence. One of these strategies is to use compliments when the students have excellent performances in the classroom, such as completing a difficult task in time, presenting well, sharing a valuable idea, or simply pronouncing a word accurately.

### *Students' Lexicon Knowledge*

The following internal factor was students' lexicon knowledge, which there were fourteen students mentioned. The students shared that their insufficient lexicon knowledge prevented them from doing the tasks. As a result, they did not want to learn English anymore.

“I do not have enough lexicon knowledge to answer my teacher's questions. Therefore, I am afraid of being in English classes.”

“I cannot understand what others say because I do not have enough vocabulary knowledge.”

According to Tran (2020), whether Vietnamese EFL students can effectively use English depends on their lexicon knowledge. Therefore, a lack of lexicon knowledge prevented the students from participating in in-class activities. It was similar to the study by Ngoc and Mai (2020), which found that the factor of lacking lexicon knowledge prevented university students' participation in English-speaking classes. In order to help students have enough lexicon knowledge, providing input in the pre-stages of teaching skills is extremely helpful. However, it requires EFL teachers to plan carefully which types of activities should be used in these stages since the effectiveness of the input provision significantly depends on how students respond to the tasks.

### *Students' Anxiety*

Twelve students stated that the anxiety also hindered their participation in in-class activities. As

a result, they might feel terrified when studying English, especially in terms of presentation skills.

“I feel fear of presentations. Therefore, I am afraid of being in presentation skill classes. I want to stay at home.”

“I am not good at speaking. Whenever I am in class, I wish my teachers would not call my name.”

It was similar to the study by Ehrman (1996), which stated that this factor decreases students' positive attitudes towards English learning. Students' anxiety might hinder the students' participation in English-speaking classes (Spolsky, 1989; Pabro-Maquidato, 2021). English is taught as the second language for Vietnamese students. Accordingly, similar to other students learning another language, they feel anxious when they do not have enough exposure to practicing the new language. Notably, students' chances of being exposed to using English in real life are somewhat limited. Therefore, the anxiety occurring in the classroom, especially for those who are not major in English, is unavoidable. However, EFL teachers are recommended to use some funny activities, such as games or singing contests, to reduce their students' anxiety and increase their participation in their English classes.

### *Students' Risk-taking Willingness*

Next, five respondents showed that the students tended to learn English which is not one of their strengths, but they recognized its importance for their future. As inferred, the student's willingness to take risks was observed.

“I want to improve my English, especially speaking skills, including public speaking and communication. They are essential for my future.”

“Although I am not good at English speaking, I want to communicate with others and get to know more friends. As a result, I like learning English.”

Larsen and Long (1991) indicated that the factor of students' risk-taking willingness affects their tendency to participate in in-class activities. Even though the students were perceived to be not good at English, they significantly desired to participate in classroom activities to develop their skills. In Vietnam, English has been used to enhance the number of opportunities for Vietnamese people to find a good job. In school, EFL teachers are always expected to visualize that vital fact to help their students be aware of why they should try their best to acquire the language. Accordingly, no matter what majors the students learn, they know how important English is to their future.

### *Students' Curiosity*

Two students stated that their curiosity about specific articles in English also encouraged them to pay more attention to their learning.

“I want to understand more about the English articles which are about the cultures of other countries, so I learn English more seriously.”

“There are some topics that I am curious about, so I want to gain an in-depth understanding of them. There is no more option. So I desire to learn English.”

There is a strong interaction between students' interests and curiosity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Vietnamese students' eagerness to learn is not something new (Van Dang, 2006). Therefore, they desire to learn new things, and it increases their willingness to learn English to help them be more competent in reading English articles. It somehow draws a more precise picture that teachers' instructional strategies play an essential role in students' success in learning English. To increase their willingness to learn, EFL teachers must find a suitable way to increase their curiosity and better their awareness of how reading materials are helpful for them in learning

the language.

### *Students' Awareness of the Importance of English*

Only one student stated that the student's awareness of the importance of English in their future jobs reflected the social effects in the research context, which highly requires the competitive candidates to have good English.

“I want to improve my English, especially speaking skills, including public speaking and communication. They are essential for my future.”

