



## Full Length Research Papers

# Attitude towards Learning English: The case of the UAE Technological High School

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Abstract

This paper outlines the results of a survey that was carried out, to identify Applied Technology High School students' attitudes towards learning the English language and to investigate whether the students' attitude is affected by the teacher's nativity. The study sample consisted of 196 students at the Applied Technology High School (ATHS). A questionnaire was used for data collection. The findings showed that the vast majority of the subjects of the study had positive attitudes towards learning the English Language. In addition, the findings revealed that teacher's nativity (native speaker vs non native speaker of English) did not influence students' positive orientation toward the English language. Finally, some pedagogical implications that would help tap the students' attitudes were presented.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Arab learners, Nativity of teacher, EFL, School setting.

## INTRODUCTION

In the UAE, as well as in the Arabian Gulf countries, English has been the dominant foreign language in the curricula of educational institutions for more than three decades. English has been introduced as a compulsory subject at Grade 1 in all elementary schools, so that the English learning process extends through primary school, secondary schools, and university, covering a total span of 17 to 19 years of learning English. Furthermore, as of September 2008, all schools under the control of the Abu Dhabi Educational Council were instructed to use English as the main teaching language in Math and Science classes. Therefore, English learning has become a de facto requirement through the Abu Dhabi schools and college curricula.

In fact, the learning of English in the UAE has been on the spotlight for years and now occupies the attention of many of its people. The progress of English language education in the UAE in the last decade is probably due largely to the strong and growing conviction of the government that English competence and computer skills are a must for the younger generations in the twenty-first century. Fluency in the English Language, in short, is the key to success in life. As a result, English is recognized as the central subject at the Applied Technology High Schools (ATHS) as almost all subjects are taught in English. The ATHS recruits both native speakers of English teachers (NESTs) and nonnative

speakers of English teachers (NNESTs) to teach English and offers intensive courses to enhance students' proficiency in it.

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), the 'attitude' of the students towards learning English language has got a queen position and different studies have been conducted to investigate the role of attitudes on students' attainments. In his article "Honey catches flies more than Ginger: Enhancing Arab students towards learning English" Al Noursi (2012) maintains that the type of students' attitudes towards the target language and the teacher is a vital criteria in determining students' success and/or failure in learning a foreign language. In a different context, Karahan (2007:84) avers, "Positive language attitudes let learner have positive orientation towards learning English". In the same token, Shah (1999) studied certain characteristics of low-achievers, and found that lack of a positive attitude contributed to the students' low achievement.

## Definition of Attitude

While (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993:1) defines attitude as: "A psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor", it is important to state that for this research attitude is

operationally defined as the students' perceptions, understandings, beliefs or experiences of learning English as a foreign language as assessed by a specially designed questionnaire.

### **The Importance of Studying Attitudes**

Studying language attitudes benefits all stakeholders in different ways. Firstly, an investigation into students' attitudes is an effective method by which language teachers, education planners, syllabus designers and researchers can obtain greater understanding into the language learning /teaching process. Secondly, students have different needs, preferences, beliefs, learning styles, and educational backgrounds, and that imposition of change upon these factors can lead to negative reactions. Thirdly, learners have views on the learning process and can articulate them. Lastly, studies on attitudes that are conducted on the UAE students towards English learning, in the researcher's view, is limited.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the value attached to the English language in the UAE and all the initiatives that Ministry of Education and Educational Councils in the different Emirates have taken, poor performance in English in the UAE schools have been reported in multiple occasions (Al-Sulaiti, 1993; Musa, 1985; Suliman, 2006). A primary cause for the UAE students' attainment in English is believed to be related to the learners' negative attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language.

In this research study, students' attitudes in the UAE Applied Technical High School towards learning English as a foreign language have been addressed. The purpose of the study is also to investigate whether the nativity of the teacher affects their students' attitude towards learning English. Specifically the study aims at answering the following two questions:

- What is the type of attitude that Applied Technology High School students hold towards learning the English language as a foreign language?
- What is the effect of non-native English speaking teachers in comparison with the native English-speaking teachers on students' attitudes towards learning English in the UAE?

### **Review of Literature**

Many studies have been conducted to explore the nature of students' attitudes towards learning foreign language in the UAE and in other different countries all over the world. For example, Musa (1985) investigated the EFL

students' attitude toward studying English in the United Arab Emirates using a five-point scale questionnaire. The findings underline that students had positive attitudes and extreme eagerness towards learning English; they valued English language efficiency in the daily life. In another contribution, Al Bassam (1987) concludes that the achievement in the English language significantly correlated with the students' attitude, motivation and satisfaction with the curriculum.

