

THE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: DIAGNOSIS

ACTITUDES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES HACIA EL APRENDIZAJE DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS: DIAGNÓSTICO

Janneth Verónica Chumaña Suquillo ^{1*}

¹ Facultad de Filosofía, Letras y Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad Central del Ecuador. Ecuador.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7354-264X>. Correo: jchumana@uce.edu.ec

Maritza Arcia Chávez ²

² Centro de Estudios de la Didáctica de la Educación Superior, Universidad de Cienfuegos "Carlos Rafael Rodríguez". Cuba. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9095-7989>. Correo: mariarcia1957@gmail.com

* Autor para correspondencia: jchumana@uce.edu.ec

Abstract

This paper includes the diagnostic to determine the reasons of the lack of student enthusiasm towards English learning, which confirmed the need to intervene the language curriculum using students' input and study its influence in their attitudes towards the language and learning outcomes. The diagnosis of the students' attitudes based on the literature review that permitted to arrive to some theoretical insights about the influence of attitudes in the students' learning outcomes. The diagnosis of the attitudes towards the language took place following the study case method steps and principles. The case consisted of a group of 18 students of the second term, to whom I was the English teacher. I diagnosed the attitudes they brought from previous levels of study. The results of the diagnosis showed that the students' attitudes towards the language, at their entrance to the university, are influenced by the teacher's methods and materials, and language needs, mainly, affecting their learning outcomes. Then, I decided to include students' input as part of the curriculum development in the English language classroom and study the possible changes in their attitudes and learning outcomes.

Keywords: diagnosis; students' attitudes; English language learning; questionnaire; case study

Resumen

Este trabajo incluye el diagnóstico para determinar las razones de la falta de motivación estudiantil hacia el aprendizaje del inglés. Esto confirmó la necesidad de intervenir en el currículo de idiomas utilizando las aportaciones de los estudiantes y estudiar su influencia en sus actitudes hacia la lengua y los resultados de



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aprendizaje. El diagnóstico de las actitudes de los estudiantes, basado en la revisión bibliográfica, permitió llegar a algunas perspectivas teóricas sobre la influencia de las actitudes en los resultados de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. El diagnóstico de las actitudes hacia la lengua se realizó siguiendo los pasos y principios del método de estudio de casos. El caso consistió en un grupo de 18 estudiantes de segundo semestre, en la asignatura de inglés. Se diagnosticaron las actitudes que traían de niveles de estudio anteriores. Los resultados del diagnóstico mostraron que las actitudes de los estudiantes hacia la lengua, al ingresar a la universidad, se ven influenciadas principalmente por los métodos y materiales del profesor, y las necesidades lingüísticas, lo que afecta sus resultados de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, con base a los resultados, se decidió incluir las aportaciones de los estudiantes como parte del desarrollo curricular en el aula de inglés y estudiar los posibles cambios en sus actitudes y resultados de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: diagnóstico; actitudes de los estudiantes; aprendizaje del idioma inglés; cuestionario; estudio de caso

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Introduction

The motivation of this paper was the question why many undergraduate students at a private university in Ecuador fail to achieve an average proficiency in English as a foreign language. I searched the reasons in the opportunity to use the language in the community environment, in the students' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes toward learning English and the factors causing such perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. I investigated teachers' methods, into the students' awareness of the benefits of knowing English for their professional and personal future and confronted those data with the literature published on the issue. The eventual objective of the research was to attempt to make positive changes in students' attitudes and in their learning outcomes by incorporating the input given by them into the classroom curriculum. The questionnaire answers provided valuable information that confirmed the need to intervene in the classroom curriculum design with the participation of the students, which constituted the second stage of the process.

In the research process, I assumed several steps, of which, in this paper, I analyze the diagnosis of the students' attitudes towards the English language. I considered it necessary to decide on the following steps to achieve not only positive attitudes, but also to obtain better outcomes in their learning of the language. To better understand and support my question, I based research on literature regarding the relationship between students' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about foreign language learning. I consulted authors such as Bloemert (2019), Holbah & Sharma (2021), and Long et al. (2024). In a brief generalization of the literature review, all the authors considered attitudes towards the target language as a crucial factor in the students' language skills development. They also indicated that such attitudes, perceptions and beliefs may change,



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depending on several factors, such as sociocultural aspects, students' future professional and personal goals, family perceptions, among others (Chumaña & Arcia, 2023).

