Attitudes towards English language learning in higher education

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Ana Mršić Zdilar
Faculty of Science, University of Split, Croatia
amrsiczdi@pmfst.hr

Abstract
The paper analyses the attitudes and beliefs of English language learners at the higher education level, including their motivation for learning English as a second language. The testing tool used for evaluation is a modified questionnaire adapted from a research paper that examined the students` attitudes towards learning German and Italian languages (Kovač and Mršić Zdilar, 2017) which was originally based on the questionnaires used to explore attitudes towards foreign language (Mihaljević Djigunović 1998, Boonrangsri et al. 2004, Zainol et al. 2012, Burgos & Perez 2015). The sample includes undergraduate students at the Faculty of Science, University of Split, who learn English as part of the elective course English for Specific Purposes within their respective study programme syllabi (Information, Physics, Information and Technology or Biology and Chemistry). The proposed research paper aims to examine how the students perceive English language learning and how they assess its importance for their further professional development and what motivates them for English language learning. As indicated in the above-mentioned research paper, students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language are one of the basic factors which influence learning success. Their significance was recognised by foreign language teachers, while numerous studies have emphasised various aspects of their significant role in the successful mastering of a foreign language. Therefore, this study may contribute to a better understanding of why students in Croatia learn English and what may additionally motivate them to improve their proficiency and fluency.

Keywords*: motivation, learning, beliefs, higher education, English for Specific Purposes*

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global landscape, the importance of proficiency in the English language has become paramount, particularly in the domain of higher education. Across various contexts, the acquisition of English language skills is recognised as a gateway to a multitude of socioeconomic benefits, from enhanced employment opportunities to the ability to engage with the wealth of information and resources available in the lingua franca of the modern world (Ying et al. 2021). English language fluency has become one of the most important commodities in modern-day business environment. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate English language learning at all levels – from primary to tertiary education. This has placed significant pressure on educational institutions to ensure their graduates are equipped with the necessary linguistic abilities to meet the demands of industry and the global marketplace (Sari et al. 2022). Learning a foreign language in the initial stages of education may be perceived by children as a fun activity, however, at higher stages of education, students should already be able to recognise the benefits of learning English, especially for professional purposes. Exploring the attitudes and motivations of students towards English language learning in higher education can shed light on the challenges and opportunities that exist within this dynamic environment. Hence, this paper explores motivation and students` beliefs and attitudes towards learning English as one of the key elements of personal and professional development and advancement and the role that teachers play in this interaction.

Theoretical background

The dynamics between attitudes, motivation, and second language (L2) learning have been a longstanding area of inquiry in the field of language acquisition. Motivation, in particular, has been recognised as a crucial factor in shaping the learning outcomes of adult second language learners (Fu et al. 2022).

One influential theoretical framework in this domain is the social psychological approach developed by Gardner and associates (Hotho & Reimann 1998). They found a meaningful relationship between motivation and second language achievement. Learners with higher motivation levels tend to achieve better results in language learning. Five key attitude/motivation variables were identified: integrativeness (interest in learning the language to integrate with the culture), attitudes toward the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation. To varying degrees, these factors contribute to language learning success (Masgoret & Gardner 2003). This approach highlights the role of affective factors, such as learners' attitudes towards the target language community in shaping their motivation to learn the language. The concept of "integrative orientation" is central to this perspective, referring to the desire to learn a language in order to interact with and become a valued member of the target (L2) language community (Hotho & Reimann 1998) (Dörnyei 1990). In contrast, "instrumental orientation" describes a more pragmatic motivation, where the language is learned for its utilitarian benefits, such as obtaining a job (Hotho & Reimann 1998).

Early studies within this framework suggested that the integrative orientation was more important for successful language learning than the instrumental orientation (Hotho & Reimann 1998). This underscores the significance of the learner's affective disposition towards the target language community in driving their motivation and, ultimately, their language learning outcomes.