Besides Musa, Suliman (2006) studied the students' attitudes towards and motivation for learning English in the UAE state secondary school. The findings reveal that the UAE students had a higher degree of instrumental motivation and that students had unfavorable attitudes towards learning certain areas of the language. Contrary to other findings of other studies (1992, Keblawi 2005) difficulties with the target language aspects such as vocabulary, spelling and structures were found to be in the first place to demotivate learners in the UAE. Interestingly, the study also reveals that there were disagreement and uncertainty in viewing learning English as a means to value British/American arts and literature. Regarding teacher's role, 30 % of the respondents referred to teacher's personality as de-motivator and a similar picture revealed in students' interviews.

While the findings of the previous studies and many others (Vijchulata and Lee (1985) in Malaysia, Benson (1991) in Japan, Mahboob's (2001) and Moussu (2002) in the USA, Arani (2004) in Iran, and Karahan (2007) in Turkey show positive attitudes towards English language and its learning, the findings of Momani (2009) shows that the Jordanian High School students had neutral positive attitudes toward learning English. Also, there was a strong correlation between the students' attitudes toward learning English and their performance in reading comprehension. However, Zainol Abidin, Mohammadi and Alzwar (2012) investigated Libyan secondary school students' attitudes towards learning English and conclude that the participants showed negative attitudes towards learning English. Same finding is echoed in Lasagarbaster (2007) who studied students' attitudes in the European context and maintains that students' attitudes toward English were not so "positive" in Europe mainly in Spain.

In terms of the teacher's role in building students' attitudes towards learning English, Mallalah (2000) reports that Kuwaiti students had more favorable attitudes toward NESTs than the NNESTs. This implies those students' attitudes towards learning English is boosted when the teacher is NEST. Mahboob's (2001) qualitative study also explores the perceptions of 32 English students at a U.S. university, reveals that students perceived distinct strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs, and did not express a clear overall preference. In the same vein, participants in Moussu's (2006) study which examined the perceptions of university ESL students in the U.S. expressed generally

positive attitudes toward NNEST teachers at the beginning of the semester (although Korean and Chinese students were more negative than others), and by end of semester student opinions were even more positive. As was the case with the students in Mahboob's (2001) study, Cheung (2007) examined both student and teacher views in Hong Kong; both groups saw NNEST and NNEST teachers as possessing different strengths and did not show any preferences to a group over the other. The Lasagabaster, and Huguet's (2007) language attitudinal studies also divulged that foreign language has been mainly valued neither positively nor negatively, but attitudes were neutral in most cases. In a more recent study, Hertel, et al (2009) investigated students' attitudes toward native and nonnative speaking instructors of Spanish. Results indicate that students perceive native speaking instructors to possess advantages over nonnative speaking instructors with regard to pronunciation and culture, but not with regard to the teaching of grammar or vocabulary. Proficiency level and the native language of a participant's current instructor also influenced opinions.

It is a truism that positive attitude towards foreign language learning is an essential factor for enhancing learners' linguistic performance and increasing their engagement in language acquisition. Studies reviewed show that although the dominant attitude towards English is positive, a range of different types of attitudes has also been reported in a good number of studies.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted at the Applied Technology High School in the UAE because a mixture of native and nonnative English language teachers and the researcher himself work there.

The participants were the students at the Applied Technology High School in the academic year 2010/2011. The 196 participating students were in their second year (grade 10) at the school and have been taught by both NNESTs and NNESTs for two years.

Given the level of the subjects in English language, the instrument used a close-ended questionnaire with specific statements to rate on a Likert scale was employed. A semi-structured interview was intended at first, but due to time constraints and administrative instruction, it was not possible to carry it out.

The questionnaire was piloted on a group of 16 students in order to test its clarity and to see if it would produce the required responses. It was also given to a jury of experts for feedback. Based on the jury report, some of the items were modified and others were omitted. In its final version, the questionnaire contains forty items that were thought to measure the participants' attitude towards learning English. The attitudes questionnaire was applied on a sample from the population equivalent to the participants of the study;

Cronbach Alpha coefficient was calculated and found to be 0.886.

