

Different Attitudes Among Non-English Major EFL Students

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the results from a survey of 346 college-level English language learners in Taiwan focusing on some causes that may have hindered English learning in the past for students participating in the survey, and the students' perspectives about English learning. Results showed that most of the students had either fear or unpleasant feelings about their past English learning experiences, and that students of different majors had different perspectives about English learning. Several suggestions are provided for future application in teaching English to non-English majors in Asia.

Introduction

Maximizing the learning results of our English students, certain issues have often focused on issues including language teaching, learning theories, teaching materials, teaching approaches and methodologies, syllabus design, etc. Though research is being undertaken everyday, much of it has been powerfully constrained by Western cultural assumptions. Little research has been directed to the topic of how the local educational/teaching environment has influenced students' learning when the students are not English majors, but studying English as non-majors due to educational requirements and professional needs. This fact may at least lead to the result that local English learning problems remain unsolved for long periods of time. This paper looks into some causes that may have greatly hindered the effect of English learning for students in Taiwan, and to a wider extent Asia, since the role of English in the education systems across the region are highly similar. Through survey data analysis, students' perspectives about English learning and the fears of learning English that may have grown out of previous experiences are documented. It is the authors' belief that a better understanding of language learners can have a beneficial effect on the process of attempting to help language learners in learning English as a foreign language.

Background and Literature Review

Only those who have actually taught English in Taiwan can visualize the scene of forty, fifty, even sixty students learning together in a single classroom. English teaching/learning theories, approaches or methodologies established in the past do not often take the reality of large class sizes into consideration. Little credit can be given to their practicality in terms of actual application in such classroom settings. For example, it seems to be the case that whenever big class size is encountered, a much more common language learning environment in Asian than in Western countries (Wang, 1991; Wu, 1991), we are hopeless in attempting to adopt the newest established theory, approach or methodology. This example is strongly related to both social/cultural/economic differences as well as local teaching/learning problems that appear to be insoluble. If the local situation remains unchanged, even after years of local researchers and practitioners advocating of sound teaching and learning theories and methodologies that seem so well established in the West, there must be some facts that require reexamination at a more fundamental level than previously thought. As Sridhar (1994, p.801) points out:

SLA theory needs rebuilding from the ground up, in order to have a more functionally oriented and culturally authentic theory: Why do models of second language acquisition (SLA) developed in the U.S. and Western Europe treat the vast

majority of L2 learners, those that learn and use an L2 in non-native contexts, as marginal? The inescapable answer seems to be that current theories are powerfully constrained by Western cultural premises.

Indeed, when discussing any issue about language teaching and learning, cultural differences should contribute tremendously to the thrust of the discussion. Issues may include the differences of educational systems, learning conditions, teaching and learning styles, learning differences between Western and Eastern cultures and differences in needs for language use in the job market.

Those who have had the experience of living or being educated for a period of time in the West may have noticed that students are not afraid of asking questions or using the target language even when producing errors. In Taiwan, most students remain silent even when they want to ask questions and participate. These students are very conscious of making errors in front of their classmates. A similar situation was found by Hui (1997, p.38), in China, who points out:

...China has a Confucian culture, which seeks compromise between people. When it is applied to language learning, it is obvious that students are reluctant to air their views loudly for fear of losing face or offending others... In addition, there are some Chinese sayings which discourage oral communication in class. The following are some examples: Silence is gold; it's the noisy bird that is easily shot dead; a real man should be good at thinking, but weak at speaking; don't speak out unless spoken to; keep your mouth shut but your eyes open; keep silent unless you can burst on the scene like a bombshell.