However, more recent research has highlighted the complexity of the relationship between motivation, attitudes, and language learning, suggesting that the dynamics between these factors are not always straightforward (Fu et al. 2022). According to Pham (2021), attitude and motivation are deemed as two major factors that influence how well a student learns a language. Researchers have called for a more nuanced understanding of motivation, which takes into account the multidimensional nature of the construct and its interplay with other factors, such as learning strategies and academic achievement (Fu et al. 2022).

As reported in Kovač and Mršić Zdilar (2017), Victori and Lockhart (1995) define beliefs as “general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning”, while Horwitz (1988) states that familiarisation with the students’ beliefs about a particular language may help teachers better understand their students` attitudes towards language learning and engagement in class. This way, teachers can modify their syllabi in order to affect and to a certain extent mitigate negative attitudes the students may harbour towards language learning.

According to Liu (2007), the motivation to learn a second language stems from positive attitudes towards the community of that language and a desire to engage and assimilate with its members. This drive, known as integrative motivation, is more effective in supporting language learning. In contrast, instrumental motivation refers to the desire to learn a second language for practical benefits, such as obtaining a better job or a higher salary. Motivation, therefore, can be directed towards goals with either a strong interpersonal aspect (integrative motivation) or a strong practical aspect (instrumental motivation) (Dörnyei 1994). It is not always straightforward to differentiate between these two types of motivation, as a single reason for learning a language may encompass both integrative and instrumental

elements, depending on the individual's social and psychological factors. In a comprehensive study, Dörnyei et al. (2006) found that integrativeness was a crucial factor in the motivational disposition of Hungarian learners mediating between all the other attitudinal variables. The modern-day educational context highlights the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation in language learning (Resendez 2023). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or pleasing, while extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a favourable outcome and external rewards. Students driven by intrinsic motivation yearn for new knowledge for the purpose of personal development, without any external coercion or feeling of obligation. On the other hand, if they are driven by extrinsic motivation, they are in some way stimulated by all potential "rewards" they might receive – such as a better job, a higher salary or praise. Teachers play a key role in stimulating and sustaining students` motivation. A motivating teacher does not merely teach, they bring the subject to life and nurture the spark for learning. They also foster a long-lasting desire for learning by activating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to Zou et al. (2023) "teachers' motivating style and teacher-student relationships played a chained mediating role between teachers' intrinsic motivation for teaching and students' intrinsic motivation for learning".

Navigating the challenges inherent in English language learning is no simple feat. Students often face obstacles such as insufficient content knowledge, limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, difficulties in writing, and a fear of being reprimanded or ridiculed by teachers and classmates (Divya Baranwal 2022).

According to Harmer (2007), teachers can have a strong influence on how or whether students remain motivated after their initial enthusiasm for the course has faded. Teachers have the ability to gradually generate motivation in students, even if there is nothing to build on initially. However, students need to play their part as well. Sustaining motivation is a collaborative act that needs both parties engaged and willing to participate.

Ultimately, successful language learning is likely a result of a complex interplay between learners' attitudes, their motivational orientation, and the learning environment in which they are situated (Daskalovska et al. 2012, Ely 1986).

Methodology

The proposed research paper aims to examine how the students perceive English language learning and how they assess its importance for their further professional development and what motivates them for English language learning. Motivation serves as a crucial factor for fostering a positive and engaging classroom environment, influencing both students and teachers. The research instrument included a 30-question online survey presented to first-year students of *English for Specific Purposes* at the Faculty of Science, University of Split, Croatia. The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms. The students were asked to answer Likert-type questions ranging on a 5-point scale (1 – Strongly disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Undecided, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly agree). This is a modified questionnaire adapted from a research paper that examined the students` attitudes towards learning German and Italian languages (Kovač and Mršić Zdilar 2017) which was originally based on the questionnaires used to explore attitudes towards foreign languages (Mihaljević Djigunović 1998, Boonrangsri et al. 2004, Zainol et al. 2012, Burgos & Perez 2015, as reported in said model paper).

The information collected by the survey was analysed with the statistics software IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.0.0. Table 1 below illustrates thirty statements from the questionnaire.

Table 1: Statements tested on a Likert-type scale.

