

How to Cite:

Jameel, A. S. (2022). Iraqi post-graduate students' tendency towards learning English. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S6), 386–395.

<https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS6.9902>

Iraqi post-graduate students' tendency towards learning English

Ali Sabah Jameel

Department of English, College of Arts, University Of Anbar, Iraq-Anbar – Ramadi

*Corresponding author email: alisabah40@uoanbar.edu.iq

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3972-1406>

Abstract---In Iraq, students learn English as a foreign language, in school, students learn English for an hour every week, and at university, undergraduate and post-graduate students learn English for two hours per week (for fifteen weeks), that means they are exposed to the language for 30 hours (two semesters). The aim of this study was to investigate postgraduate students' tendency to learn English as a foreign language. The participants were 106 students from six colleges under the University of Anbar, who were enrolled in master's programs during the academic year 2021–2022. A questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. As a statistical means, a percentage ratio was used to analyze the data. The findings of the study revealed that postgraduate students did not have a positive tendency or willingness to learn English and did not put in any effort to learn the language. Even in a compulsory English course, they faced many difficulties due to the teaching methods of professors, and the English textbook, 'Headway Academic Skills,' was found to be highly generic.

Keywords---post-graduate students, tendency, university of Anbar.

Introduction

In Iraq, the first and the official language is Arabic, and the foreign language that Iraqi students (in schools and universities) learn is English. In addition to this, some schools and universities teach French, but in a very limited capacity. The researcher, while teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Iraq and in some Arab countries, noticed that the strategies, programs, techniques, and methods of teaching EFL have been investigated in detail across the world, but there is a shortage concerning the same in Iraqi literature. While the COVID-19 pandemic forced all educational institutions worldwide to shift from face-to-face education to online platforms, students have had to use certain learning styles and strategies for the first time, especially to learn English.

Investigating students' attitudes, perspectives, trends, and tendency or willingness to learn EFL shed light on their needs, obstacles, and difficulties, and on the skills that they want to develop. In addition, the process provides a clear picture to all teachers so that they can tailor lesson plans that are in line with students' academic levels and needs. On reviewing the literature investigating Iraqi schools and undergraduate students' English language competencies and attitudes towards learning the language in Iraq [1–6], the researcher found that students showed positive attitudes towards learning it. However, Iraqi students' English language competence is not sufficiently good compared to international standards. The present study is an attempt to reveal this problem and the factors that influence students' tendency towards learning English. This study aims to reveal the extent to which postgraduate students in non-English specialist departments in Iraqi universities tend to learn EFL.

Research Question

The researcher sets the following question: 'To what extent do the Iraqi postgraduate students (from non-English specialist departments) have tendency of learning English language at the university level?'

Research Significance

The outcomes of the study reveal the actual inclination to learn EFL among students enrolled in the master's program and the factors influencing their low language performance. University professors, curriculum designers, and educational planners could take into consideration the outcome of this study while planning and designing suitable curricula to encourage English-learning among postgraduate students at Iraqi universities.

Background

To achieve the goal of teaching EFL in Iraqi educational institutions, it is important to know students' pre-existing language competency and background. Despite learning English for almost 16 years, postgraduate students at Iraqi non-English specialist departments consider it a heavy course. As English is compulsory for all university students (undergraduate and postgraduate), language anxiety is an important factor when it comes to learning the subject. The course textbooks are fixed, and the English language instructors in Iraqi universities do not specify additional materials for the English course. It is important to investigate students' tendency and willingness to learn English and reveal the reasons behind low language proficiency. This study attempts to determine the factors behind poor English language proficiency among Iraqi university students, whether it is due to community-, language-, or education-related reasons.

Based on the notion that motivation is the major factor that encourages individuals to learn a foreign language, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert were the first scholars to conduct a study (in 1959) that investigated learners' motivation and attitudes towards second-language learning. They concluded that motivation was an important cause of variability in learning second and foreign

languages and influenced success in learning the language. Learning a foreign language depends on the learner's aptitude and ability. To learn a language, one needs to master grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, structure, language functions, and so on. The desire to learn a foreign language differs between individuals, and within educational institutions, students usually have no choice in the learning material. Therefore, the teacher and the curriculum play an important role in motivating students to learn a foreign language (Ochsenfahrt, 2012).

