

Research

*The Relationships between English Ability, Attitudes and Motivation among
First Year PSU Students from Islamic Religious Schools*

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationships between English ability, attitudes, and motivation in learning English of first year students from Islamic religious schools at Prince of Songkla University Hat Yai (PSU). A 28-item survey questionnaire was administered to 90 PSU students graduating from Islamic religious schools in the three southern provinces of Thailand. The study revealed that the students generally had low English ability but held positive attitudes toward learning English and toward native speakers and their cultures. They tended to be instrumentally motivated to study English. Both at the beginning and at the end of the semester, the English ability of all the students from Islamic religious schools who participated in the study was weakly but significantly associated with overall attitudes and there was a moderate significant correlation between attitudes and motivation. Based on the comparison of the students' attitudes and motivation across time and groups, no significant difference between attitudes and motivation as measured at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester were found.

Keywords: English ability; Attitudes; Motivation



บทความวิจัย

**ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษ ทักษะคิด และแรงจูงใจในการเรียน
ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ ที่จบการศึกษาจากโรงเรียน
เอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลาม**

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษ ทักษะคิด และแรงจูงใจในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ ที่จบการศึกษาจากโรงเรียนเอกชนสอนศาสนาอิสลาม การวิจัยนี้ได้ดำเนินการในระหว่างภาคเรียนที่ 1 ปีการศึกษา 2550

กลุ่มตัวอย่างในการศึกษาได้แก่ นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 จำนวน 90 คน ซึ่งจบการศึกษา จากโรงเรียนสอนศาสนาอิสลามใน 3 จังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้คือ ยะลา ปัตตานี นราธิวาส โดยใช้แบบสอบถามนักศึกษาเกี่ยวกับทักษะคิดและแรงจูงใจในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษจำนวน 28 ข้อเป็นเครื่องมือในการวิจัย ผลการวิจัยพบว่านักศึกษาส่วนใหญ่มีความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษอยู่ในระดับต่ำ อย่างไรก็ตามนักศึกษามีทักษะคิดเชิงบวกต่อการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ และวัฒนธรรมของเจ้าของภาษา นักศึกษามีแรงจูงใจในการเรียนค่อนข้างสูงและเป็นแรงจูงใจเชิงเครื่องมือ นอกจากนี้พบว่าในช่วงต้นและช่วงปลายภาคเรียนของภาคเรียนแรก ทักษะคิดโดยรวมของนักศึกษาทั้งหมดมีความสัมพันธ์ในระดับต่ำกับความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ และความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างทักษะคิดโดยรวมของนักศึกษาทั้งหมดกับแรงจูงใจมีความสัมพันธ์ในระดับปานกลางอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทาง นอกจากนี้จากการเปรียบเทียบหาความแตกต่างของทักษะคิดและแรงจูงใจระหว่างช่วงต้นและช่วงปลายภาคการเรียน พบว่าทักษะคิดและแรงจูงใจระหว่างต้นภาคเรียนและปลายภาคเรียนไม่มีความแตกต่างกัน และพบว่าทักษะคิดและแรงจูงใจระหว่างกลุ่มนักศึกษาความสามารถต่ำและปานกลางไม่มีความแตกต่างกันเช่นกัน

คำสำคัญ: การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ, แรงจูงใจ, ทักษะคิด



Introduction

In Thailand, most Islamic religious schools are situated in the three southern provinces: Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. These schools follow the same educational policy as that of the other types of schools. However, the management system is different and that makes Islamic religious schools unique. The teaching and learning management of these schools is divided into 2 parts: Islamic studies and general subject matter. There have been some research studies reporting problems relating to students in Islamic religious schools. One of these problems is students' low proficiency. This was suggested by Cheangchau et al (1998) who reported the results of the achievement tests of Mathayomsuksa 3 students from Islamic religious schools in five southern border provinces in 6 general subjects: science, mathematics, social science, Thai language, health education and English. Their test scores in these subjects were lower than those of students from general schools in the same region. Lanui et al (1995) also found that students at secondary level in Islamic religious schools in five southern border provinces had insufficient basic knowledge of English. Above all, many students at lower-secondary level in Islamic religious schools had negative attitudes towards English. They thought that learning other languages such as Arabic and Malay was more useful than learning English (Lanui et al, 1995; Rattanayart, 2007). Despite these problems, an increasing number of students from Islamic religious schools in the southern border provinces are currently accepted in universities especially in Prince of Songkla University. In particular at Hat Yai and