Specifically in the Ecuadorian University context, we find some aspects that affect students' motivation towards English. Among others, highlight the lack of access to the language practice, and English tests do not include the skills that students require to be able to communicate in the English language in the real-life context. As stated by Guagchinga-Chicaiza (2025), it is necessary to think of a more effective curriculum and approaches to learning English in Ecuador. The grounds of such needs are first, the feeling of the importance of teachers conducting research in their own classrooms to determine the reasons for the lack of student enthusiasm towards the language. Then, based on those findings, teachers should try different strategies to help students in their learning, including their participation in the curriculum.

To intervene in the curriculum, in an attempt for more effective classroom approaches in our English teaching activity, I assumed the method of the study case, following the principles of the qualitative methodology to collect in-depth data (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2020) in the natural setting of the English classroom. I supported my case with different empirical methods. In the diagnosis stage, I used the open questionnaire as it allows getting more information from the survey and provides students with more possibilities to express their opinions and judgments. At the same time, the researcher has the possibility to get more information, though it becomes more difficult and time consuming to get into conclusions (Feria et al., 2020).

Regarding the relationship between students' perceptions about their learning, Gonzales (2024) mentions the importance of taking learners' viewpoints into account by putting their experiences and knowledge at the center of the pedagogical process, and by allowing them to become actively and consciously involved in the language learning experience.

Studies connecting learners' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs with outcomes include Gardner et al. (2006), Zhang et al. (2024), and others. They link attitudes and perceptions to outcomes, passing through many aspects that influence such process: the teacher, materials, methods, activities, students' learning styles and interests, opportunities to practice the language, teachers' feedback in relation to students' results. Most of such aspects trigger or hinder the students' motivation towards language learning.

Most of the studies consulted agree on a close interdependence between students' outcomes in the process of learning the language and their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. As consequence, their goals for language learning will influence what they think of the language needs and its role in their lives. In brief, what students think of themselves, of the teachers, and of their learning of the language may influence their learning strategies and their outcomes in the language use.

The relationship between attitudes, perceptions and beliefs with the ways that students approach the learning of the foreign language, and their outcomes, is an issue widely analyzed in literature. Although there is a consensus on the need to discover what students believe about their process of learning, of the language itself, and how they approach that process (attitudes), it is not a closed question. Even when the object of this study is closer to students' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs, those attitudes of the teachers are of high importance and require teachers and researchers to deep on that side of the research topic. Though not specifically object of this study, teachers' attitudes constitute an issue of study in the field of foreign language teaching.



Materials and methods

We decided for a case study as a method to obtain conclusions regarding what attitudes students bring to the English classroom at the university, how such attitudes may have affected students' learning outcomes. The data collected in the first stage (diagnosis- content of this paper) would help passing into a second stage, where I as the teacher researcher, intervene in the classroom curriculum development with the students' input to confirm if there are changes in the students' attitudes and learning outcomes after the incorporation of their contribution to the curriculum.

The context of the study, such as Colman (2015), is a combination of circumstances within which something exists or takes place and influences the understanding of events related to human actions or utterances. According to the Ecuadorian Higher Education System, the foreign language requirement at the university is the completion of eight levels, necessary for the students to obtain a proficiency certificate in English. The case consisted of a group of 18 students who had experienced other teaching approaches, methods, strategies and techniques in their previous English learning experiences in the general education system and in the first level of the university.

The group was in the second term of the academic year to whom I taught English. Their age ranged from 18 to 26 years, 14 women and 4 men. Their major varied, including Medicine, Architecture, Business Administration, etc. Two of them studied Medicine, eleven studied Nursing, one studied Accounting; one studied Physical therapy; two students studied Nutrition; and one student studied Biology. The case study participants shared the same cultural background, they have Spanish as their L1, and all of them had completed the first English level at the university. All of them studied English in the primary and secondary education. However, all were assigned to second level A. 1.1) in English as per the placement test results. The students conforming the case had English as a curriculum requisite to graduate from the University, thus it was mandatory.

According to the object of the study, the research is framed within the type of intrinsic, case study, and according to its purpose, as interpretative. Such a classification justified by the scope of inquiry to understand the relationship among students' attitudes toward English language learning, and the possible links with their learning outcomes to obtain a deeper understanding of the possible causes of their low interest towards the language. The results of the diagnosis stage would help the researcher study the possible relationships between the variation of students' attitudes and their learning outcomes if they took part in the curriculum development with their contributions with content and activities. In the diagnosis stage, I used the open questionnaire as a data collection method.