Zulfikar et al. (2019) indicated that students' thinking of the critical role of English and their attitudes towards English learning are positively correlated. Therefore, the more the students were aware of the importance of English for their future jobs, the more positive attitudes they showed toward English learning. Moreover, English has become compulsory in the Vietnamese and international contexts. The Vietnamese government implemented several educational reforms, although the reforms have been unsatisfactory (Nguyen, 2013; Le & Nguyen, 2017; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Pham & Bui, 2019). Therefore, students' understanding of this fact increases their attitudes towards their English learning. The students who have good English can take more advantage of competing in the job market in Vietnam (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020).

### *External Factors of EFL Students' Attitudes towards English Learning*

#### *Teaching and Learning Materials*

The first external factor was teaching and learning materials. Due to the defective materials, seventeen students did not enjoy the classes, especially reading and writing skills.

“I do not like reading a long text. It is exhausted.”

“I feel bored when studying English, especially reading skills. There are a lot of long texts with many words. So stressful!”

Other students found the materials used in their learning hard to follow.

“The materials are sometimes too difficult. Sometimes, I feel like I am listening to the Martian language, not English anymore.”

“The used tasks are too challenging to me. Nobody likes the things that they cannot understand at all.”

The students under-expected the used teaching and learning materials in the current context. As a result, they were not happy with what they had learned. This finding was in line with several previous studies (e.g., Wilkins, 1974; Wlodkowski, 1993; Tomlinson, 1998; Guariento & Morley, 2001). Specifically, EFL students feel stressed and overloaded if they read long texts. Therefore, the query on how to solve this problem needs its answer as soon as possible to prevent students from losing their learning motivation. It is suggested to divide the long texts into smaller pieces. In other words, EFL teachers should do some tasks requiring their students to work in groups and assign them to read their parts. At the end of the activities, the students are expected to share the main ideas of their parts and together draw the complete picture of the text contents.

#### *Teaching and Learning Contents*

There were eleven students' respondents related to teaching and learning content. The students tended to like practical sections more than theoretical ones. Therefore, they showed negative attitudes toward theoretical classes.



“Yah...the contents of the class are theoretical, so I do not like it much. Therefore, I want my teachers to give us a chance to practice rather learning theory.”

“I am obsessed with theoretical sections even though I am aware of their values. However, I cannot swallow them at all.”

Moreover, the students resisted enjoying the classes because these classes could not meet their needs. Consequently, they showed their negative attitudes towards the types which lack practical values.

“Some English classes are not effective, and they do not meet my demand in practice. Therefore, I feel dissatisfactory with them.”

According to Getie (2020), students' attitudes and interests are positively associated. Some theoretical classes might be compulsory according to the curriculum. Consequently, students may have some anxiety or anger in English classes due to their lack of choice (Ehrman, 1996; Littlewood, 2001). Learning theories without providing practicing chances might reduce the students' positive attitudes toward their English learning. English, which becomes extremely important to one's future jobs, is a compulsory subject in school in Vietnam. Therefore, students cannot decide whether they will study English or its alternative. As a result, students who dislike the language may feel inadequate and lose their learning motivation. Nevertheless, it somehow displays the critical role of EFL teachers in their classrooms more apparent. Specifically, EFL teachers are expected to establish a learning environment that helps students reduce their fear of learning a new language, a foreign language. The learning environment can be better by using language games or other fun activities.

### *Teaching and Learning Curriculum*

Regarding the curriculum, one student stated that the heavy curriculum also reduced the enjoyment of English learning.

“The curriculum is too heavy. Therefore, both my teachers and ourselves suffer during the semester. That is the reason I failed to enjoy the classes.”

According to Wehman and Kregel (2004), curriculum design is highly demanded to help students gain higher competencies and independence. However, when the curriculum is heavy and ambitious, it becomes counterproductive. The Vietnamese education system has implemented many pedagogical reforms at all education levels, but the results have been under-expected. Therefore, the findings of this study related to curriculum design can be a reason behind the disappointing results.

### *Teacher-related Factors*

In terms of teacher-related factors, this current study analyzed them into themes, including teacher personalities, teacher teaching methodologies, teacher communication, and teacher attitudes towards their students.

- *Teacher Personalities*

Thirty-eight students remarked on the factor of their teachers' friendliness.

“My teachers are amicable. They help me understand in-depth the lessons, so I improve a lot.”

“My teacher is a humorous and supportive teacher.”

“Some teachers are so strict and not friendly. Therefore, I feel much stressed.”