Pattani, the two main campuses, there were around 1,282 students from the three southern provinces in the 2005 academic year and 1,312 in the 2006 academic year (PSU Registration Office, 2006). Generally, students enrolling in PSU at Hat Yai campus are required to take two Foundation English courses (FE I & FE II). In order to be better prepared for Foundation English I, students whose English O-NET scores are 33 or below (out of 100) have to take the Preparatory Foundation English course in the first semester because of their low English proficiency. Those whose English O-NET scores are above 33 can take Foundation English I in the first semester. Most students from Islamic religious schools who are admitted to the Hat Yai campus have quite low English O-NET scores. In the 2006 academic year, 226 students from Islamic religious schools enrolling at the Hat Yai campus had the average O-NET English score of 28.5 (PSU Registration Office, 2006). One hundred and eighty-one out of the 226 students (80%) had to take Preparatory Foundation English because their English O-NET scores was 33 or below. Of those 181 students, 48 failed the Preparatory Foundation English course. Forty-five students (20%) whose English O-NET scores were above 33 took FE I and approximately half of them got fairly low grades (C, D+, and D) while the rest failed (grade E) (Department of Languages and Linguistics, 2006). Thus, it is clear that these students had problems with English proficiency which may lead to problems in their tertiary study.

Motivation and attitude are important factors, which help to determine the level of proficiency achieved by different learners (Ellis,



1985). This study aimed to investigate the relationships between English ability, attitudes, and motivation in learning English of the first year PSU students from Islamic religious schools and attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' English ability, attitudes, and motivation when they first start their tertiary education and are there any relationships among these?

2. What are the students' English ability, attitudes, and motivation after the first semester and are there any relationships among these?

3. Are the students' attitudes and motivation significantly different when they first start their tertiary education and after the first semester at the university?

Review of Literature

There are several affective factors which can influence second language proficiency and second language acquisition (SLA). Among these are motivation and attitude (Krashen, 1981). Motivation and attitude are important factors, which help to determine the level of proficiency achieved by different learners (Ellis, 1985). Motivation is one of the main determinants of second / foreign language learning achievement (Dornyei, 1994). Motivation has been classified in various ways according to different perspectives of psycholinguists. Gardner and Lambert (1972) define 'motivation' in terms of the second language learner's overall goal or orientation. Gardner (1985, cited in Gardner and Tremblay, 1995) defines motivation to learn a second language as "the extent to which the individual

works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do it and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (p.10). Gardner's socio educational motivation theory (Gardner and Lambert 1972; 1985) suggests two broad classes of motivation in terms of learners' purpose of second language learning: integrative and instrumental motivation. The term integrative motivation refers to a desire to learn the second language in order to have contact with and perhaps to become similar valued members of that the second language community. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, refers to a desire to achieve proficiency in a new language for some practical goals; for example, passing an examination, or furthering career opportunities. In other words, integratively motivated learners are mainly interested in the second language community and its culture whereas instrumentally motivated learners are concerned with success in general language skills such as grammar and vocabulary. Instrumentally motivated learners are less likely to succeed in communication compared with integratively motivated learners who tend to be more successful in aural-oral proficiency.

Research methodology

Participants

The population of Muslim students who graduated from Islamic religious schools in the 3 southern provinces of Thailand and who were currently studying in their first year in 2007 academic year at PSU was 140. Fifty students were excluded because of unavailable English O-NET scores. Thus, 90 students participated in



this study. Among these, 39.4% were from Yala, 35.9% were from Narathiwat and 24.5% were from Pattani. They were studying in various faculties at Prince of Songkla University Hat Yai campus. The majority studied at the Faculty of Sciences while the others were from the Faculties of Engineering, Nursing, Natural Resources, Management Sciences, Economics, Liberal Arts, Medicine, and the Traditional Thai Medicine Establishment project. These students were admitted into this campus by different methods. Most of them were accepted through the admission system of the Commission on Higher Education while some were recruited directly by PSU.