Chen's (1985) found actual hostility and fear towards learning English in her research, with some students responding that they hate English and are afraid of it. Where did these fears arise? Most language teachers in Taiwan today, were previously students in Taiwan. Part of that experience included physical punishment dished out by teachers and insulting comments from classmates or friends, and maybe even parents, due to poor performance on examinations. While the situation has been improved somewhat, physical punishment due to poor performance in English examinations is still being practiced in some schools. Such a profile of junior and high school education is not at all unique to Taiwan in the Asian context, it certainly is very different from the situation in Europe and North America. Another possible source of fear, also related to cultural, was mentioned by Wu (1991). Wu found that even adults who studied English, without grade pressure, did not dare speak English in front of other people due to the fear of making errors. Additionally, fear of making errors and losing face was among seven factors that influenced university students' willingness in participating in classroom oral communication.

The Study

The objective of this study was to investigate (1) some causes that may have influenced the effect of English learning for students in Taiwan, (2) perspectives about English learning among non-English majors in Taiwan.

Subjects

A total of 346 students of nine English learning classes from different majors at a university in central Taiwan, Chaoyang University of Technology, participated in the study. All the subjects had studied English formally for six years in junior and senior high schools. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 20. Table 1 shows the number of the students of various departments.

Table 1. Students participating in study

Number	Class Description	Number of Subjects
1	Information Management (Computer)	53
2	Business Administration	51
3	Insurance	30
4	Accounting	15
5	Finance	31
6	Finance	29
7	Information Management (Computer)	31
8	Visual Communication	55
9	Applied Chemistry	51

Survey Instrument

The English Learning Questionnaire used in this study was composed in Chinese. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) fifteen closed-ended questions, (2) two open-ended questions. The survey was handed out at the beginning of their first class of the first semester in the academic year of 1996 to 1997. The survey was finished in class and collected immediately. The survey's first section examined causes that may have influenced students' English learning effect and students' perspectives about English learning, while the second section investigated students' feelings and past learning experiences of learning English in greater details. In the first section, the subjects were asked to rate statements, such as "Communicating with foreigners is the basic purpose of studying English" on the following Likert-type scale: (1) very agree, (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree. Question 2 (what were your sources of fear?) and question 10 (If you are to choose the most important or favorite skill, what would be the preferred order of question 9?) were not included in this analysis, due to their different nature. To calculate the score for this section, item (1) for each question represents 1 point, item (2) represents 2 points, item (3), (4) and (5) represent 3, 4, and 5 points, respectively. This paper concentrates on the results from the first section of the survey.

Data Analysis

The survey's first section is easily analyzed through statistical analysis. Such analysis can help us understand not only students' general views, but more importantly, if there are any statistically significant differences among the classes who participated in the study. A quick look at the overall means of the respondents (see Table 2) supplies us with a general picture of Taiwan students' attitudes towards learning English.

Table 2. Results of survey questions

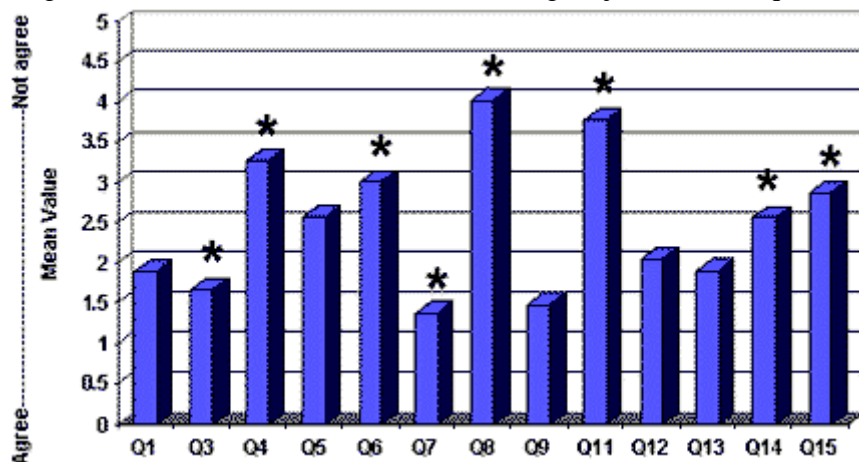
Question Number and Question	Mean	Responses	Std. Dev.
1. Studying English in Junior and high school caused fear and unpleasant feelings	1.9	342	0.886
3. Communicating with foreigners is basic purpose of studying English	1.67	342	0.887
4. Like to learn English through grammar translation	3.27	342	0.891
5. I fear making grammar errors while speaking English	2.58	342	0.93
6. Like to learn English in an all English environment	3.01	342	1.02
7. Like to be able to listen and understand everyday English	1.37	342	0.656
8. I think it is enough to be able to read in English	4.03	342	0.744
9. I think that the skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are of equal importance	1.49	342	0.766
11. In English learning I want to focus only on reading	3.78	342	0.822
12. In English learning I want to focus only on listening	2.04	342	0.963
13. Speaking is the skill I want to learn most	1.91	342	0.894
14. Reading is the skill I want to learn most	2.57	342	0.866
15. Writing is the skill I want to learn most	2.87	342	0.908

