

# Taiwanese University Students' Attitudes toward Freshman English and English Learning

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## Abstract

This survey investigates the views and the attitudes of Taiwanese university students towards English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning in general, and their Freshman English (FE) course in particular. 163 Non-English majors Taiwanese university students at a Taiwanese university participated in the study. The data collection method employed in the study is questionnaire survey. The questionnaire covers three kinds of information, each in a different section: the participants' personal background; their English learning information; and their opinions and attitudes towards Freshman English. It contains 19 questions of these three types: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank completion, and open-ended brief comment. Several major findings on the participants' overall attitudes towards Freshman English are discussed. Implications for teaching FE are also discussed.

**Key Words:** Taiwanese university students, Attitudes, Motivations, EFL, ESL, EAP, ESP, Freshman English, FE, English learning, Survey, Questionnaire.

reactions and attitudes towards the questions.

### Data Collection

The questionnaire survey was conducted at a medium-size university in Taiwan. The questionnaire was given to a total of 180 university students, who completed the questionnaire in their classroom.

Every questionnaire was given to the participants only after getting permission from the participants and their teachers. The purpose of the survey and the general format of the questions were orally introduced to all the participants before they began taking it.

It was emphasized to all the participants that the survey was anonymous, and also that they were free not to participate if they did not want to. They were encouraged to express their own opinions and to not worry about what their teachers or other authorities at their schools had said or thought. The questionnaires were collected right after the participants finished them. In general, each participant took about 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Of the 180 copies of the questionnaire that were distributed, 175 were filled out and returned. Eight of those returned copies were excluded from the survey because they were incomplete. The respective final total sample size and response rate of the survey were 163 and 90.6% (163/180), with 67 (41%) of the participants male 96 and (59%) female.

## Result Findings and Discussion

This survey investigates the views and the attitudes of Taiwanese university students towards English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning in general, and their Freshman English (FE) course in particular. Based on the results of the data analysis, several major findings on the participants' overall attitudes towards Freshman English are discussed as below.

### 1. Self-Perceived Best English Skill

Among the 163 participants, 95 people (58.28%) reported that they perceived reading ability to be their best English skill (over the other three skills - speaking, listening, and writing). 33 people (20.27%) reported that their best skill among the four skills was listening ability. 20 people (12.27%) and 15 people (9.2%) reported that their best English skill was writing and

speaking, respectively. That the majority of the students felt their reading ability was better than their other skills in English may result from the junior and senior high school English curriculum and English education in Taiwan.

### 2. Self-Perceived Worse English Skill

55 people (33.74%), 50 people (30.67%), and 47 people (28.83%) reported that their worst English ability among the four skills was writing ability, listening ability, and speaking ability, respectively. Only 11 people (6.75%) reported their reading ability to be their worse skill among the four skills.

The results indicate that most of these university students felt their difficulties in English learning involved either writing, listening, and speaking in a fairly evenly distributed way, with reading ability felt to be less of a problem in English learning, which is consistent with the preceding results of the item on their self-perceived best English skill.

### 3. Important English Language Skill Training for Freshman English

In response to the importance of the four skills in English for Freshman English, 111 people (68.10%) among the 163 participants thought that the most important English language skill for Freshman English to address was actually the combination of two skills: listening and speaking abilities. The perceived next most important English skill was the combination of the other two skills: reading and writing abilities. Twenty-two people (13.50%) thought the focus of the language-skill training in Freshman English should be reading and writing ability. Fifteen people (9.20%) preferred that Freshman English should cover training in all four skills. Finally, only 4 people (2.46%) thought that either listening ability alone or speaking ability alone should be the most important skills for Freshman English.

### 4. Language Used to Oral Present the Lecture for Freshman English

137 people (84.05%) reported a preference that English teachers conduct Freshman English courses in both English and Chinese interchangeably, which they considered to be more beneficial and effective for the students to learn content knowledge and also improve their English ability. 24 people (14.72%) preferred their English teachers speak English all the time during class. 2 people (1.23%) preferred their teachers present the course largely in Chinese. The results show some correlation between English proficiency and the preferred language of

instruction used in Freshman English. The people who perceived themselves to have good English ability desired the teacher's lectures and classroom talking to be done all in English. Most of the participants in the study, however, apparently did not perceive themselves to have sufficient English ability for that.

### 5. Favorite English Language Content/Material Used in Freshman English

156 people (95.71%) out of the 163 participants reported that they considered their most favorite English textbooks should have content relevant to the everyday English used in the real world. As discussed in Finding Number 3, most of the participants thought that speaking and listening skills were the most important skills for FE, and they wanted to improve those two skills the most. Just 5 people (3.07%) thought the content or materials of textbooks used in FE should be relevant to medical English, and only 2 people (1.23%) reported that the textbook content should be relevant to a literature-related field.

Somewhat in contrast, 73 people (44.79%) suggested having ESP courses such as medical English, or nursing English in the second or third year. 83 people (50.92%), however, did not consider medical English or nursing English to be very important for improving their English ability. They also asserted that they could learn a great deal of specific terms related to medical or nursing English from their required courses.

