Factors affecting English language learning processes at Thai Nguyen University

Nguyen Thi Nhu* Duong Duc Minh**

* Centre of vocational education and continuing education, Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam
* International School, Thai Nguyen Univerity, Vietnam

Abstract- The present investigation aims to investigate the factors that affect the teaching and learning processes of English teachers and learners at Thai Nguyen University. These factors were divided into two categories: socio-psychological (interest, personality family circumstances) and teaching situation (teachers and syllabus). Two sets of questionnaires were administered as the data collection instruments to gain enough data for the analysis. Results from both questionnaires show that social psychological factors influence the students' attitude and motivation towards learning the English language. Students hold positive self-concept manifested in rating themselves versus their ideal person. And both are reflected in the general low level of anxiety in the English classroom as reported by the students themselves. Parental support was reported as generally encouraging. In addition, attitudes towards English speaking people were fairly favorable though attitudes towards English culture were rather neutral. Teachers' attitudes towards their profession and towards the students' performance appear to be "good" and they are generally satisfied with their profession and its conditions. Teachers also showed their satisfaction with the syllabus and believed the goals, objectives and teaching methods could match the students' needs

Index Terms- Thai Nguyen University, attitude, motivation, English learning, English teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

The construction of an educational system capable of preparing humanity to live productively and meaningfully in this shifting world is one of the most essential and critical responsibilities of a modern society (Griswold, 2008). In an increasingly globalized world, numerous factors have emphasis on foreign language learning as a part of educational practice has become particularly important.

A number of factors have been identified as influencing students' engagement with L2 learning. Characteristics of L2 learning such as cognitive and social aspects, individual learner differences, affective issues, motivation, learning styles and learning strategies have drawn much attention from researchers. Consequently, learner variables have become one of the most significant domains of research in second language acquisition (Van, 2008)

Learning is the most fundamental and most important activity for every student at universities and colleges, and this activity can only greatly benefit from motivation. According to Piaget (cited by Duy, 2009) motivation is all factors that work to meet the needs

and direction of the learning process. Motivation exists in two forms: internal motivation and external motivation. The inner motives are formed from the interest in learning to satisfy the need for understanding. External motivation is not created by the excitement of oneself in learning but the excitement resulting from learning (high scores, reward, punishment, to please someone…). Motivated people will actively participate in the learning process and have the independence in solving problems, like new things, new challenges. On the other hand, people with strong external motivation, when achieving their goals, tend to be less motivated and often fail to cope with failure, difficulties and complex tasks (Chi, 2007).

Besides, according to Curran & Rosen (2006) every courses in the curriculum, along with the is the leading factor that brings knowledge, understanding and skills to students. The content of the courses and the curriculum that is clear, practical and highly applied will promote the learning behavior of students who are trying to learn to accumulate knowledge and skills for the future

In Thai Nguyen university, all institutions have their own EFL programmes to cater for the needs of their students. The programmes ranged from the very basic to the most advanced, adapted to the varying proficiency levels of learners. In all universities (except the School of Foreign languages), the English competence of the students before entering university is different. In addition, English is not the tested in the entrance exam, students are not classified according to placement test to teach in group, the syllabus has not been systematically compiled, the number of students in a large English class. Those factors have been foreseen that affect the teaching and learning processes of teachers and learners at Thai Nguyen University. However, up to date, there has been no research conducted to explore factors affecting the teaching and learning process extensively. Therefore, this study's intention is to acquire as much information in these factors as possible. From the point of view of the language teachers, the more knowledge they accumulate, the more confident they become in creating a language learning environment that will maximise the gains experienced by the students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. English Language Learning.

Language learning is an active intelligent, rule-seeking, problem-solving process that develops through the construction and application of a system of rules. These rules allow the speaker to create innovative utterances never heard before. It would take too

long, the cognitivists argue, to learn language through a process of stimulus-response. Learners must understand and analyse grammar rules to develop their competence as a basis for performance. Its purpose is to enhance the same sorts of abilities that native speakers possess.

One of the main principles of the communicative approach was that language is learned best through the negotiation of meaning in task-based interaction with others. Communicative language teaching classroom procedures are usually composed of group activities, language games, and role plays; yet these activities and the ways in which they are used are not exclusive to communicative classrooms. Richards (2002) explained that the communicative approach may have survived into the new millennium because it refers to a diverse set of rather general and uncontroversial principles, and it can be interpreted in many different ways and used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures.