Students' motivation and aptitude, on the one hand, and instructors' professional and personal traits, on the other, have traditionally been regarded as factors in the efficiency of foreign language acquisition. According to educational psychologists and language acquisition specialists, learners' personal characteristics and attitudes towards learning languages and students' perceptions of themselves in relation to their educational activities, resilience, and motivation all have an impact on their performance (Hromova, 2019). English language teachers are found to be a major source of motivation (Stipek, 1998). Hromova (2019) also found that self-development, opportunities, and necessity are additional factors that motivate students to learn English.

In the Arab context, learning English is a challenging task that requires a very strong social reason, as it involves money, time, and effort. In Arab countries, three major factors motivate English learning: affect (taking care of students' emotion), goal orientation (using English to communicate), and expectancy. These factors are associated with the learners' gender, language proficiency, and age (Rebecca, 1996). In addition, learning English is based on learning strategies and student preferences. Students with high anxiety tend to avoid learning foreign languages. There is a difference between students' ability to learn a language and their motivation to learn a language. Students' ability refers to what they can do, while motivation indicates what they will do. If variables that motivate a student to learn the English language do not exist, then motivation would be low, resulting in a lower tendency to learn English (Rebecca, 1996).

Further, differences between the learner's first language system and the target language system may also hinder individuals from learning a foreign language. A learner with low motivation and few reasons to learn a language ponders over the tasks involved in language learning such as deduction, reading and listening comprehension, memorizing vocabulary, and writing, which rely on grammar, note taking, and so on, all of which influence their decision to learn the language. Thus, there is no doubt that motivation plays a major role in learning a foreign language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995). Learning foreign language strategies is a tool that helps language learners develop their language competence, but using such strategies requires a base. A base involves having the reason(s), willingness, motivation, and attitude towards learning a foreign language. In the absence of these variables, students' tendency to learn foreign languages is very low (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995).

Language anxiety is a psychological factor that exists before and during the learning process. In its presence, learners do not have the tendency to learn the language as anxiety results in poor performance, reducing students' success

rates. Thus, the focus again is on learners' attitudes and motivation in enhancing their language performance (Rahman, 2016). Exposure to language, family support, previous linguistic competence (linguistic background), English language teaching strategies, age, learner's personality, and the learner's first language influence their tendency to learn English (Khasinah, 2014). Reyes (2019) also found that English language teachers were an important factor in students' attitudes towards learning English. Jameel (2022) found that teaching English in Iraq shows that the English language is a challenge for Iraqi EFL university students, as it requires a good background knowledge of the English language system.

Educational psychologists focus on linguistic challenges as factors that may hinder foreign language learning. Students who lack self-confidence have a low tendency to learn a foreign language, as they face difficulties in expressing themselves, and feel hesitant, tentative, and fearful of committing mistakes. Furthermore, the uphill task of learning vocabulary makes it difficult for them to attempt learning English (Ying, et al., 2021). Students' affective domain, and psychological and emotional factors may also hinder them from learning English if they do not receive enough support from the head of the educational institution. In addition, students' interest in learning the language, their needs and the purpose behind it are also factors that influence the learning process (Valizadeh, 2021).

Literature Review

The following are the most relevant studies investigating students' tendency, attitudes, and willingness to learn English. Rahimi et al. (2020) discussed challenges such as students' emotions, learners' gestures, creativity in language learning, and the use of authentic context to develop intercultural communicative competence in non-specialist departments. Hynes (2020) stated that English language learners face difficulty in learning foreign content, which may be presented in English. One of the difficulties is due to them being wired to comprehend only their first language. Furthermore, students' social factors such as low family income and lack of literacy skills and formal education should also be considered.

Ahmed et al. (2021) investigated Iraqi students' attitudes towards learning English in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The participants were 214 first- and second-year students from the Department of English, in some private universities in Kurdistan region, North of Iraq. The collected data revealed that students had negative attitudes towards learning English in terms of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. Pham and Nguyen (2021) investigated students' attitudes towards learning English language in the Vietnamese context. The participants were 89 undergraduate students of three different specializations: office administration, tourism, and medical studies. A questionnaire consisting of 34 items was used to collect the data. The results revealed that on an average, there was a positive attitude towards learning English despite lack of similarity among the three majors.