As observed, the student tended to cooperate with friendly teachers rather than with those who were cold or stonyhearted. It aligned with the study by Chen (2012), which found that

friendliness is one of an effective teacher's characteristics. However, it is not always related to the teacher's responsibility. Vietnamese teachers have to take care of many students in each class, their families, financial problems, etc. Therefore, these factors may somewhat affect how teachers behave in the classroom. It is expected to provide them with more support to help them gain more positive attitudes towards teaching and their students.

In terms of teachers' enthusiasm, twenty-eight students wrote that this factor encouraged them to learn English.

"I like learning English thanks to my teacher's enthusiasm."

"My teacher is very enthusiastic. In my opinion, writing is a tough subject. However, thanks to my teacher, I am more motivated to learn it."

EFL teachers are always required to show their teaching enthusiasm to gain their students' willingness to be in their classes. Getie (2020) also proposed that teachers' enthusiasm is influential in students' attitudes towards English learning. No one wants to study with a dead body-walker. In other words, students are sensitive to their teacher's attitudes and willingness to be in class. Accordingly, they tend to feel negative about those teachers who come to the class without enthusiasm for teaching.

Twenty-eight students mentioned the teacher's conscientiousness. Specifically, the students were grateful for those conscientious, thorough, and devoted teachers.

"I want to say thank you to my teacher because she is so devoted. She helps me a lot in my vocabulary retention. For that, I keep learning English."

"My teacher is conscientious, so it encourages me to improve my English. Besides, the teacher's conscientiousness energizes me a lot."

Like teaching enthusiasm, EFL students can feel their teachers' conscientiousness, which will decide whether they want to learn with those teachers or not. Otherwise, the students might lose their motivation for English learning when working with those teachers who are unconscionable and irresponsible in their teaching. Some complaints were collected from the students about the teacher's teaching irresponsibility.

"Some teachers are not responsible for their teaching. I still remember that one of my teachers had just used two or three first classes to provide knowledge to us. Then, he asked us to exercises all the time without any feedback on our work. In some classes, he asked us to self-study then go home without doing anything useful. It wasted a lot of my time."

"Some teachers are not devoted and responsible for teaching. Most of the time, I have to learn by myself. It is a bit ridiculous."

It was to see that the EFL students were well-aware of their teachers' behaviors that affected their attitudes towards English learning. Dornyei (2001) remarked on the importance of teachers' behaviors in students' motivation for learning. Teachers should always be aware of the role of guiding their students to become good people with proper behaviors. Every behavior that teachers make in their class contributes to forming how their students will behave in the future.

Four students started the teacher's rigidity contributed to enhancing their willingness to learn English.

"My teacher is very rigid, but I like it. In my opinion, rigid or disciplined teachers will run the class better."

“Other people may feel bad when studying with disciplined teachers, but I am not one of them. I think easy-going teachers are not really bad, but learning with rigid teachers makes me believe more in their knowledge.”

Interestingly, some students were negatively affected by teachers' rigidity because they were willing to learn with friendly teachers rather than rigid ones (Winer, 1992). However, some students wanted to learn with rigid teachers due to their sense of self-discipline. The finding helped educators better understand how critical students' learning styles analysis is. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should have a good orientation about how the class runs, what kinds of teachers they are, and what they expect from their students at the beginning of the course. It will help increase the understanding as well as the teacher-student rapport.

The factor of teacher's unpunctuality and irrational absence was a problem that three students had a complaint.

“Some teachers often come to class late or be absent without any notification. Sometimes, they just write a topic on the board, and nothing else then.”

“I feel good when studying with a teacher. However, she is swamped, so she is usually absent. Therefore, I have not learnt much from her. What a pity!”

Punctuality is essential in education. Alemi (2020) highlighted the importance of teachers' punctuality, which positively correlates with their commitment to the teaching profession. As mentioned, teachers play role models for their students to follow (Getie, 2020). Teachers' unpunctuality and irrational absence reduced the students' attitudes towards their learning.

- *Teacher Professional Knowledge*

There were forty-six respondents regarding teachers' teaching methodologies and techniques. Some students were satisfied with their teachers' teaching methodologies and techniques, which affected their attitudes towards English learning.

“My teacher's teaching techniques are desirable. Moreover, these techniques create an active, collaborative, and friendly learning environment. I always enjoy the classes.”

“My teacher usually uses post-discussions to help us review the lessons. I think these discussions are helpful. Moreover, these discussions also make the classes more delightful.”

However, boring teaching techniques might cause students to lose motivation for English learning.