The communicative approach is not a single method; it is to a certain extent a point of reference that can be adapted to practically any method, including cognitive and acquisitionist. Due to its social structure the communicative approach is most closely related to sociocultural approaches (Collings, 2007).

2. Factors affecting language learning

* Family and parents

According to Terenzini, (1993), Engle, (2007), the change of L2 students often requires learning and adapting to new academic and social systems. Their challenges lie in the fact that these new academic and social systems are not part of their family and cultural traditions. Thus, adapting to new academic and social systems requires them to break away from their old traditions and cultural norms.

The parents who are involved in their children's school, tend to have fewer problems and better learning performance, and are more likely to complete high school than students whose parents are not involved in their school. Positive effects of parental involvement have been demonstrated at both the elementary and secondary levels across several studies, with the largest effects often occurring at the elementary level. Drake (2000) states, "Nowadays, family involvement has reached a new level of acceptance" (p. 34).

More explicitly, Wells (2008) said, social capital "includes the social and personal connections or networks that people capitalize on for interpersonal assistance and personal gain, which for youths are often developed in schools in addition to the home" (p. 29).

As a result, it can be said that socio economic status is necessary for successful foreign language learning and academic performance causes significant social, cultural, and academic success.

* Curriculum and Syllabus

Harris and Schaible (1997) stated that "anecdotal evidence suggests that both students and faculty members believe that students improve their writing and subject-area knowledge in writing across the curriculum-based courses" (p. 31). According to Harris and Schaible, "The overwhelming weight of current evidence suggests that LAC (learning across the curriculum) can improve both student comprehension of subject-specific knowledge and their writing, but only when it is consistently and rigorously applied" (Harris and Schaible, 2000, p. 37)

Rose (1985) cited "The way of talking about writing abilities and instruction is woven throughout discussion of program and curriculum development, course credit, instructional evaluation and resource allocation. And, in various ways, it keeps writing instruction at the periphery of the curriculum." (p. 341). Morris (1998) offered, "The content of curriculum in UK have been explained with reference to areas of learning or experience which is a combination of forms of knowledge and types of skills and attitudes of a culture that assists students in writing" (p.27).

It is clear that English learning is important. It is the poor English learning achievement that has called for attention to teaching and course design in order to improve the situation (Abbott, 1992). To achieve better English teaching and learning, the first possible issue to look at is the curriculum, as it is often the first thing on which learning objectives, teaching content, assessments and teaching methods are based, and it is a major factor affecting language learning outcomes.

Therefore, we can perceive that curriculum is an important influential factor to develop English language learning of students.

3. Attitudes and motivation in language learning

2.3.1 Attitudes and Motivation

Language aptitudes could be defined as "a set of cognitive or verbal abilities which appears to be related to second language achievement" (Gardner, 1985). This variable has always been combined with the attitudes and motivation variables to compare their relative effects on achievement. However, some researchers nowadays question the value of such concept as they see that all individuals acquire a first language, and have debated the issue of innateness or acquisition of a language.

Besides, "Attitudes and motivation" refer to a class of nonability variables presumed to be important in second language acquisition" (Gardner 1985, p.119). Some research dealt with a number of attitudinal and motivational measures and others with one attitudinal object. Almost all report a relationship between attitudinal variables and indices of second language achievement. In this study, the attitudinal/ motivational dimension includes attitudes towards learning a foreign language, towards learning English as a foreign language towards English culture and English speaking people, motivational intensity, daily political situation, attitude towards the English language course and teacher.

4. Factors affecting Attitudes and Motivation in language learning

Since attitudes and motivation influence second language learning, the factors that influence them could be exemplified in parental and teacher attitudes, community beliefs or cultural expectations, peer pressure, relevance of the course.... Most research so far has dealt with parental and teacher attitudes and their effects on student attitudinal/motivational characteristics.