## Measuring Students' Attitudes Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains 40 items, it adopted a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5= strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree. In order to determine the kind of attitudes of the students towards learning English, the rating for all the items were summed. The maximum mark was 200 and the minimum mark was 40. Based on this range, the participants' results were divided into three levels to determine the kinds of attitudes they hold towards learning English. The results are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, a score between 40 and 94 indicated a negative attitude; a score between 95 and 149 indicated a moderate attitude while a score of between 150 and 200 was considered positive.

## Data Collection

The participating students responded to the items of the questionnaire at the end of term2 of the academic year 2010/2011. The researcher himself collected the data. By attending personally, the researcher could answer students' questions and explain any items that students had doubts about. Students were assured that the purpose of the study was to improve language teaching and learning in the school. They were encouraged to answer all questions as honestly and accurately as possible. Also, they were told that all answers would be anonymous and totally confidential. Students took about 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Subsequent statistical analyses were performed using SPSS. In order to answer the second question of the study, the researcher grouped the completed questionnaire into groups according to the nativity of the teachers (NEST vs NNEST).

## Statistical Analysis of the Data

The following statistical analyses were applied:

1. Descriptive statistics include mean scores and standard deviations were used to measure the attitudes of the respondents.
2. Inferential statistics such as (t-test) for two dependent samples was utilized in order to compare students' attitudes in both groups (NNESTs Vs NNESTs).

The responses from all participants were entered and saved in analysis program. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each question using Likert-scale formats, by each item and overall. The significance level was set at 0.05, and t-test for two independent groups determined how much of the variations within the means could be attributed to different variables.

**Table 1.** Criteria in Determining the Type of Attitudes of ATHS Students Towards Learning English in General

Score Range	Type of Attitude
40-94	Negative
95- 149	Moderate
150-200	Positive

**Table 2.** Attitude of the Subjects towards Learning English

Attitude	Unfavorable	%	Moderate	%	Favorable	%	TOTAL	%
No. and Percentage	0	0%	101	51.53%	95	48.47%	196	100%

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Knowing the importance of English and the importance of attitude to language learning, this study was conducted to explore students' attitudes towards learning English, and to investigate the effect of teacher's nativity on their students' attitude. Based on the definition of attitude towards English in general as mentioned earlier, the results indicated that students generally have positive thoughts and emotions towards learning English language and the EFL teachers.

This sub section presents the results and the findings of the study related to its questions

### Results Related to Question 1

What is the type of attitude that the Applied Technology High School students hold towards learning the English language?

In order to investigate the type of attitude students at ATHS have towards learning English, they were asked to respond to a 40-item questionnaire. Table 2 shows the number and the percentages representing all subjects' responses on the three kinds of attitudes.

Results on students' attitudes towards learning English reveal that almost half of the subjects (48.47%) had positive attitudes towards learning English. Further, the remaining 51.53% had moderate attitudes toward learning English. Interestingly, the study also found out that no student had negative attitude towards learning English.

This positive attitude towards learning English may be best explained by the fact that students at the ATHS are aware that learning English language is crucial for academic and career life; they recognize that high level of

proficiency in English is the key for success in life. Almost 75% of the subjects strongly disagreed with the statement "I don't think that I need English in my future job." And 21% responded, "Disagree", giving a combined total of 91 % of the subjects producing a favorable attitude towards learning English and valuing its role in career future success. The results clearly indicate that the students felt the need for English as a school subject or at least accepted the English requirements at the school.

In addition, due to the significant position that English language has in the country and all over the world, students hold positive attitudes and good level of motivation towards learning English. As such, the subjects of the study reflected their willingness and motivation in learning English on their responses to the questionnaire of the study; they responded positively to statements like " I love learning English", "I find learning English interesting" and "I believe I can learn English very well". They also responded negatively to statements like: "Learning English is a waste of time.", "I find learning English language boring", and "I don't like to speak English in class". Then it can be easily concluded that there does exist a predominately positive attitude among the students at ATHS toward learning English as a second language. A probable cause for ATHS students' positive attitude lies in the nature of the ATHS education system, which uses English as a medium of instruction, and as a result, requires students to develop a degree of proficiency in that language.