### 6. Least Favorite English Language Content/Material Used in Freshman English

94 students (57.67%) reported that they did not think that practice material for the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) should be used as the only material for Freshman English, even though they confessed that passing the GEPT was very important to them. They reported that they could practice GEPT in the language lab or at home by themselves.

### 7. Importance of /Motivations for Learning English

159 people (97.55%) reported that they were aware of the importance of English. As to their motivation for learning English, the three most popular answers were to enhance or improve their English overall proficiency (96%), to fulfill a requirement for their degree (89.57%), and to find a better job in the future (87%). A few people reported their purpose of learning English was to pass the GEPT (6%), to study abroad (5%), or to travel overseas (2%). The first result is

perhaps just the general, non-analyzed feeling of the students that English is important in the world today. The other two of the top three responses perhaps indicate that when the students think about it a little more, motivations involving clear practical benefits, such as graduating from college and getting a better job after college are more important to them than motivation for situations that do not have clear practical benefits, such as passing the GEPT, or for situations that may or may not happen, such as studying abroad or traveling overseas in the future.

### 8. Amount of Hours for Freshman English

For how many hours a week FE should meet, more than half of the participants, 88 students (53.99%), chose two hours a week, 31 students (19.02%) chose 3 hours a week, 38 students (23.31%) chose four hours a week, and six students (3.68%) chose five hours a week. In general, the participants who reported themselves as having relatively good English proficiency preferred more hours a week for Freshman English. These participants thought that better English language ability needs to be developed with study and practice day by day, rather than just for two hours one day a week.

### 9. Benefits/Effectives of Self Study in Language Labs

118 people (72.39%) reported that they were in favor of studying Freshman English or English in general by themselves in language labs. Moreover, 128 people (78.52%) said they felt there was benefit from self-study in English language labs, and believed their English ability could be improved through that.

### 10. Benefits/Effectives of English Corner

128 participants (78.58%) reported that the most important benefit of extra-curricular, regularly scheduled, free English conversation sessions with an English native-speaker teacher and any interested students and staff (English Corner) was that they could become used to talking with English native speakers, and not feel so anxious and nervous when using English. They also indicated a positive attitude towards English Corner as being able to help them improve their English abilities, especially listening and speaking. In general, though, they said they were too lazy to attend English Corner.

### 11. Most Useful Way of Self Studying/Improving English

For most of the participants, some ways that they considered to be the best or most useful for improving their English outside the classroom included watching English movies, listening to English radio programs, learning and singing English songs, reading English magazines or short stories, and talking with English native speakers (in English Corner or in other avenues).

### Discussion & Teaching Implications

As noted, this study investigates the views and the attitudes of Taiwanese university students towards English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning in general, and their Freshman English (FE) course in particular. Based on the results of the study, some implications for teaching FE are discussed as below.

#### Skills Needed, and the Materials and the Language Used in Freshman English

The results indicate that most participants perceived their reading ability to be the best of the four language skills, and that the skills that needed the most to be improved or that were the most desirable to focus on in Freshman English were listening and speaking. The participants perceived their writing ability to be their worst, with writing considered the most difficult and time consuming English-using task. That they perceived their reading ability to be better than the others and their writing ability to be worse could be the result of their English education in junior and senior high school. This also can perhaps explain the reason why they preferred the materials for their Freshman English textbooks to be related to everyday communication, and why they prefer that the English teachers present the content in both Chinese and English. Such a result may due to the students' low self-perceived English ability level in non-reading tasks.

#### Motivations for / Importance of Learning English

The results also indicate that the students engage in studying English for their own sake to learn more about English and to enhance their overall English ability. The reported motivations for learning English are an interesting mix of impersonal, generalized reasons plus more fairly personal and specific reasons. These results may be due to almost all of the participants believing in the importance of English in their life, including their everyday life, their current academic life,

and their career in the future. They apparently felt that everyone, including themselves, has to have proficiency in English in order to fit in this big global society. However, when they moved past this generalized stage or mode of thinking, personally practical instrumental motivations, finishing their degree and finding a job, stood out as the next-most important reasons for them to learn English well.

#### Implications for Freshman English and English Language Curriculum

Based on the results of this study, some suggestions can be made for developing English language curriculums that better meet Taiwanese university students' perceived needs and wants. In English coursework, one suggestion, for instance, is that listening and speaking skill training in Freshman English could be emphasized. Another is that second, third, and fourth year students could be provided with either elective or required ESP courses, such as medical or nursing English, or whatever specialized-purpose English is relevant to their field. In non-coursework areas, to help and encourage students to improve their listening and speaking abilities in English, one suggestion is that schools could require students of all or certain years in school to go for a specified number of (credit or non-credit) hours to study English in the language lab. Another possibility is for schools to require students of all or certain years in school to attend English Corner for a specified number of (credit or non-credit) hours. Based on the students' responses in this survey, if non-coursework opportunities are optional, many students may not use them.

Even though students naturally look at EFL education and Freshman English from the vantage point of their own perspective and experiences, which have inherent limitations, developing, implementing, and succeeding with Freshman English and other university EFL curriculums does not seem possible without the input and the more or less willing cooperation of the students who take the courses.

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