Parents are believed to have a major role in their children's second/foreign language process. Gardner (1985) identifies two roles for the parents: active or passive. The first refers to the parents' conscious promotion of the children's language learning as they monitor their progress and praise their success. The latter may include encouraging and supervising the children's work but necessarily involves transmitting negative attitudes towards foreign language learning. This can be manifested openly through comments about speakers of the target language or the importance of language learning in the curriculum, or indirectly by showing apathy in the foreign language. Mao (2011) reported that parents who have positive attitudes towards French Canadians and who

are integratively oriented encourage their children to study French and as a result these children are skilled in French. Bain (2010) reported that children with ethnocentric tendencies have parents with similar attitudes. Gardner (2010) reported an association between the students' orientation and difficulty with cultural identification and their parents'. The only parental characteristics investigated in this research are the educational and occupational background and encouragement of English language learning as reported by the students themselves. As the latter is the subjects' perception of the parents' encouragement, it must be said that it may or may not conform to the parents' opinion; however, this perception is the students' reality in their practical learning process.

Likewise, teachers play a significant role in the foreign language teaching process. Teachers are expected to have some general characteristics, personal and professional, to be successful in their task. Personal characteristics are those pertaining to the teacher as a human being, that is, they have no relation to professional competence. Patience, tolerance, warmth, flexibility, sensitivity, open-mindedness, and self-confidence are the major characteristics a teacher has to have. Such qualities- Gu (2009) believes- are innate but could be brought to surface or enhanced.

For the purpose of this research, one part of the students' questionnaire was designed to elicit information about how the students perceive their English language teacher; personally and professionally. Furthermore, the teachers' questionnaire involved some questions about the teachers' educational background, enthusiasm towards the teaching profession and relationship with students.

5. English language teaching in Thai Nguyen University

Thai Nguyen University (TNU) is located in the northern midland and mountainous region where many ethnic minorities live in harmony for a long tradition, in which ethnic minorities accounted for 24% - the highest rate in the country with their own cultural identities. At present, TNU has a current enrollment of 90,000 students, of which there are about 65,000 undergraduate (55,000 full-time and 10,000 part-time) and others are professional vocational students. The annual application average is from 70-80,000 applications from various parts of the country, mostly from 16 northern upland provinces of Vietnam.

Inn TNU, English is a compulsory subject across all programmes at different institutions (except the School of Foreign Languages, the International School and 5 advanced programs at TNUT and TUAF). Students study 10-12/120-132 credit hours, accounting for nearly 10% of the total credit hours of an undergraduate programme. Most of the students come from mountainous areas and there are no entrance exams or placement test. Most students understand from beginning of English course that they need to be good at English to be confident looking for jobs. However, apart from students with an English major, English was only taught in the first two years of university for a couple of hours a week. In all institutions within TNU, students who had already learnt three or seven years of English at school are still placed in a class with the students who had not learnt any English before entering university. Thus, they all learn English from the beginning with the same textbook and the same contents delivered in each lesson. In a mixed class of 30 to 40 students who have to relearn English feel bored, while the others feel nervous and lack confidence. Then, for the last few years at universities, English is no longer

taught in the curriculum, any student who wants to maintain and improve their English have to spend their money to improve their English in language centres outside universities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. 1. Research design.

The present study will be quantitative research in nature. The data collected from two questionnaires of both students and teachers will provide quantitative data for the study. The data will be compared and contrasted to see the main factors affecting the language teaching and learning processes as well as the relationships (if any) among those factors.

2. Participants

* Students

Seven hundred and thirty students enrolled as regular students in 4 universities within Thai Nguyen University served as subjects for this study. The total of 730 students aging from 17 to 23 responded to the student questionnaire.

*Teachers

Seventy-eight English teachers from 9 institutions within Thai Nguyen University responded to the questionnaire for teachers. 11 of the teachers are males and 67 are females. Sixty-six teachers are M.A. degree holder and 12 Ph.D. All the teachers are full-time teachers at their institutions

3. Research questions

1. Which of the social and psychological factors influence the students' English language learning?

2. What are teachers' attitudes towards their profession and towards the teaching curriculum?

4. Instruments

* Students' Questionnaire

The questionnaire as used in this study consists of two main parts and 9 subsections aiming at eliciting descriptive information about students' gender, university, number of English language courses taken. Some of its basic ideas are adapted from the Attitude/ Motivation Test Battery which is developed by Gardner and his associates to assess the non-linguistic aspects of second language learning. Changes-major and minor- as well as additions and subtractions to the original items were needed to assess the non-linguistic aspects of foreign language learning in TNU.