Burgos and Molina (2020) investigated students' attitudes towards learning EFL through a questionnaire survey of 131 university students in Chile. The results revealed that university students had a positive attitude towards learning EFL. Getie [21] investigated the factors affecting students' attitudes through a questionnaire survey and interview of 103 Grade 10 students in Debreworkos in Ethiopia. The results of the study indicated that students' attitudes towards learning EFL were positive. Mutar (2019) investigated Iraqi students' attitudes towards learning English. The questionnaire survey of 400 undergraduates at a non-major English university, that used English as a medium of instruction, revealed that students had positive attitudes towards learning English. Pathan et al. (2021) examined language learning demotivation with respect to English among 215 undergraduate students from two public universities in Pakistan and found that classroom atmosphere and characteristics, instructional materials, lack of interest in language learning, long experiences of failure in English exams, and personality were demotivating factors to learning EFL.

Materials and Methods

Study Participants

The participants of this study were 106 (49 female and 57 male) postgraduate students enrolled in master's programs at the University of Anbar (in the Anbar Province in the west of Iraq) in non-English specialist departments. Their course content was mainly in the Arabic language. The exceptions were the students enrolled in the master's programs of the Faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy, and some departments of the Faculty of Science, who studied all subjects in (British) English. The study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The questionnaire was submitted to 118 students, but only 106 students responded, which was considered the total number of participants. The researcher did not get students' informed consent since the students have participated as volunteers. It is not an obligation to all students. The students received the questionnaire and read the instructions after they were sure that all the information will be private and will be used only for the sake of the research, they filled the items and submitted their replies. The study was approved by the appropriate ethics committee [details blinded for peer review].

Variables

The independent variable was English language learning. The dependent variable was the postgraduate students' tendency towards learning the language.

Instruments

Data was collected using a questionnaire with 21 items, which was distributed to a pilot sample consisting of 37 postgraduate students to ensure the suitability of the items, reveal their ambiguity, measure their discriminatory power, and evaluate their clarity. The overall reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which was found to be 0.82 at significance level ($\alpha=0.05$) for this study.

Procedures

To answer the research question of this study, the following procedures were conducted:

- The global, standard English as a Second Language Program (ESLP) 82 Questionnaire: Self-Assessment of English Writing Skills and Use of Writing Strategies was used. The 'General Learning Strategies' dimension was used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire was taken from the website of Marquette University (<https://www.marquette.edu/oie/documents/ESLP82QuestionnaireFa08.pdf>)
- The items were translated into Arabic for the students' ease.
- They were general/polar questions with 'yes' or 'no' answers.
- The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms. The items were then analyzed using frequencies and percentages calculated by Google Forms' statistic system.

Results and Discussion

To answer the study question 'to what extent do Iraqi postgraduate students (at non-English specialist departments) tend to learn English at the university level?' frequencies and percentages were used. Table 1 presents the results of the data analysis.

Table 1
Frequencies and Percentages of Students' Responses

Items	F* 'Yes'	%*	F* 'No'	P*
I try to find as many ways as I can to use English.	16	15.10	90	84.90
I look for opportunities to read English as much as possible.	7	6.60	99	93.40
I look for opportunities to listen to English as much as possible.	9	8.49	97	91.51
I look for opportunities to speak English as much as possible.	3	2.83	103	97.17
I think about my progress in learning English.	53	50	53	50
I try to find out how to become a better learner of English.	39	36.79	67	63.21
I notice my mistakes in using English and use that information to do better.	11	10.37	95	89.62
I plan my schedule so that I have enough time to study and improve my English.	26	24.53	80	75.47
I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	14	13.21	92	86.79
I give myself a reward when I do well in English.	98	92.46	8	7.54
I try to relax whenever I feel scared of using English.	104	98.11	2	1.89
I encourage myself to use English even when I am scared of making mistakes.	32	30.19	74	69.81

I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	105	99.05	1	0.95
I write down my feelings about learning English in a diary.	0	0.00	106	100.0
I talk to someone else about how I feel about learning English.	101	95.28	5	4.72
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the person to slow down or say it again.	72	67.92	34	32.08
I ask English speakers to correct me when I speak.	2	1.88	104	98.12
I practice English with other students.	4	3.77	102	96.23
I ask for help from English speakers.	1	0.95	105	99.05
I ask questions in English.	11	10.38	95	89.62
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	5	4.72	101	95.28

Note: F* = Frequency; %* = Percentage

The indication that postgraduate students do not have positive tendency to learn English is reflected by the high percentage of negative responses to the items of the questionnaire. The percentages of the highest five negative responses to the questionnaire items were as follows: 100%, 99.05%, 98.12%, 97.17%, and 96.23%, respectively. The percentages of the five positive responses to the questionnaire items were as follows: 99.05%, 98.11%, 95.28%, 92.46%, and 67.92%, respectively. The percentage of the items that got answered 'No' was 68%, while the percentage of 'Yes' was 32%.