I made a literature review to confirm the research question and see how different authors had treated the issue of concern internationally. I followed an empirical search through the analysis of students' test results at the time of entrance to the university and the first level tests to contrast them with the students' perceived attitudes in the classroom context. The students' results and perceived attitudes were not compatible with the time they had studied English before. In the literature review, I found that the issue was common to different countries, and inside Ecuador.



During the first-class meeting, I made the students get to know each other for them to feel comfortable. Then, I handed in the first Short Answer Questionnaire (ISAQ) to the students. The questionnaire asked about their personal information and their previous experiences in learning English. Their answers helped determining the students' attitudes toward learning English in previous programs and educational levels. This information would permit diagnosing the state of such variables compared to their performance in the classroom.

For me, having students' acceptance to take part in the study was very important as their feeling of involvement and awareness of their roles as protagonists of the research would allow me to count on their commitment from the very beginning of the research process.

I collected empirical material from the students with the help of a questionnaire that I developed to collect the data necessary in the diagnosis process, following the principles of the qualitative research approach. In this paper, I refer only to the first open questionnaire, as I used several other instruments and methods along the research process that constitute content of a separate paper as they belong to the curriculum development stage of the research. The questionnaire was of an open type that I subjected to experts' validation with the support of the Delphi method.

The experts' selection process followed the steps established by Pérez (2005), to obtain experts' opinions and suggestions to improve the data gathering instruments and provide more reliability to the data. The experts' selection procedure followed two stages and three rounds. The first stage was to obtain a larger universe of experts as to be able to screen according to some criteria (to possess knowledge about foreign languages teaching and learning processes; have experience in research about foreign languages teaching; and to have knowledge in research methodology around foreign languages). I invited different professionals' meetings regarding such criteria to take part in the analysis of the instruments and provide suggestions, if necessary to validate the instruments, in questionnaire number 1.

The sequence followed in the research followed the one exposed by Marín-González (2021):

- 1) To contact the experts who know about the topic and ask them to take part in a panel. In the present study, I did it electronically as some of the experts are from other countries (Cuba, Spain and Venezuela) or cities in Ecuador (Quito and Loja).
- 2) To create and issue the questionnaire to the experts, asking about their opinion in relation to the topic and asking for a small CV including their experiences in the field of study, their field of specialization in foreign languages and their experience in conducting research, and experience in teaching English in the Ecuadorian context.
- 3) To analyze the experts' replies to verify that they met the above categories.
- 4) To issue a summary with all the answers to the experts to get their feedback

To select the experts, the formula applied was the one found in Pérez (2005): $K = \frac{1}{2}(k_c + k_a)$, considering the criteria stated above. For the knowledge coefficient, a scale from 1 to 10 was taken for them to mark, within that scale, their knowledge about the research. The argumentation coefficient (k_a) based on the selection by the experts of a value (high, medium, and low) knowledge about the indicators given to them was repeated with those who met the selection categories after the analysis of the information gathered. The experts selected share more than ten years' experience in the field of foreign language teaching; six of them are PhDs with more than ten articles published, and all of them enjoy more than ten years of experience in research projects



related to the field of study. All of them have done their research in the field of foreign languages teaching and learning processes.

For the evaluation of the instruments, the experts adhered to the categories of correspondence between the objectives and the instrument; the representative quality; and language. They followed some indicators in their assessment (A- Correspondence between the objectives and the instrument: significance or not significant; B- Representative Quality: optimum, good, average and poor; C- Language: adequate or inadequate (Marín-González, 2021).

I gave the students the questionnaire validated by the experts (see Questionnaire 1). I handed it directly to the students in a face-to-face meeting, for them to be able to ask the teacher in case they needed. According to Bowling (2005) the face-to-face questionnaire gives possibilities to get responses in a more social environment and provides more information. The open-ended questionnaire allowed the students to express their opinions freely and spontaneously (Bartolo et al., 2025).

During the first-class meeting, I asked the students to introduce each other to create an ambience of psychological comfort. I handed in the first Short Answer Questionnaire (ISAQ) to the students. The questionnaire asked about their personal information and their previous experiences in learning English. Their answers helped determining the students' attitudes toward learning English in previous programs and educational levels. This information would permit diagnosing the state of such variables compared to their performance in the classroom.