No.	Statement
1.	I practice English whenever I have a chance (by watching movies without subtitles, talking to foreign speakers, reading articles in English).
2.	I feel that others speak English better than I do.
3.	I like speaking English in class.
4.	I feel agitated and uncomfortable while speaking English.
5.	I get uncomfortable speaking English in front of my colleagues.
6.	I am afraid I will be subjected to mocking while speaking English.
7.	I don`t like to participate in classes of English on my own initiative. I rather stay silent.
8.	I believe that people who speak foreign languages are more educated and have a higher social standing.
9.	Learning English helps me meet new people.
10.	Learning English is extremely important because it could benefit my professional career.
11.	People will think better of me and my competencies if I speak English well.
12.	I am forced to learn English.
13.	I can apply my knowledge of English in my everyday life (in the summertime, talking to foreigners, friends and similar).
14.	English is too difficult.
15.	It`s fun to learn new vocabulary in English.
16.	A good command of English positively influences my self-esteem.
17.	It`s much easier for me to express my thoughts in Croatian during English classes.
18.	I am not particularly interested in English classes.
19.	Learning English is a waste of time.
20.	I intend to invest more time into learning English.
21.	I speak English better thanks to my teacher.
22.	I watch my grammatical accuracy while speaking English.
23.	Active participation of all students is encouraged in English classes.
24.	Grammar is more prioritised in English classes, and verbal communication less.
25.	My teacher keeps me motivated to learn English.
26.	The importance of teamwork is emphasised in English classes.
27.	We cover interesting and stimulating topics in English classes.
28.	English teaching materials include various fields of interest (politics, sport, fashion, food, communication and similar).
29.	I think it would be better if the teacher used Croatian more in English classes.
30.	I think we should have English classes in the higher years of the study programme as well.

Respondents

The sample included 51 first-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Science, University of Split, who learn English as part of the elective course *English for Specific Purposes* within their respective study programme syllabi (Information, Physics, Information and Technology, or Biology and Chemistry). The students were previously introduced to the particulars of the study and were informed that the survey was anonymous and that their participation was voluntary, so they agreed to complete the online questionnaire. The study included 19 (37%) male students and 32 (63%) female students. The

questionnaire was completed by 24 (47%) Biology and Chemistry students, 13 (25%) Information Science students, 8 (16%) Physics students, and 6 (12%) Information Science and Technology students.

Figure 1: Respondents by gender.

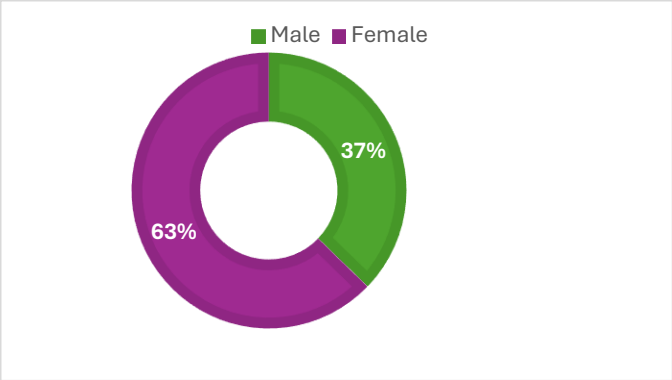
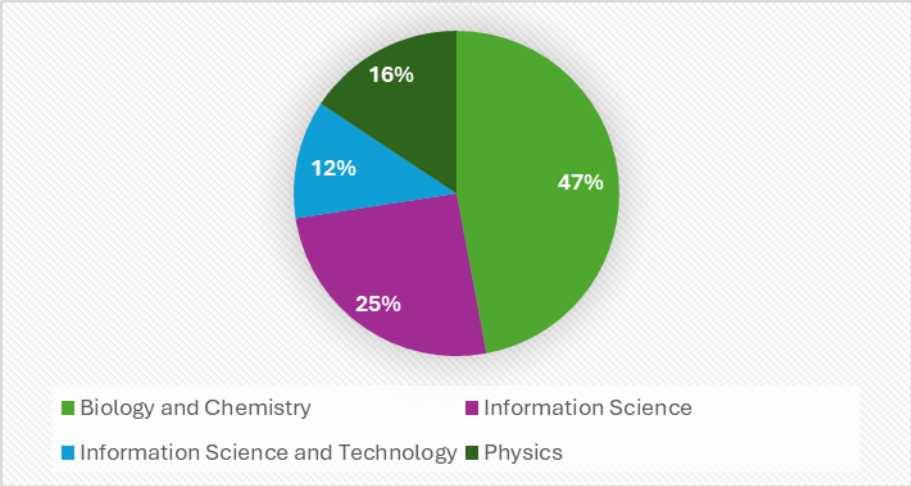