The participants were divided into 2 groups on the basis of their English ability. Nineteen students whose English O-NET scores were above 33 were placed in “average group” while 71 students whose score were 33 or below were placed in “low group”. In their first semester at PSU, the average group took Foundation English 1 whereas the low group took Preparatory Foundation English.

Instruments and data collection

The study employed two research instruments, namely, a questionnaire about attitudes and motivation, and a structured-interview. English scores to represent the students language ability were also collected by the researcher.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect data about students’ attitudes and motivation. The motivational items used in this study were adopted from the questionnaires developed by

Gardner (1972) and Dornyei (1994). Five items (numbers 1, 5, 8, 13, 14) investigated the integrative motivation of the students, that is their desire to learn English due to an interest in English speaking people and their culture. Some modifications were made in order to better suit the learning context in Thailand where English is learned as a foreign (rather than a second language). The “instrumental” items (numbers 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12) investigated the efforts of students to learn English for a functional reason, for example to pass examinations or to get a better job, or a place at university. Most of the items were of the closed type in which the students were presented with a list of statements to rate their motivation and attitudes on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 5 “strongly agree” to 1 “strongly disagree”. There were also a number of open-ended questions of the ‘Others (Please specify)’ type. The coefficient alpha reliability of the responses to the attitudinal and motivational items was found to be satisfactory at 0.81.

The structured-interview

A Structured interview was used to elaborate the students’ answers to the questionnaire items. The questions for the interview were written in Thai and checked by the researcher’s supervisory committee.

English scores

The 2007 English O-NET scores of the subjects in this study were obtained from the Registration Office of Hat Yai campus. These scores were used to divide the subjects into two groups of low and average ability. The scores were also taken as an indicator of the students’ English ability before starting their tertiary education. Their English O-NET scores



ranged between 17 and 54. The average score was 31.94 out of 100%.

In addition, the students' scores from the Preparatory Foundation English and Foundation English 1 mid-term and final tests were obtained from the Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai campus at the end of the first semester (October, 2007), and these scores were used as the indicator of the students' ability at the end of the first semester

Procedure

The data were collected during the first semester of the 2007 academic year (June-October 2007). First, at the beginning of the semester, the English O-NET scores of the participants were collected, and the questionnaire was administered to them. At the end of the semester, the questionnaire was administered for the second time and 20 students were randomly selected for interviews.

Statistical analysis

To answer the research questions, the various methods of analysis were used.

-Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was employed to determine the relationships among students' English ability, attitudes, and motivation.

-Paired sample t-tests were used to determine whether the attitudes and motivation of students at the beginning of their tertiary education and after the first semester were significantly different or not.

-Since the tests which the students took before the beginning and at the end of

the semester were not the same, standardized t-scores were calculated to determine their English ability.

Results and Discussion

Correlational relationship among English scores at the beginning and at the end of the semester

In order to compare the relative levels of ability of the students in the average and low groups, standardized (norm-referenced) t-scores were calculated based on the O-NET scores of the subjects in the low and average groups separately to indicate the levels of relative ability of each student within their respective groups at the beginning of the semester. For the low group, the t-scores based on the mid-term and end of term Preparatory Foundation English test were calculated, and for the average group t-scores based on the mid-term and end of term Foundation English 1 test were calculated separately to indicate the levels of relative ability of each student within their respective groups after the first semester.