“I have no problem with the lessons. However, the ways some teachers run the classes are too bored and uninteresting.”

“I like English, but I often feel boring with my teacher's teaching technique. Therefore, English is no more interesting, I think.”

Consequently, EFL teachers' professional knowledge was essential that affected the students' attitudes toward their English learning. It was similar to several preceding studies (e.g., Spolsky, 1969; Dornyei, 2001; Getie, 2020). No one, of course, wants to learn with a teacher who does not have enough professional knowledge and lacks abilities to answer the students' concerns. Consequently, before coming to class and conveying the knowledge to their students, teachers should be well-prepared with their lesson plans and predict what kinds of questions their students will have. Sometimes, only one satisfactory answer to students' questions can help.

Seven students shared that teacher's supplementary materials helped them better their English learning.

“My teacher has many much-adding study materials. Thanks to them, I can practice at home to improve my English.”

“My teacher introduces a lot of useful materials for me to read at home. Moreover, he often shares with us mobile-assisted language learning applications. They are handy.”

Supplementary materials provided the EFL students with valuable resources to promote their understanding of the teaching and learning contents. According to Kiliç and İltter (2015), authentic materials also positively affected EFL students’ attitudes towards English learning. The finding highlights the importance of institutional support for EFL teachers to have good sources to introduce to their students.

Regarding the teacher’s classroom management skills, three students complained that the teacher’s lack of ability to supervise exams and detect cheating caused discontent among the students.

“There is some cheating in class. However, some teachers cannot detect it, so that it may have caused much unfairness in grading.”

“Although my teacher is outstanding at teaching, sometimes she cannot detect the cheating in examinations. Therefore, many students get high scores, but the outcomes cannot show the students’ abilities correctly. It is a bit unfair to me.”

Moreover, the other three students appreciated their teacher’s flexibility in dealing with students’ problems, which played a vital role in encouraging them to learn English.

“My teacher is flexible in both teaching and dealing with other classroom problems. Sometimes, she is sympathetic when we submit our assignments late due to unexpected reasons.”

“Learning with the flexible teachers is so much better than working with inflexible ones. I used to learn from an inflexible teacher. He has never given mercy even though we [students] had reasons for a late submission.”

Teachers’ classroom management skills are essential in determining whether students are willing to learn or not. In Vietnam, where the teaching and learning condition is not good, it highly requires teachers’ abilities to deal with classroom problems (Wilkins, 1974; Conteh, 2002). EFL teachers, who were flexible in solving problems in their classes, enhanced their students’ positive attitudes towards English learning.

- *Teacher Communication*

Eight student respondents showed that the students were grateful when getting the teacher’s effective feedback.

“I am so grateful for my teacher’s feedback on my performance. The feedback helps me a lot, for sure.”

“My teacher always notes my mistakes and give me her feedback then. It helps me improve a lot.”

According to Richmond et al. (2001), teacher feedback is an instructional communication strategy, and it plays an essential role in students’ learning improvement (Richmond et al., 2001; Quoc et al., 2021). Simpson (2006) stated that EFL students trust their teachers’ corrections because they can be aware of their learning improvement throughout these corrections.

For the factor of the teacher-student relationship, four students shared that the teacher’s small talk was an effective way to encourage the students to develop their English.

“My teacher spends her time talking with us outside of the classrooms about her learning and teaching experience. Therefore, I think these small talks decreased the distance between the teacher and ourselves.”

“I usually feel the distance between the teacher and students. However, I learned with a wonderful teacher this semester. She spent a lot of her time after the classes talking with us. There is no more distancing, I guessed.”

A good teacher-student relationship forged the students' attitudes towards English learning. It was similar to the study by Day and Ford (1998). Moreover, Spolsky (1972) stated that teaching could not be effective if it lacked communication between teachers and students. Therefore, teacher-student small talk was an effective interactional strategy for enhancing their relationship.

Interestingly, the current study found that teacher humor affected the students' attitudes towards their English learning. Specifically, the teacher's inappropriate humor decreased two students' motivation for being in English classes.

“Teacher's inappropriate humor is a problem in the class. Once upon a time, we discussed “Idols,” but that teacher used bad words to talk about our idols. That was so disappointing.”

“I think some teachers should be more careful with their words. I am okay, but my friends sometimes get hurt by the teachers' inappropriate sense of humor. They feel it funny, but the others do not feel the same.”