Figure 2: Study programmes.



Results and discussion

The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 2 below. According to the obtained Mean and Mode values for each statement, the respondents agree or strongly agree with statements 1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 30. This indicates that students recognise the importance of learning English for their personal development, professional advancement, expanding their social contacts, and improving their overall social standing and self-esteem. They also recognise the need to keep learning English in the higher years of the study programme instead of only in the first year of study because English has become the language of global communication. By mastering the English language, individuals can access a wealth of opportunities, from studying abroad to pursuing global careers, ultimately broadening their perspectives and enriching their personal experiences (Rameez 2019).

The respondents have positive beliefs about their own English language proficiency, and they tend to use it in various situations. According to Salainti (2023), positive language attitudes and motivation correlate with improved proficiency and performance in English as a second language. While Colaste (2018) found that positive attitudes towards language learning can alleviate anxiety and boost achievement, Habók et al. (2022) found that positive attitudes can lead to better engagement and more effective learning strategies and Kim et al. (2024) found that English language proficiency contributes to the psychological well-being of students.

The respondents reportedly mind their grammatical accuracy while speaking, which means that they have a high level of language awareness. When students mind their grammatical accuracy while speaking, it signifies that they are consciously aware of the rules and structures of the language they are using. Language awareness involves an enhanced understanding and sensitivity to the forms, functions, and use of language. It includes both explicit knowledge of language rules and implicit awareness of language use in different contexts (Carter 2003).

The respondents believe that the teacher plays a key role in students` motivation for language learning because they nurture students` self-esteem in class, encourage the active participation of all students and foster teamwork as a key element of achieving cohesion between students. The respondents also deem teaching materials as a crucial factor in English language learning, especially material from various fields of interest such as politics, sport, fashion, food and communication. Stimulating and current topics sustain students` attention during class and foster their engagement. According to Rondón and Vera (2016), effective teaching materials are fundamental for language learning because they facilitate language acquisition and cultural understanding, thus making the learning process more comprehensive and engaging. Beyond the role of teachers, the quality of teaching materials used in the classroom is also crucial for the success of second language learning. Teaching materials, such as textbooks, handouts, and multimedia resources, should be carefully curated to align with the specific needs and learning styles of the students. Engaging and interactive teaching materials can help students better comprehend and apply the concepts they are learning, fostering a deeper understanding of the English language. In second language learning, teachers often function as facilitators who guide students through interactive and communicative tasks. They create an environment that encourages students to use the language actively, rather than just passively receiving information. This role includes designing meaningful activities and providing feedback that helps learners improve their language skills (Van den Branden, 2016). Teachers play a crucial role in promoting learner-centered approaches, where they adapt their teaching methods to suit individual learners' needs and preferences. This approach helps in making learning more effective by focusing on the learners' active participation and engagement (Ly 2024).

According to the findings, the students disagree or strongly disagree with statements 4, 5, 6, 12, 14, 18, 19 and 29. This indicates that students have a high level of confidence while speaking because they do not feel any pressure, agitation or discomfort while speaking in front of their colleagues or any kind of prejudice from their peers. They also believe that they are not forced to learn English but do so on their own accord, which again confirms that they are willing participants in the learning process. The respondents have a generally positive belief about the English language as they do not believe it is a waste of time or boring, and they appreciate the fact that the classes are delivered entirely in English as opposed to incorporating Croatian into class because it provides them with more opportunities to actively use English. A study conducted by Diaz (2015) shows that students often have nuanced preferences regarding language of instruction. While some students prefer to be taught in their native language to avoid misunderstandings and improve comprehension, others prefer English to enhance their language immersion and improve their proficiency in English. Preferences can vary depending on

the context, such as whether the subject matter requires complex understanding or if the learning environment supports adequate English language skills.