* Teachers' questionnaire

The teachers' questionnaire is constructed on similar lines to the students' questionnaire. Since the student and the teacher are the two important elements in the teaching/learning process, equal emphasis should be put on examining both of their views about this situation. The teachers' questionnaire is composed of three parts.

Part I asks about teachers' attitude towards the teaching profession. Part II asks about teachers' attitudes towards the teaching/learning situation and towards the students' performance in general and Part III asks about teachers' attitude towards the syllabus at their institutions.

4. Data collection and data analysis

After transferring the questionnaire into Google form and publish online, the researchers wrote an email to ask for help from teachers who are teaching English at 9 institutions within TNU. The teachers were then randomly assigned students in their classes whom they were teaching at that time to complete the questionnaire. After five months (from December 2018 to May

2019), 730 completed online questionnaires were collected and ready to provide data for the present study.

The teachers' questionnaire was administered in similar procedure and 78 questionnaires forms were collected.

Data collected from two sets of questionnaire was collected where frequencies and percentages are given, the ratings on the five-point scale items which appear in the questionnaire were reduced to three points: high, mid and low for ease of interpreting the results. The high rating was created by combining scales 4 and 5, and the low rating by combining scales 1 and 2; the mid rating represents scale 3: neutral. Besides, the high level represents "strongly agree" and "moderately agree", the mid-level "neutral", and the low level "moderately disagree" and "strongly disagree". The results were then presented in tables to see the correspondence

IV.   FINDINGS

1.Results of questionnaire.
* Parental Encouragement
Chart 3.1: Parental Encouragement
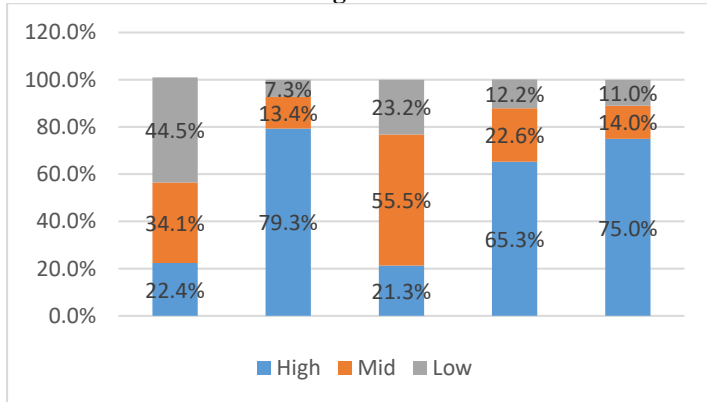
In general, students reported positive attitudes of their parents towards the teaching/learning of English as a foreign language. The majority reported neutral responses as to whether parents think their children should spend more time on the English courses (55.5%). Besides, 44.5% students thought that their parents did not help them to learn English. The reason could be that either parents themselves are not proficient enough in English or it is not expected that parents offer help to their children at the university level.

* Interest in Foreign Languages
Chart 3.2 below states that students showed general positive interest in foreign languages. One of the four items indicating the level of interest in foreign languages which is a general statement concerning "the importance of learning foreign languages for the Vietnamese" received 90% high ratings. The other three items on the other hand, concerning the students' own use of foreign languages received lower percentages of ratings. The reason could be that they perceived 'the book' as a textbook related to their field of study, thus they feel a more urgent need to read it in the original language it was written in. Another reason could be the lack of local newspapers and magazines written in English; thus, students may not find equal interest as in reading about issues that concern them more directly found in newspapers and magazines.
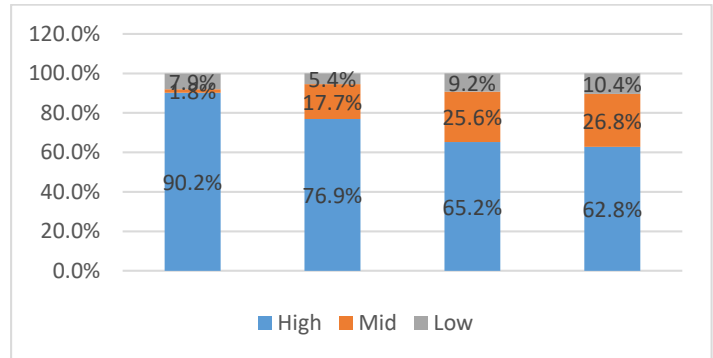