This finding is to some extent in consistent with the findings of Musa (1985) who maintained that EFL students' attitude towards studying English in the United Arab Emirates was very positive as 75% of the secondary male students involved in the study stated that they like learning English. In Musa's (1985) study and this study,

**Table 3.** t-test Results of the Students' Attitudes towards Learning English

Source	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	DF	t-value	Sig
Native	103	145.28	17.61	1.74	194	-1.612	.923
Non native	93	149.31	17.33	1.80			

**Table 4.** Number of responses and percentage in each type of attitude as per nativity groups

Group	Unfavorable	%	Moderate	%	Favorable	%	TOTAL	%
N	0	0%	59	30.10%	44	22.45%	103	53%
NN	0	0%	42	21.43%	51	26.02%	93	47%
TOTAL	0	0%	101	51.53%	95	48.47%	196	100%

students showed high interest in learning English as they are aware of its significance as a global means of communication. This implies that teachers, yet very important to enforce the students' attitudes and motivations, are not key factor in compositing the preliminary attitudes towards studying English. Similar findings were echoed in many other studies in the region (Al Bassam, 1987; Mallalah 2000; and Suliman 2006), and in other parts of the worlds (Arani, 2004, Benson, 1991 and Karahan, 2007). All studies showed a dominant positive attitude and favorability towards learning English.

## Question 2

What is the effect of non-native English speaking teachers in comparison with the native English-speaking teachers on students' attitudes towards learning English in the UAE?

In order to answer this question, the subjects of the study were divided into two groups according to their teachers' nativity; their responses were gathered and computed using t-test. Results are exhibited in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that there was no statistically significant difference between the students' attitudes of the group that were taught by NESTs and the attitudes of the group that were taught by NNESTs due to the nativity of the teacher (T- value = -1.612, Sig = .923). The mean score of the native group was 145.28 and the mean score of the non-native group was 149.31. The results exhibited a slight insignificant difference between the attitudes of the students in both groups in favor of the group that were taught by NNESTs.

Based on the findings related to the second question, the nativity of the English teachers was not a causative factor in building students attitudes towards learning

English. Only 8.5% of students agreed to the statement that native English teachers make the best teacher, while 82% showed strong disagreement. The rest 9.5% were not sure. This may best be explained by that teachers' mother tongue of the teachers is believed not to be a crucial factor in building attitudes towards learning English. It is the learning climate that plays a major role in attitude composition; students were aware of the significance of the English only environment that the school strictly implements, their behaviors and their study skills in improving their English.

Table 4 presents the number and the percentage of responses in each type of attitudes in the two groups (NEST vs NNEST)

Table 4 indicates that 22.45% of the subjects in the group that was taught by NESTs showed favorable attitudes, while 26.02% of the subjects in the group that was taught by NNESTs showed positive and favorable attitudes towards learning English. 30.10% of the former group showed moderate attitude, while 21.43% of the latter group showed moderate attitude toward learning English. To present a more clearly picture of the results in table 2 above, Figure 1 below is presented. It reveals that the subjects' attitude towards English in and learning English are at moderate level.

The Figure shows the students in the Native group showed more favorable attitude than that of the Non Native group, whereas the Non Native group showed more moderate attitude that that of the Native group.

However, the results of this study indicate inconsistency with those of Mallalah's (2004) study in regards with the attitudes towards native English speaking EFL teachers (NESTs). Mallalah maintains that the subjects who were Kuwaiti high school students in his study had strong favorable attitudes towards NESTs and viewed them as honest, hard workers, efficient, cheerful,