According to Petraki and Nguyen (2016), Vietnamese teachers are aware of teacher humor benefits, such as lightening the atmosphere and increasing their immediacy; as a result, they sometimes use their humor in EFL classes. However, the students had harsh reactions to their teachers' inappropriate humor. As inferred, the misuse of teacher humor is due to the lack of teacher humor audience consideration. Dickmeyer (1993) made a list of dangerous consequences due to this lack, such as hurting students' feelings, violating regional rules, or even isolating students from the learning community.

- *Teacher Attitudes towards Their Students*

Seven students indicated that the teacher's caring related to the ability to assess the students' levels helped them improve their attitudes toward English learning.

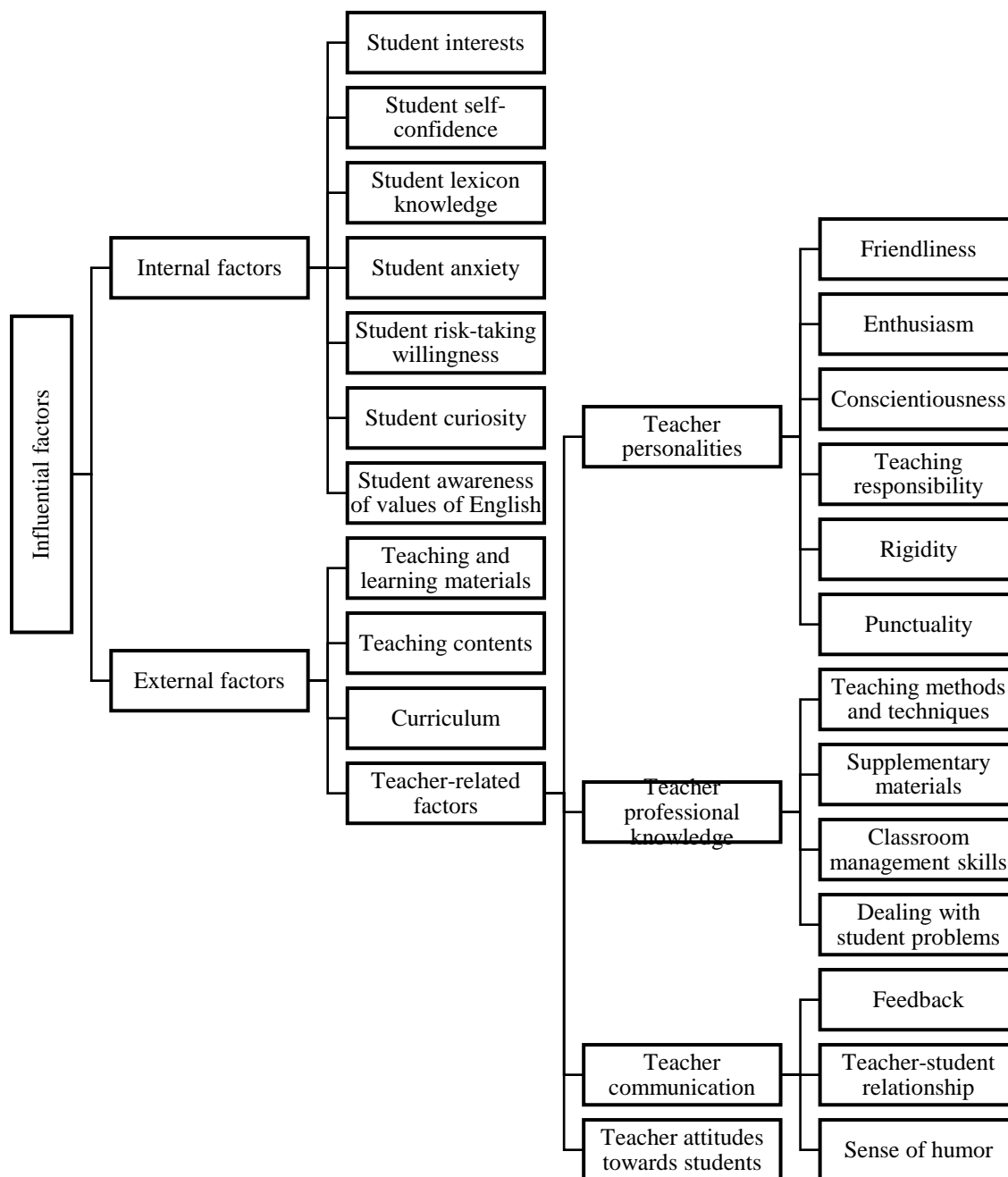
“My teacher is very good at evaluating our abilities [students], so he can plan the lessons to guide us. It means he cares about us a lot. Based on his guidance, I can feel my English development. It is so incredible!”