Chart 3.2: Students' Interest in Foreign Languages
* Instrumental Motivation
Chart 3.2 below shows students' instrumental motivation of TNU students. Two items (studying English .... to meet and converse… and studying English … make me more knowledge person) indicated a very high level of instrumentality among the students. The first item could be considered a social one where other people are also involved, 'students could meet and converse with a variety of people'. The second could be labelled as personal, where students could be more knowledgeable. However, only 48% reported that studying English can be important because knowing a foreign language would make them more respected (item 3). Though this item can be considered both social and personal, it does not seem that knowing a foreign culture is associated with 'social respect'. One item (number two) which showed less instrumental motivation could be said to relate to ethnocentrism; "Studying English can be important because it will offer me a chance to leave the country" received 38% high ratings, 32% low ratings and 30% 'neutral'.
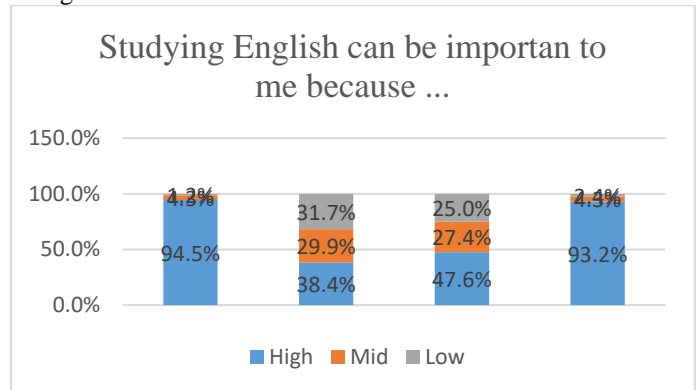

Chart 3.3: Students' instrumental motivation
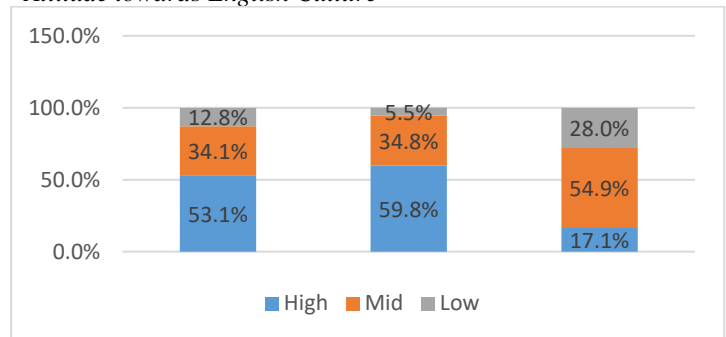*Attitude towards English Culture*

Chart 3.5 Attitude towards English Culture
An average of 56% of the students showed positive attitudes towards English speaking people, and English culture on two
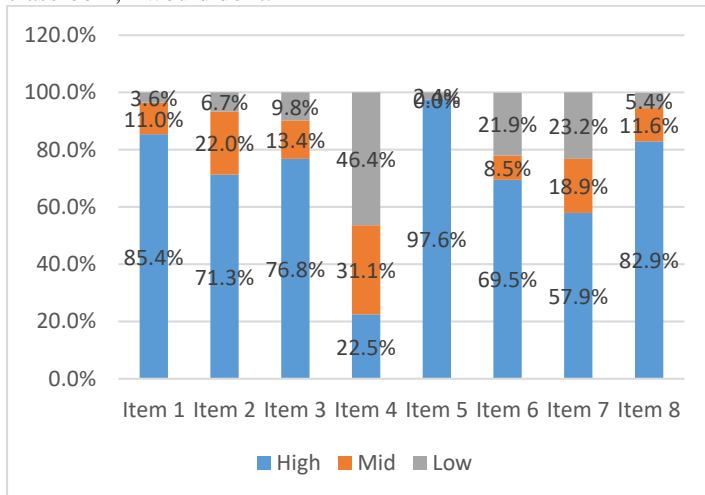
items. However, the percentage of high ratings dropped to 17 concerning their directly stated attitudes towards English culture with 55% neutral responses, "... *I have discovered that some aspects of that culture are not as good as I had thought*". That more students showed positive attitudes towards English speaking people and 'artists and writers', but more or less neutral attitudes towards the culture, tending toward low level- may be because 'culture' is more inclusive than individuals. That is, students may have a relatively negative attitude towards a culture which they believe has some effect, in one way or another, on their own culture or identity, whereas individuals of that foreign culture are not perceived as having direct influence. This may also be related to the students' degree of ethnocentrism, where the higher the level of ethnocentrism is, the more negative their attitude towards the foreign culture is expected to be.