Table 1: Correlational relationship among English scores at the beginning and at the end of the semester

Variables	t-scores_beginning	t-scores_end
Average group		
t-scores_beginning	1	.394
t-scores_end	.394	1
Low group		
t-scores_beginning	1	.403*
t-scores_end	.403*	1

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Overall, the findings presented in Table 1 show that for the average group there was no significant correlation between their t-scores at the beginning and t-scores at the end of the semester. However, there was a moderate significant correlation for the low group between their English O-NET scores at the beginning and at the end of the semester. It should be noted that since the scores for the two groups were derived from different tests the levels of difficulty of which could not be equated, the scores are not comparable as between the two

groups and an overall correlation is therefore not possible.

Attitudes towards learning English

In order to establish the students' attitudes towards English speakers and their cultures, the mean scores were computed. For the 12 items relating to attitudes towards learning English and the 2 items relating to attitudes towards native speakers and their culture with values for negative items adjusted accordingly, the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The students' attitudes

Variables	Mean scores of each group		
	Average group	Low group	All
Attitudes towards learning English			
At the beginning	3.84	3.63	3.68
At the end	3.77	3.57	3.61
Attitudes towards native speaker and their culture			
At the beginning	3.08	3.14	3.13
At the end	3.03	3.65	3.09

3.41-4.20 =Agree/positive attitudes

2.61-3.40 =Moderately agree/moderately positive attitudes



On the whole, the total means score in Table 2 shows that students from Islamic religious schools held positive attitudes towards English learning and towards native speakers and their cultures although they held more positive attitudes towards learning English than towards native speakers and their cultures. This might be due to the fact that the setting in which English learning takes place is in a formal classroom and students from Islamic religious schools rarely have experience with the target language community or the English language in their daily life and therefore do not have clearly articulated attitudes towards that community. The participating students from

Islamic religious schools held positive attitudes toward learning English, as was found in Rattanayart (2006)’s study. Students from Islamic religious schools in Yala have strongly positive attitudes towards English learning. They accept that English is important in the globalized world.

6.3 Motivation in learning English

The students’ motivation in learning English was presented in Table 3.

Table 3: the students’ motivation to learn English

Variables	Mean scores		
	Average group	Low group	All
Instrumental motivation			
At the beginning	4.29	4.28	4.29
At the end	4.19	4.24	4.23
Integrative motivation			
At the beginning	3.81	3.64	3.68
At the end	3.68	3.62	3.63

3.41-4.20 = Agree

2.61-3.40 = Moderately agree

Overall, the findings presented in Table 3 shows that the students have greater instrumental motivation than integrative motivation both at the beginning and at the end of the semester suggesting that the most popular reasons for learning English are those generally associated with the instrumental type of motivation. Students are more concerned

about learning English for purposes related to their careers or occupations than with being close to native speakers or their cultures. They strongly agreed that English can help them find jobs easily. This is consistent with Lui (2007)’s study in which Chinese students’ attitudes towards English were more instrumentally than integratively motivated.



6.4 The relationship among English ability, attitudes and motivation of students from Islamic religious schools

Variables	English ability	Attitudes	Motivation
At the beginning			
English ability			
Average group		.059	-.044
Low group		.167	-.157
All		.229*	-.016
Attitudes			
Average group	.059		.531*
Low group	.167		.447*
All	.229*		.464*
Motivation			
Average group	-.044	.531*	
Low group	-.157	.447*	
All	-.016	.464*	
At the end			
English ability			
Average group		.332	.306
Low group		.251*	.097
All		.320**	.105
Attitudes			
Average group	.322		.549*
Low group	.251*		.594*
All	.320**		.558*
Motivation			
Average group	.306	.549*	
Low group	.097	.594*	
All	.105	.558*	

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)



The results illustrated in Table 4 show that at the beginning of the semester, among all students there was weak and significantly correlation between English ability and attitudes ($r = .229, p < 0.05$) and a moderately and significantly correlation between attitudes and motivation ($r = .464, p < 0.05$). Among the average group, no other significant correlations between English ability and the other variables were found whereas the attitudes and motivation were moderately and significantly correlated ($r = .531, r = .447, p < 0.05$) while there were no significant correlations between other variables. At the end of the semester, in the average group, the correlation coefficients between attitudes and motivation showed a moderate correlation ($r = .549, p < 0.05$) whereas no other significant correlations between the other variables were found. In the low group, weak to moderate correlations were

found between certain variables. There was a weak but significant correlation between English ability and attitudes ($r = .251, p < 0.05$) and a moderate and significant correlation between attitudes and motivation ($r = .594, p < 0.05$).