“My teacher is very good at assessing his students' English abilities. As a piece of evidence, to those students who are not good at English like me, my teacher will give more support. I have really appreciated it.”

Rahimi and Karkami (2015) said that caring teachers show more empathy towards their students. According to Getie (2020), how teachers perceive their students also affects students' feelings and attitudes towards English learning. As a result, the students were grateful to their teachers when they showed empathy and caring. It was similar to the study by Larsen and Long (1991).

In sum, similar to previous studies, the current study also showed the vital role of teachers in their students' attitudes towards English learning. Specifically, teacher-related factors, including teacher's enthusiasm, friendliness, teaching knowledge and skills, professionalism, interactional strategies, attitudes towards learners and profession, behaviors, and teaching responsibilities, affect students' attitudes towards English learning (Day & Ford, 1998; Spolsky, 1972; Dornyei, 2001; Getie, 2020; Larsen & Long, 1991; Krashen, 1998; Wilkins, 1972; Conteh, 2002). It is easy to perceive the role of teachers in their students' English learning attitudes, especially in Vietnam. According to Howe (1995), teachers' expectations decide if Vietnamese students are active or passive.

The current study's findings were summarized and presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Finding summary

In a nutshell, the influential factors of EFL students’ attitudes towards English learning included seven internal factors and four external ones according to themes. Internal factors were students’ interest, self-confidence, lexicon knowledge, anxiety, risk-taking willingness, curiosity, and awareness of the English role. External factors consisted of teaching and learning materials, teaching contents, heavy curriculum, and teacher-related factors. Particularly, teacher-related factors included four sub-factors, namely (1) teachers’ attitudes towards their students, (2) teachers’ communication (feedback, teacher-student relationship, sense of humor),

(3) teachers' professional knowledge (teaching methods/techniques, supplementary teaching resources, classroom management skills, abilities to deal with in-class misbehaviors), and (4) teachers' personalities (friendliness, enthusiasm, conscientiousness, teaching responsibility, rigidity, punctuality).

### **Conclusion**

The current qualitative study was designed purposefully to investigate what factors affect EFL students' language learning attitudes. A tertiary institution in the Mekong region was chosen to employ the study. As known, this institution plays a vital role in meeting the requirements of society in terms of human resources. According to the data collected from 69 first-year students studying in the chosen institution, many factors affected EFL students' attitudes towards their English learning. The factors were divided into two domains, namely internal and external factors. Internal factors included students' interest, self-confidence, lexicon knowledge, anxiety, risk-taking willingness, curiosity, and awareness of the English role. Besides, external factors, consisting of teaching and learning materials, teaching contents, heavy curriculum, and teacher-related factors, significantly affected the students' attitudes towards their English learning.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Many stakeholders benefit from the contribution of this current study. First, EFL teachers need to remind their influence on their students' attitudes toward English learning and their learning outcomes in general. They should avoid misbehaviors both inside and outside the EFL classrooms, including unpunctuality, irrational absence, and inappropriate humor. Besides, they need to develop their enthusiasm, friendliness, teaching knowledge and skills, professionalism, interactional strategies, attitudes towards learners and profession, behaviors, and teaching responsibilities.

Second, school administrators and policymakers have an opportunity to understand students' desire for language learning and what affects this desire. As a result, they can plan further EFL teachers' professional development training to avoid the factors lowering students' positive attitudes towards English learning and help teachers improve their teaching effectiveness. Moreover, they should clarify the students' dissatisfaction with the heavy curriculum and inappropriate teaching and learning materials. Consequently, they can adjust these things to match their students' abilities.

Finally, the researchers interested in investigating the factors affecting EFL students' attitudes towards their language learning can profoundly understand the Vietnamese educational context based on the current findings. Moreover, the current study suggests some further improvement based on its limitations. First, further investigation should be conducted with the participation of both students and teachers from all education levels, from kindergarten to post-graduate programs, in both private and public educational institutions. Second, the participants should be recruited from all provinces and cities of Vietnam so that the findings can be more significant. Finally, cross-cultural research should be employed to compare the Vietnamese educational context to other countries.

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