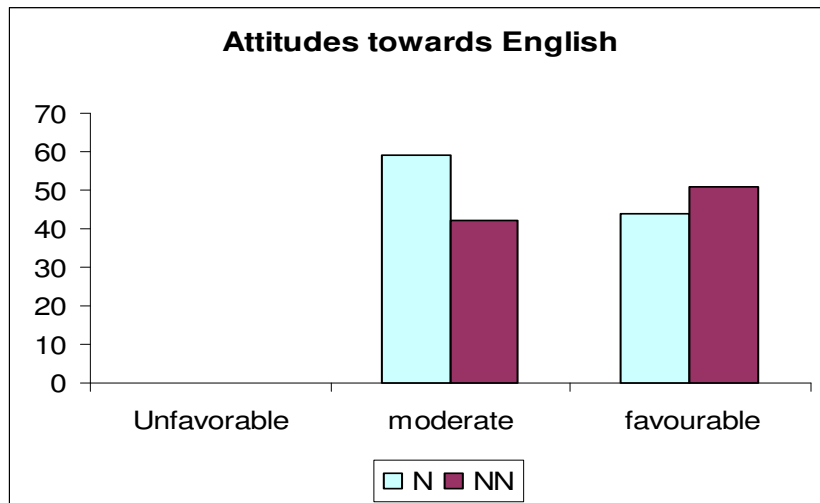


Figure 1. Attitudes towards learning English per group

democratic, kind, friendly, intelligent, well-mannered, polite and humorous. A possible explanation for such a strong positive-ness attitude may be attributed to the role of the Americans and other western people in liberating Kuwait; in the same vein, many people all over the world view the western products as the most reliable and trusted goods. This kind of perception may lead to the positive attitude not only towards products but also towards people from these countries in all walks of life, not only in education or teaching English field.

A close in depth look at Mallalah' study reveals that the characteristics mentioned in the study are not exclusive to the NESTs, and they are considered as personal rather than professional credentials. Any teacher could be honest, cheerful, friendly, humorous ...etc, in other words, such features attributed to the NESTs are within the reach of the NNESTs, provided that they are given ample training, profound insights into language learning and intense exposure to language. However, the strong attitude towards NESTs may be attributed to the notion that that they are tolerant with students mistakes, that they do not give many quizzes and a plenty of homework, and that they are casual in giving their lessons (Arva and Medges, 2000). Thus, the difference of attitude is caused by the teaching behaviors rather than the teachers' native ship or nationality; this finding is reflected in Table 5 in this study. The mean scores of students' attitudes in the 6 sections taught by NESTs differ tremendously in spite of the fact that all teachers are native speakers of English; the same is true for the other set of sections that were taught by non-native English speaker (Native Arabic speakers). It is probable that teachers in both groups, who used authentic English, adopted different techniques and methods, were aware of the emotional and psychological growth of the learners, and had good contact and rapport

with the learners have succeeded in composing positive attitude towards learning English.

To investigate the attitudes within the groups, Table 5 presents the means scores and standard deviation of each subgroup in the study. Figure 2 below presents more clearly Table 5 above

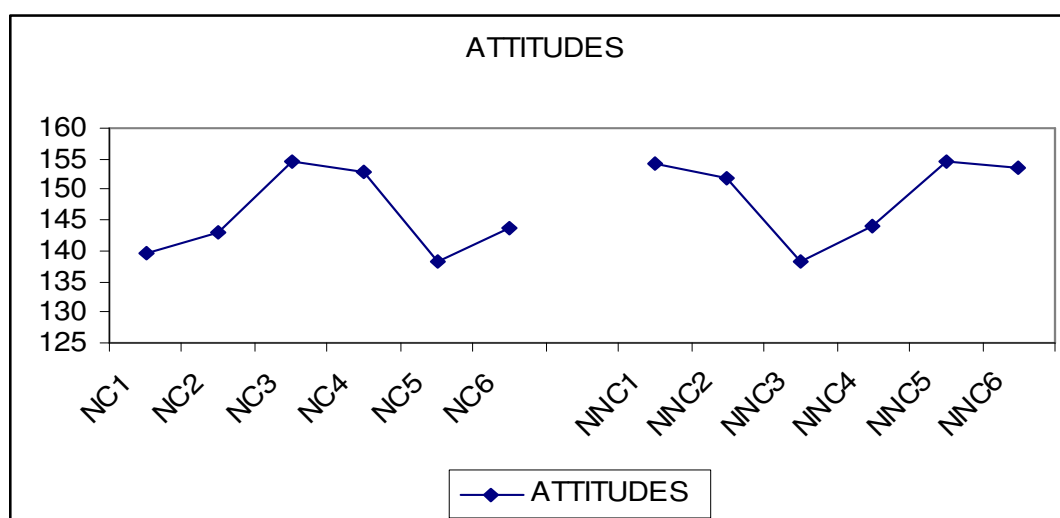
Obviously, students' attitudes vary within the same group as the mean scores of the subgroups in each main group (NESTs vs NNESTs) differ considerably. This supports the argument that teachers' behavior and not nativity what determines students' attitudes towards learning English. EFL students want a teacher who can motivate them to speak more and more in the classroom and teach them how to use language outside the classroom. They want their teacher to be good at English and capable of correcting their mistakes without hurting their ego or without accusing them of not having knowledge of English. They want their teacher to create an informal environment in the class where they can learn with fun.