For me, having students' acceptance to take part in the study would allow counting on their commitment from the very beginning of the research process. The questionnaire helped gathering information about students' attitudes toward English learning.

Results and discussion

Questionnaire 1 helped not only gathering information about the attitudes towards English learning that students brought to the classroom but also getting them involved as part of the research process. However, the main purpose of the Questionnaire 1 was to gather information about the influence that the experience of studying English in the previous levels to the university had on the students' attitudes. The questions included the possible influences of the students' previous teacher's methods on their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions about the English language; as well as the influence of the English language curriculum in their daily lives; and their awareness about the real benefits of knowing English for their future professional and personal lives.

All the students in the diagnosis had English in primary and secondary school (question 1). In relation to their beliefs on how much primary school English study had influenced their learning in the secondary school, the answers were controversial as eight students mentioned that the language learned in primary school constituted a basis for the language learning in secondary school. On the contrary, half of the group answered that it had little influence. One student said it had no influence at all. All the students who considered that their learning in primary school (8) had highly influenced their learning of the language in secondary school acknowledged that their teachers' methods were appropriate. Also, these students considered the language important for their future lives. However, the nine students who believed that their first experience with learning English had little influence in their secondary school learning, described their primary school



teachers' methods as repetitive, not providing new knowledge, boring, not motivating, and some topics were never concluded (S1.Qu1.Q2). They stated that they did not learn new content as teachers in both levels emphasized the same vocabulary and grammar rules. There was a coincidence with Mejia (2016), who found similar answers in students about their language learning in childhood. This author concluded that when a person studies a language as a child, he /she will understand and keep it better.

A highlighting datum was the difference between the beliefs of students who had studied in private schools. They all acknowledged higher teaching quality in private schools. (S4.Qu1.Q2) and most of them considered English knowledge useful and necessary for their professions and life (S10.Qu1.Q2). This finding though it was not specifically of attention to the research, opens a question for a comparative study about private and state FLT in Ecuador.

A third part of the group acknowledged they had brought many gaps in English to the secondary school ("... when I started learning English at the secondary school I realized that I had many gaps in relation to the language knowledge" (S8.Qu1.Q2); "when I enrolled in the English course I lacked many things and did not understand well" (S15.Qu1.Q2).

Most of the students blamed their lack of knowledge on the teachers' methods, stated in answers such as "Teachers repeated the same topics all the time" (S2.Qu1.Q4); "what I learned at the school did not serve much as the methods of the teachers were different; before the teacher just focused on one basic structure" (S4.Qu1.Q4).

Some referred to the teacher's awareness of their actual language level: "I get very confused, and I cannot respond to the teacher's questions correctly" (S9.Qu1.Q4); "in previous levels teachers thought that I knew a lot of vocabulary and grammar, but I studied just to pass the tests and not to know the language. That situation continued up to the university" (S7. Qu1.Q4). Sometimes we do not give the subject the importance it has and consider it "an optative subject without a proper source or a syllabus" (S12.Qu1. Q4).

Students acknowledged that high school English covered some of their expectations regarding language knowledge and skills: "in high school, teachers are more demanding and creative" (S15.Qu1.Q4). That helped to face the knowledge demand at the university: "what we got in high school was just a part of what is necessary at the university" (S17.Qu1.Q4).

Some students provided support to the syllabuses they had followed before: "thanks to the support of an extracurricular course I could understand better the English I had in high school" (S9. Qu1.Q2). I interpreted this answer as a positive perception of the quality of the institution in the language teaching and learning outcomes.

In brief, an important part of the students inquired showed negative perceptions about previous experiences in English learning before they entered the university, which I considered as important information. I highlighted their answers when they referred to the fact that activities were repetitive and non-creative. They blamed their lack of language knowledge, partially on those activities requiring memorization and translation. Few students mentioned activities such as listening to songs and filling in the lyrics in the blank spaces and reading books as a support to writing. Their reference to such activities showed acceptance of that kind of activity as they regretted not having them more often. Few students acknowledged films, reading books and



the creation of stories. The most accepted activities were films and songs, showing a positive attitude, as they preferred them.