The above findings align with the findings of the research conducted by Kovač and Mršić Zdilar (2017) for German and Italian students of the tourist study programme on which the testing tool for this study was based, which means that students in Croatia generally have positive beliefs about the importance of learning languages.

Motivation for learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is influenced by several unique factors: targeted learning goals, learner needs, teacher beliefs, teaching methods, and student attitudes. Learners are often motivated by the need to acquire language skills tailored to their specific professional or academic fields. This makes their learning more relevant and directly applicable to their careers or studies (Bin, 2014). The ability to apply what is learned in real-world scenarios, such as understanding industry-specific documentation or participating in professional communication, enhances motivation. This immediate applicability makes the learning process more engaging (Tandon, 2024). Teachers' beliefs about the importance of motivation and their methods can significantly impact student motivation. An eclectic approach that adapts to student needs can foster a more motivating learning environment (Yang and Wyatt, 2021). ESP teaching often employs a variety of methods to cater to specific learner needs, which keeps the course content dynamic and engaging. This diversity in teaching methods can help maintain elevated levels of student interest and motivation (Alshaye et al. 2024). Students' attitudes towards learning ESP and their psychological readiness play a crucial role. Positive attitudes and a clear understanding of the benefits can greatly enhance motivation (Fitria 2020).

Table 2: Results of the statistical analysis.

Statement	Mean	Mode
1.	4.47	5
2.	2.73	3
3.	3.59	5
4.	1.96	1
5.	2.41	1
6.	2.14	1
7.	2.80	4
8.	3.78	5
9.	4.53	5
10.	4.80	5
11.	4.29	5
12.	1.98	1
13.	4.73	5
14.	1.51	1
15.	4.14	4
16.	4.31	5
17.	2.92	2
18.	2.08	2
19.	1.14	1
20.	3.53	4
21.	3.90	5

22.	3.90	4
23.	4.24	5
24.	2.86	2
25.	4.02	5
26.	4.06	5
27.	4.31	5
28.	4.29	5
29.	1.73	1
30.	4.06	5

Conclusion

While positive beliefs about language learning are generally associated with better outcomes, negative attitudes may adversely impact students` progress. Therefore, it would be beneficial to occasionally seek feedback from students regarding their own beliefs about English language learning and their motivation levels, and, if needed, to amend the syllabus to sustain students` motivation and passion for learning based on the received feedback. The findings of the statistical analysis highlight several key aspects of students' beliefs and attitudes towards English language learning that may benefit all teachers while designing their course syllabus as well as universities when pondering whether and how to incorporate *English for Specific Purposes* into their curricula:

1) Importance of the English language: Students acknowledge the significance of English language learning for personal growth, professional success, social interactions, and self-esteem.

2) Language proficiency and awareness: Students have positive beliefs about their English proficiency, while the importance of grammatical accuracy indicates their high language awareness.

3) Teacher's role: The students perceive the teacher's role as crucial in boosting their self-esteem, encouraging participation, and fostering teamwork.

4) Teaching materials: Students value diverse and stimulating teaching materials that sustain their interest and engagement.

5) Continued learning: Students recognise the need to continue learning English beyond the first year, underscoring its global relevance.

6) Confidence and motivation: High confidence in speaking and a willingness to learn without feeling pressured or prejudiced reflect a positive learning environment.

7) Positive attitude towards the English language: Students exhibit a generally positive attitude towards English, viewing it as neither boring nor a waste of time.

8) Preference for English medium: Students prefer classes conducted entirely in English, which they find beneficial for active language use.

Considering that the respondents learn English as part of their respective study programmes at the Faculty of Science, it would be interesting to use the same testing tool on other study programmes, such as medicine, law or civil engineering. These findings may contribute to a better understanding of why university students in Croatia learn English and what may additionally motivate them to improve their proficiency and fluency.

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