P<.05 Note: Questions 2 and 10 not included due to different question type

While the means are generally informative, they do not give much insight into differences among the majors. ANOVA analysis was used in order to find any differences among the nine classes surveyed. Figure 1 graphically shows the means of all the classes and also indicates those questions that showed significant differences among the classes. Five of the questions did not show any significant difference although question five, while not statistically significant, comes very close (see Table 3) at p=0.056. This leaves four questions where clearly all the students, from different majors, form a single population in their opinions. These four questions are: 1) Studying English in Junior and high school caused fear and unpleasant feelings 9) I think that the skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are of equal importance 12) In English learning I want to focus only on listening 13) Speaking is the skill I want to learn most.

The last three of these questions are useful to us to compare closely, as they relate to differences in learning English skills and thus can be compared among each other to judge the degree of students' attitudes. Fear caused by junior and high school English training has been raised as possibly having negative influence on Taiwan college/university English learning. It appears that the respondents of this survey agreed on its influence, rating the fear caused by such training at a mean of just under 2 (in the agree range). Following question 1 was an open ended question (see appendix) asking students' answers of their sources of fear in their English learning history. The responses tended to fall into five main categories: 1) afraid of being laughed by others due to inaccurate pronunciation, 2) fear of making grammatical errors, 3) fear of examinations, 4) the ways classes were taught in the past, and 5) physical punishment. While we cannot compare this finding among the groups (due to its subjective nature), it is in itself a useful finding as it shows the respondents begin with a strong fear and unpleasant feelings towards English learning. The following questions should, therefore, be somewhat influenced by previous negative feelings, i.e., if previous English classes had emphasized reading, with punishment for those who did not perform well, students may have a resulting fear of reading even though they may concede the importance of this skill when studying English.

Figure 1. Means and ANOVA results among majors for each question



P<.05

Moving on to the remaining three questions that form a single population, we can observe that students agree that the four main language skills are of generally equal importance, as seen in the agree result for question 9. Questions 12 and 13 show that a strong emphasis on listening and speaking are what these students are looking for. What they are not looking for is clear in question 11 where a highly not agree result is seen, however, a single population was not formed for this question. While reading is seen as the least important English skill to learn, some majors feel more strongly about this than others. This leads us to the actual differences among the nine groups.

Eight of the thirteen questions showed significant differences among the majors in an ANOVA test, see Table 3, with question 5 just outside the significance range at p=0.056. Continuing with the previous observation concerning the language skill most sought after by the respondents, question 11's LSD (Least Significant Difference) post-hoc multiple comparison test reveals that class 2 was significantly higher than four other classes. Class 2 is the management major class. None of the class' means fell under a score of 3, showing that indeed, reading is the skill least preferred by all students, with management students showing the strongest desire to avoid reading. Overall results for each questions with a significant difference among the classes can be seen in Figure 2.