## CONCLUSION

The current study had been conducted to identify the AHS students' attitudes toward learning English language and whether the type of the attitude is affected by the teacher's nativity. The findings indicated that the students hold positive significant attitudes toward learning English language and that the type and the degree of attitude are not affected by the teacher's nativity, but by the teaching methods and the learning atmosphere that the teacher creates for his /her students. Because attitudes can be modified by experience, and effective language teaching strategies can encourage students to be more positive towards the language they are learning.

**Table 5.** Means, Numbers and Standard Deviation of Students' Attitudes in all subgroups

Group	Mean	No.	Std. Deviation
NC1	139.71	17	17.27
NC2	143.06	16	19.69
NC3	154.63	16	16.77
NC4	152.72	18	13.50
NC5	138.24	17	15.50
NC6	143.53	19	18.24
<b>Sum</b>	<b>145.31</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>16.83</b>
NNC1	154.25	16	17.41
NNC2	151.94	17	15.02
NNC3	138.20	15	15.64
NNC4	144.00	17	19.19
NNC5	154.53	15	17.84
NNC6	153.54	13	13.56
<b>Sum</b>	<b>149.41</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>16.44</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>147.19</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>17.55</b>

**Figure 2.** Means Scores of Students' Attitudes in all subgroups

Therefore, the role of the teacher in this regard is immense and can influence students' ability to learn a second language by creating a positive attitude towards the target language, English. Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), then, should recognize that all students possess positive and negative attitudes in varying degrees, and that the negative ones can be changed by thoughtful instructional methods.

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## Appendix A: Attitude Questionnaire

Name: ..... Class: .....

Dear students,

This questionnaire has been designed to help you identify your attitudes towards learning English. Read each statement and mark each statement on a scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Please answer the following questions about yourself and your English class by filling the numbers that correspond to your feelings, according to the following scale:

1: *Strongly Disagree*   2: *Disagree*   3: *Not sure*   4: *Agree*   5: *Strongly Agree*

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	I love learning English	①	②	③	④	⑤
2	Learning English is important	①	②	③	④	⑤
3	I prefer to focus on other subjects rather than English	①	②	③	④	⑤
4	I don't think that I need English in my future job	①	②	③	④	⑤
5	I would like to spend as much time as possible to study English	①	②	③	④	⑤
6	Learning English is a waste of time.	①	②	③	④	⑤
7	I am not going to use English in the future	①	②	③	④	⑤
8	English should be known since it is an international Language.	①	②	③	④	⑤
9	I think the English language is necessary for communicating with other people.	①	②	③	④	⑤
10	I find learning English language very difficult to learn	①	②	③	④	⑤
11	I find learning English interesting	①	②	③	④	⑤
12	I find learning the English language boring	①	②	③	④	⑤
13	I think I'm a pretty good language learner.	①	②	③	④	⑤
14	I don't have any idea about how to go about learning a language.	①	②	③	④	⑤
15	I am good at comprehending this language.	①	②	③	④	⑤
16	I am good at producing this language.	①	②	③	④	⑤
17	I think I am improving my English knowledge day by day.	①	②	③	④	⑤
18	I feel myself at ease while speaking in the classroom.	①	②	③	④	⑤
19	I always practice English whenever there is a chance.	①	②	③	④	⑤
20	I learn English to pass the exams	①	②	③	④	⑤
21	I believe I can learn English very well.	①	②	③	④	⑤
22.	I do my best to learn English because it has many advantages over other languages.	①	②	③	④	⑤
23	Only English is used in the class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
24	I feel confident about my English ability.	①	②	③	④	⑤
25	I learn a lot in English class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
26	I don't like to speak English in class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
27	Students listen to each other's answers and opinions.	①	②	③	④	⑤
28	The use of classroom time is effective.	①	②	③	④	⑤
29	I receive the grades that I deserve.	①	②	③	④	⑤

**Appendix A continue**

30	I'm afraid people will laugh at me if I don't say things right.
31	Materials and activities are appropriate and interesting.
32	My English teacher is able to simplify difficult material so I can understand it
33	My English teacher teaches in a manner that helps me learn
34	Native English speakers make the best English teachers
35	My English teacher is a good example of the ideal English speaker
36	I understand what my English teacher is saying without a problem
37	The pronunciation of my English teacher is good
38	I understand my English teacher's pronunciation easily
39	English teachers should all speak with a perfect American accent.
40	I don't care where my teacher is from, as long as he/she is a good teacher for me.