* *Attitude towards Learning English*

In the questionnaire, there are 8 items aiming at exploring students' attitude toward learning English as follows:

Item 1: I plan to learn as much English as possible,

Item 2: If I had the opportunity to see a play in English, I would definitely go.

Item 3: English is an important part of the Lebanese educational system,

Item 4: I would rather spend my time on courses other than English.

Item 5: Learning English is a waste of time.

Item 6: I am studying English only because it is a requirement.

Item 7: If there were an English Club in the University dealing with English poetry, drama, books, cooking, movies..., I would attend meetings,

Item 8: If I had the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom, I would do it.

Chart 3.6 Attitude towards Learning English

Students' attitudes towards learning English tended to be high on all items except one. The highest percentage of high ratings was for the following item: "*Learning English is a waste of time*". Of the 730 students, 98% disagreed on this statement and none was neutral. This means that most students have a great value for learning English. An average of 84% reported they plan to learn English as much as possible and that they would speak it outside the classroom given the opportunity. However, only 76% agree that English is important in the Vietnamese curriculum. The item "*I am studying English only because it is a requirement*" received

70% high ratings and 22% low ratings. While 71% of the students would go to a play in English, 58% would join an English club at the university. The fact that the second item is related to the students' lives at the university could explain the discrepancy in percentages, though relatively not too big. The interesting point here is that though the majority has positive attitudes towards 'the learning of English' (item numbers 5, 1, 8, 3, 2, 6 and 7 in order of high percentages), 46% show negative attitudes and 31% are neutral on one item: "*I would rather spend my time on courses other than English*". The reason that only 23% showed positive attitude on this item can be that it is concerned with the language course- content, readings, assignments...- rather than the value of English or the general use of it.

2 Results from teachers' questionnaire

*Attitude Towards the Teaching Profession

The majority of teachers (59%) reported they had planned to teach English. Those who responded they were happy with their choice formed 86% and those who would not change their profession if they found a more suitable one were 68%.

More than half of the teachers (59%) do not find the teaching profession materially rewarding but 82% find it is socially. An average of 82% reported that teaching is enjoyable but tiring, and 64% find it satisfying. All of the teachers agreed that teaching is a 'respectable' profession.

Of the total teachers, 81% felt their interest in the profession has not decreased as years passed. About 73% do not feel satisfied if only a few students show progress. All teachers give extra assignments to help the students overcome their points of weakness.

In general, teachers seem to be quite happy with their jobs though more than half (an average of 59%) had not planned to teach and do not find the profession materially rewarding. This satisfaction seems to give them the incentive to carry on their duties and responsibilities such as maintaining their interest, wanting more students to progress and giving extra assignments.

Relationship with students

The two adjectives used most to describe the kind of relationship between teachers and students were 'disciplined' and 'friendly'. The frequency of use of the six adjectives came in the following order: 'friendly' (67), 'disciplined' (54), 'formal' (38), 'informal' (3), 'strict' (30), and 'permissive' (16). From these figures, one could better understand the relationship between the two. Teachers would prefer to be 'friendly' but at the same time 'disciplined'. This may be explained by the still prevailing belief among the Vietnamese: parents, teachers and students, that teachers are "the authority" in the classroom and that they have to be serene. While the terms 'formal' and 'informal' received equal number of frequency of usage, words such as 'strict' and 'permissable' tended to be rarely used probably because of the strong connotation each word carries.

Of the total number of teachers, 14% would 'definitely' make an attempt to know a little about the students' background at the beginning of the semester and 41% would, only if they feel they should know more. The rest (46%) do not make any attempt at all. As to whether the teachers are willing to give extra time to help weak students, 86% reported they would if they find the student really needs help, and the rest (14%) would but not more than their assigned office hours.

Finally, while only 9% of the teachers remain optimistic and try to help students overcome their points of weakness, 64% find it difficult to maintain such a feeling. The decision of the rest (27%) depends on the general atmosphere of the class.