Table 3. ANOVA results with LSD (Least Significant Difference) results

Question Number & Question	df	F	Sig.	LSD (P<.05)
1. Studying English in Junior and high school caused fear and unpleasant feelings	8	1.162	0.322	
3. Communicating with foreigners is basic purpose of studying English	8	2.338	0.019	2>18>1, 8>39>1, 9>3, 9>4, 9>7
4. Like to learn English through grammar translation	8	3.125	0.002	1>92>93>95>4, 5>98>4, 8>7, 8>9
5. I fear making grammar errors while speaking English	8	1.924	0.056	1>6, 1>92>97>5, 7>6, 7>98>9
6. Like to learn English in an all English environment	8	4.865	0.000	2>1, 2>6, 2>73>6, 3>75>1, 5>6, 5>78>6, 8>79>1, 9>6, 9>7, 9>8

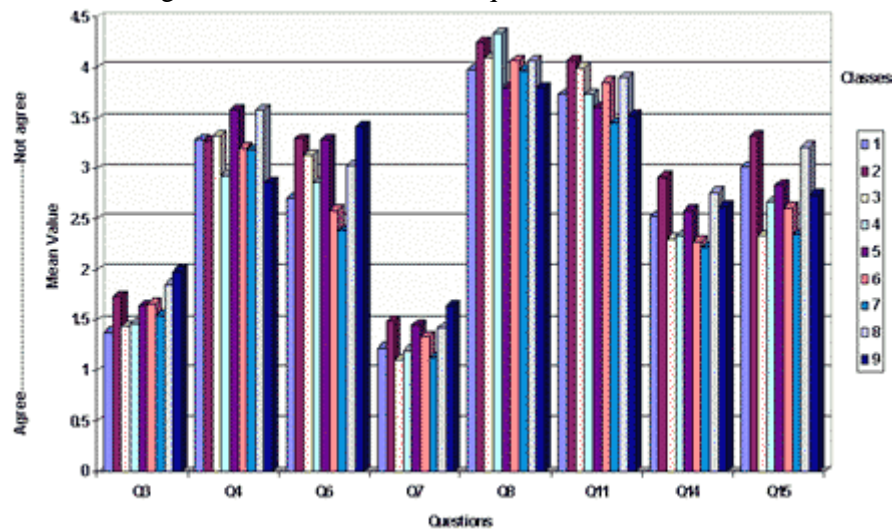
7. Like to be able to listen and understand everyday English	8	3.213	0.002	2>1, 2>3, 2>75>3, 5>78>3, 8>79>1, 9>2, 9>3, 9>4, 9>6, 9>7
8. I think it is enough to be able to read in English	8	2.0	0.046	2>5, 2>94>5, 4>9
9. I think that the skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are of equal importance	8	1.373	0.207	
11. In English learning I want to focus only on reading	8	2.823	0.005	2>1, 2>5, 2>7, 2>93>7, 3>96>78>7, 8>9
12. In English learning I want to focus only on listening	8	1.911	0.058	
13. Speaking is the skill I want to learn most	8	1.512	0.152	
14. Reading is the skill I want to learn most	8	3.116	0.002	2>1, 2>3, 2>4, 2>6, 2>78>3, 8>6, 8>79>7
15. Writing is the skill I want to learn most	8	6.675	0.000	1>3, 1>6, 1>72>3, 2>4, 2>5, 2>6, 2>7, 2>95>3, 5>78>3, 8>4, 8>5, 8>6, 8>99>3, 9>7

Following this analysis method, question 3 reveals that communication with foreigners is generally seen as the basic purpose of studying English with class 9 (chemistry majors) rating this purpose statistically significantly less important. Question 4 touches on preferred teaching methodology, specifically inquiring into the preference for the grammar translation method. Students responding to this survey generally found this method not agreeable. Class 8 (the design majors) showed the most differences with other classes, evaluating this method as actually somewhat preferred. This may have something to do with their comparatively lower level of English proficiency, since it is to most of Chaoyang English teachers' common impression that students of design majors are "difficult to teach" or "of very low English level". And the way that grammar translation method is used seems to be able to work well with this kind of students.

Learning English in a primarily English environment, i.e., using English to teach English, was generally not approved of by the respondents in question 6. The chemistry students ranked this approach less favorably than four other classes. This result is reflected in that the chemistry majors having less resistance to the grammar translation method, as shown in the results from question 4. This trend is continued in question 7 where generally students show a preference for understanding everyday English, but with the chemistry students differing from six other classes and rating this skill as less important.