6.5 The comparison of English ability, attitudes and motivation

Although it can be seen from the mean scores included in Table 5 that the students from Islamic religious schools indicated their attitudes and motivation to be at the same level when they first started their tertiary education at the university and after the first semester, a series of t-tests were performed to confirm whether their attitudes, motivation and English ability of the students were significantly different at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

Table 5: The comparison of attitudes and motivation across time

Variables	Groups				df	T	P
	Average		Low				
	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D.			
Attitudes							
At the beginning	3.77	.317	3.56	.367	88	1.802	.075
At the end	4.12	.367	4.05	.413		.601	.549
Motivation							
At the beginning	3.65	.237	3.50	.348	88	1.870	.065
At the end	4.01	.391	4.02	.493		-.080	.936

The data in Table 5 seems to show that the mean scores for attitudes and motivation of the average group at the beginning of the semester were higher than those of the low

group. However, t-tests confirmed that there were no significant differences between the attitudes and motivation of the low and average groups ($p < 0.05$) either at the beginning



or the end of the semester. All the participating students from Islamic religious schools maintained positive attitudes and motivation throughout the semester and were satisfied with the new teaching approach they experienced in the university.

Further, the comparison between the attitudes and motivation across time was shown in the Table 6.

Table 6: The comparison of attitudes and motivation across groups

Variables	\bar{x}	S.D	df	T	Sig (2tailed)
Low group					
Attitudes					
At the beginning	3.56	.367	70	1.50	.138
At the end	3.50	.343			
Motivation					
At the beginning	4.05	.413	70	.614	.514
At the end	4.02	.493			
Average group					
Attitudes					
At the beginning	3.73	.317	18	.985	.338
At the end	3.65	.237			
Motivation					
At the beginning	4.12	.427	18	1.22	.237
At the end	4.01	.392			

The results of the t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences in attitudes ($t = 1.50, p = .138$) or motivation ($t = .614, p = .514$) at the beginning and at the end of the semester within the low group. The students held positive attitudes and motivation for the whole semester. Among the average group, there were no significant differences between attitudes ($t = .985, p = .338$) and motivation ($t = 1.22, p = .237$) at the beginning and at the end of the semester. This is similar to the findings of Kim (1990), who attempted to examine the

differences between a high proficiency group and a low proficiency group and found that there was no difference in attitudes and motivation.

Conclusions

This study investigated the attitudes and motivation in learning English of first year university students from Islamic Religious schools and the correlations between these measured variables and the students' English ability. The results of the study reveal that the students generally had low English ability. They



held positive attitudes toward learning English and toward native speakers and their culture. They tended to be instrumentally motivated to study English. The investigation into the relationships among English ability, attitudes and motivation indicated that at both the beginning and end of the semester, there was a weak, although significant correlation between English ability and attitudes. Based on the comparison of the students' attitudes and motivation across time or groups, no significant difference between the attitudes of students from Islamic religious schools measured at the beginning of the semester and those measured at the end of the semester were found.

Pedagogical Implication

Pedagogically, the findings of this study are useful to teaching and learning languages in the following aspects. Firstly, it is obvious that the English ability of students from Islamic religious schools at PSU when they first started their tertiary education was low. The educational authority both at the Islamic religious schools and the university should provide the bridging program, effective treatment or special English courses to improve their basic knowledge of English. Secondly, the positive attitudes and motivation of students from Islamic religious schools found in this study suggested that English teachers should maintain and accelerate the student' positive attitudes and motivation. It might not be difficult to promote the autonomous learning among them by improving or developing a self-access center as a resource for independent study. Further, students tend to have instrumental motivation. Consequently, English

teachers should encourage the integrative motivation type. Giving them opportunities to meet native speakers or to discuss some topics related to the natives' culture would help promoting this type of motivation.

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