Teachers seem to be quite responsible and willing to help and instruct the students, and at the same time, realistic concerning their everyday, practical, professional chores. For the first two questions, teachers showed mild interest and responsibility towards students, that is, within their professional duties; however, they find it difficult to remain optimistic and try to help students, possibly because of factors relating to the general atmosphere of the university and/or country, and not necessarily for educational reasons

Teachers' level of Satisfaction

In general, teachers seemed satisfied with most of the teaching/learning aspects. However, the language laboratory, facilities offered by the university, and the outside opportunities the students have to practice English received relatively lower ratings of satisfaction. On the other hand, teachers seemed quite happy with the way they evaluate the students' achievement and their availability for consultation.

Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Syllabus

Of the total teachers, 63% reported that the aims of teaching English in TNU are known to themselves and to all teachers of English. Therefore, what they believe the aim of teaching English to university students should be is summarized in the following (the number in brackets after each phrase represents the number of times it was mentioned in the questionnaires), to help students:

a. express their thoughts in any form- written or spoken (67)

b. communicate with people (51)

c. in their academic studies, undergraduate as well as graduate (40)

d. in their profession (37)

e. read, write, listen and speak in the foreign language (with different emphasis on the skills) (30), and

f. know about the foreign people and culture (21).

Of the total number of teachers, 91% reported their departments have set goals for the teaching of English. Of these, 95% thought these goals match theirs, 80% believed they match the students' needs to learn English as a foreign language. However, only 40% had a say in setting these goals. About 90% reported their actual teaching matches the departmental goals and 75% felt students are aware of these goals.

Of the total teachers, 68% think students do feel the need to learn English. This was quite evident in the students' questionnaire where students reported the value of learning English in different instances. As to what kind of syllabus teachers have, 55% reported they follow a general one where they are given guidelines, but interpretation is left to them; 41% reported they follow a rigid one where they are given a day to day schedule. Only one respondent said he/she follows an open one where decisions about what and how to teach are left entirely to the teacher. All except one would like to have a general syllabus, which is justifiable by the fact that teachers do need to know what is expected of their teaching and at the same time can adapt that according to what may be more suitable and efficient in certain conditions.

Whether students should be consulted about the content and method of courses in sciences and mathematics, the majority of teachers (82%) expressed disagreement. However, as far as language courses are concerned, 50% of the teachers agreed. This may be natural since the syllabi in the former type of course could be more precise with definite steps and clear guidelines to be followed.

V. CONCLUSION

Regarding social psychological factors influence the students' attitude and motivation towards learning the English language, it can be concluded that in general, students had a positive opinion of their proficiency in foreign languages- especially English, their performance in English language skills, as well as their frequency of using the skills. This is accompanied by the students' positive self-concept manifested in rating themselves versus their ideal person. And both are reflected in the general low level of anxiety in the English classroom as reported by the students themselves. Parental support was reported as generally encouraging.

Attitudes towards English speaking people were fairly favorable though attitudes towards English culture were rather neutral. However, nearly half of the students expressed interest in spending more time discussing the culture of English speaking people in the classroom. Students have a general satisfaction in the teaching/learning situation. They believed that learning a foreign language does not endanger their cultural identity. This may be linked to their general interest in foreign languages as shown in the results "It is important for the Vietnamese to learn foreign languages" (90%). The value of learning English was also appreciated by the subjects; "Learning English is not a waste of time" (98%). This was also obvious in their desire that only English be spoken during the class. This is reflected in the subjects' relatively positive motivational intensity in the English language course, except for volunteering for extra assignments.

Regarding teachers' attitudes towards their profession and towards the students' performance, the second important figure in the teaching situation in this research, seem to be generally satisfied with their profession and its conditions; "it is socially rewarding" and "their interest has not decreased". Moreover, they are willing to exert extra effort when needed, and their relationship with the students appears to be "good". They showed the great effort on helping students not only to learn English but also to be a good citizen as the most frequent words appeared were "friendly" and "disciplined". In addition, English teachers at TNU also showed their satisfaction with the syllabus and believed the goals, objectives and teaching methods could match the students' needs.

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AUTHORS

Nguyen Thi Nhu – Centre of vocational education and continuing education, Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam
Email: Centre of vocational education and continuing education, Quang Ninh Province.

Correspondence Author – Nguyen Thi Nhu. Email: nhu78ttt@gmail.com. Tel: +84.772286268.