Question 8 has the highest overall mean of all the questions and most classes show the same opinion, with class 2 (management students) and class 4 (accounting students) feeling stronger that reading is not enough compared to class 5 (finance) and 9 (chemistry). Questions 11 and 14 follow this pattern with another score in the not agree zone by all the classes for the preference to focus on only studying reading. Lastly, question 15 reveals that students somewhat agree with class concentration on writing skill, with management students showing a somewhat not agree preference for this skill (statistically significantly different from six other classes). It is a common observation that management majors in Taiwan tend to have higher English level than most other non-English majors.

Figure 2. Mean results of all questions for each class



Conclusions

In this study, we investigated students' perspectives on English learning and what their fears were in the past English learning process. Of special interest was the way different majors showed preferences for different language skills and teaching methods. While it may be difficult to measure objectively, it is generally observed by English teachers in Taiwan that certain majors have better English skills (when considering non-English majors). What this investigation has found is that while some groups of students may generally be accepted as having better English ability, management majors for example, this does not exclude other students as having equal interest and potential, but with a different emphasis and differences in attitude.

The general lack of research on the issues surrounding non-English majors has led many language teachers in Asia to assume that all students can be treated with the same standard approach. This has inevitably given way to disappointment as not only are our students in Asia EFL, as opposed to ESL, but the vast majority of students studying English are non-majors. Can we assume that different majors have the same interest and outlook, value the same skills or generally appreciate our efforts in the same way? This survey has clearly shown that this is not the case.

Future Application

Certainly this data points towards understanding the special needs of each group of students. This could mean adopting methods to have a better a "fit" with the target students, as Leng (1997) points out. While fashionable teaching methodologies come and go, the teaching situation in Asia is generally similar with large class sizes and limited resources. Rather than dismissing teaching methodologies, such as grammar translation, we should realize that such methodologies may have useful applications when combined with other factors such as students' backgrounds, levels, preferences, future needs for English, teachers, schools, culture, etc. As Hsiu-Ju Lin (1996) put it:

The degree to which I would stress one or the other would depend on the level of the students and their needs...

The differences among majors found in this study sheds some light on the special groups and their specific needs that make up non-English majors studying English. While most studies of English learners in Taiwan have dealt with English majors, there are far more students studying English because it is a core requirement at all schools.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

1. Did the English learning in your junior high and high school age give you any fear or unpleasant feeling (1) yes (2) no (3) some, if your answer is "yes" or "some", please answer from question 2, otherwise, answer from question 3.

2. The source(s) of the fear was (were) (1)ways of class instruction (2) fear of inaccurate pronunciation (3) fear of examinations (4) fear of making grammatical errors (5) others. Please elaborate as well as you can no matter what the source(s) was (were)

3. You think that being able to actually communicate with foreigners in English is a very basic purpose of English learning. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

4. You like to learn English through “grammar translation” and “vocabulary translation”. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

5. When you speak in English, the fear of making grammatical errors has a great influence on me. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

6. You like to learn English in an “all English” environment. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

7. You like to be able to listen and understand everyday English. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

8. You think that it is enough to be able to read in English. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

9. You think that “listening”, “reading”, “speaking” and “writing” are of equal importance in English learning. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

10. If you have to choose the most important skill or your favorite skill, what do you think is the best sequence? (1) listening, speaking, reading, writing (2) speaking, listening, reading, writing (3) reading, speaking, listening, writing (4) writing, reading, listening, speaking (5) others, please elaborate _____

11. In English learning, you only want to focus on the training of “reading”. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

12. In English learning, “listening” is the skill that you want to learn most. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

13. In English learning, “speaking” is the skill that you want to learn most. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

14. In English learning, “reading” is the skill that you want to learn most. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

15. In English learning, “writing” is the skill that you want to learn most. (1) very agree (2) somewhat agree (3) neutral (4) somewhat disagree (5) very disagree

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