Half of students regret that few teachers included activities suggested by them in their lessons; they supported that "teachers preferred to follow a more methodic teaching", (S3. Qu1.Q11), at the same time, they considered "each student has different learning methods" (S4.Qu1.Q11).

Students' beliefs about the teachers' acceptance of students' proposals to improve their learning dynamics opposes to the belief of the students' having a "passive and reactive role against a highly structured teaching environment generated by teachers" (Díaz-Larenas et al., 2015, p. 43). One opinion about the teacher worth mentioning is that the student expressed the teacher desire for them to learn the language in "she wanted all of us to interact by using different techniques, to make us learn English in a better manner" (S15.Qu1. Q11).

As a consensus from the students' opinions excels that most of them desire to have the opportunity to give suggestions to the teacher, although three of them manifested they did not care, since the teacher would not consider their ideas. I interpreted that answer as a negative predisposition that teachers should interpret as a positive factor because it becomes a hint to change teaching approaches in their attempts for success in the teaching learning process (Otero-Potosi et al., 2023). Students' perceptions find support in Salanove et al. (2005, p. 161) when they state, "Besides the teacher, the student has to be taken into account as part of the teaching and learning process".

In the literature, it is recognized that even through evaluations, teachers can encourage participation and creativity in students as "incentives for extra marks to help students participate and get better scores" (S9.Qu1.Q13); in such cases teachers should be "more innovative in the teaching techniques used" (S18.Qu1.Q13). Students said that teachers lack creativity and technology skills. They stated that teachers do not want to change their path; "mainly because they are not interested in new ways, they avoid asking the students to propose activities" (S7.Qu1.Q15). Teacher's fear is getting behind schedule and syllabus. "They do not listen to what we have in our minds" (S10.Qu1.Q15); "They limit to providing the contents scheduled in the syllabus and reject having any type of relationships with the students" (S13.Qu1.Q15). Creativity influences not only the acquisition of linguistic skills, but also other educational processes at the university level, especially scientific research (González et al., 2020).

In general, students centered their judgments on their lack of knowledge of the language, on didactic and methodological factors, where the teacher has major responsibility, coinciding with Aguilar (2024). Students practically did not mention the social component of the learning process in the interaction with others in the execution of the language activities. The literature on this issue widely discusses significant language learning processes, as well as the classroom environment at the secondary level, in the context in which education is currently developing (Carrillo et al., 2024).

Conclusions

Although the totality of the students inquired had English in primary and secondary education, they considered that what they had learned in those levels of education, to be only slightly useful in their English learning process at the time of their entrance to the university. The diagnosis results helped to conform to some



generalizations that evidence students' negative perceptions of the language lessons, which lead to some questions for future research in the field of EFLT.

- The teachers' methods together with the shallow level of language ability that students received in previous educational programs made the students believe that they were not learning, thus they characterized the language lessons as boring and lacking dynamism and repetitive.
- According to students' beliefs, the English language teaching process in private and state educational systems differ from each other, being the private more productive in terms of students' academic progress and attitudes towards the language learning process. Students from state schools tend to reject the language, based on their lack of knowledge and poor advancement in their learning. This statement may serve as an open research question in the field of EFT in Ecuador.
- Students' perceptions led them assume that in primary and secondary education, English teachers devoted little attention to their interests and possible suggestions to improve the teaching and learning processes since the teacher was the only decision maker in the process of the language learning.
- Most of the students believe that the lessons could be more dynamic and motivating if teachers brought audiovisual materials, songs, games and plays, as well as the use of the IT technology to the English lessons.
- The data gathered allowed stating that students feel the need to study the language, not only as a requisite to graduate, but also as a tool to get an international scholarship, as a possibility to communicate with people from other countries, and as a tool to get information related to their field of study.
- The sociocultural aspects influence students' desire to know the language, such as their understanding about their feelings, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs towards English learning. The context, in some way, affects students' professional expectations.

The above conclusions confirmed the influence of previous learning experiences on the students' attitudes towards the language. It continues to be an issue internationally open to research and teachers concern, as confirmed by Masié (2021) who states that attitudes are a significant predictor of the students' achievements in learning the language.

The above conclusions made us corroborate the need to proceed with the study case and intervene with the development of the English language classroom curriculum. The attempt is to proceed by including students' input into the classroom curriculum as an attempt to influence their attitudes towards the English language and their learning outcomes.

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