The results reveal that postgraduate students with non-major English (the students who study all the subjects in Arabic language) had a very low tendency to learn English. The items to which the students responded positively did not, in fact, reflect their tendency to learn English; for instance, the item 'I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English,' which 99.05% of students agreed with. This, along with the item 'I try to relax whenever I am afraid of using English,' which 98.11% of students agreed with, does not reflect positive tendency toward learning English; rather, it reflects a case of anxiety. The item represents students' negative feelings towards learning English before the beginning of the course, as does the item 'I talk to someone else about how I feel about learning English,' which 95.28% of students agreed with. It is implied that when a student talks to someone regarding their feelings about learning the English language, they complain or express feelings of dissatisfaction.

Further, 100% of students responded negatively to the item 'I write down my feelings about learning English in a diary.' This means that students do not write in English, and they are not interested in doing so, either. The same is true for 99.05% of the students who showed no tendency to speak in English, as reflected in their reply to the item 'I ask for help from English speakers.' Further, 98.12% of students did not tend to ask for a native speaker's feedback. The items that reflected students' low tendency to learn English were 'I have clear goals for improving my English skills,' 'I try to find as many ways as I can to use English,' 'I look for opportunities to read English as much as possible,' and 'I notice my mistakes in using English and use that information to do better,' and 86.79%,

84.90%, 93.40%, and 89.62 of students replied with 'No' to each item, respectively.

In general, the results show that most postgraduate students have a very low tendency to learn English. Responses to the item 'I think about my progress in learning English,' to which 50% of students agreed and 50% disagreed, suggest that the students' negative tendency towards learning English is due to the factors influencing their tendency to learn English. These factors could include bad experience of learning English at school, or the difficulty level of the English language textbooks. Also, the language course instructor's characteristics, teaching style, classroom management, and behaviors have great influence on students' tendency to learn the language. In addition, the postgraduate students learn all the subjects in Arabic, the first language, and English language is a minor course that credits one hour a week.

The results of the study are in line with those of Ahmed et al. (2021) and Pathan et al. (2021), Al-Khayyat (2021), Mekael & Yavuz (2021), Rodhan (2021), and Anber and Jameel (2020). The outcomes of these studies found that students have low attitudes, perspectives and motivation to learn English language. However, they contrast with the results of Pham and Nguyen (2021), Burgos and Molina (2020), Getie (2020), and Mutar (2019). These studies found that students have positive attitudes, perspectives, and willingness to learn English language.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be inferred that Iraqi postgraduate students pursuing majors through a non-English medium of instruction do not have a positive tendency to learn English as a foreign language. This negative tendency to learn the language is due to several factors such as educational, personal, social, institutional, and material (curriculum), among others. The lack of opportunities to sufficiently read, hear and speak English, to think about the progress in learning, and to practice it with other students hinders the process. In addition, students do not set goals to improve their English skills; they do not encourage themselves to use the language and feel nervous when they study or use it. It can be inferred that some of the major challenges in learning English are lack of intent to learn and scheduled plans required to improve the language. Additionally, students whose medium of instruction is Arabic are particularly scared of making mistakes in English.

Based on the outcome of this study, the researcher suggests that English language instructors should take care of the students' emotional and affective domains; in fact, the EFL instructors' encouragement could be a major factor that fosters students' willingness to learn English. Colleges with instruction materials and curriculum in Arabic (first language) should encourage students to learn about the cultures of English-speaking countries, especially Britain since all the Iraqi educational institutions use English textbooks written in British English. Instructors as well as institutions are ultimately responsible for mitigating students' learning anxieties. Therefore, the need for a positive atmosphere that encourages postgraduate students to learn English is essential. Researchers and

scholars are invited to investigate the factors that influence students to learn English in Iraqi universities.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the language editor.

Data Availability

The dataset for the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Funding Statement

The author declares that the work was completed without financial support from any person or organization.

References

- Ahmed, S. A., Othman, B. J., Gardi, B., Sabir, B. Y., Ismael, N. B., Hamza, P. A., Sorguli, S., Aziz, H. M., Ali, B. J., & Anwar, G. (2021). Students' Attitudes towards Learning English in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 072–087. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.63.11>
- Al-Khayyat, A. S. J. (2021). Investigating Postgraduate Students' Perceptions towards Learning ESP via Google Classrooms Platform. *Journal of Education College Wasit University*, 1(43), 553–564. <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol1.Iss43.2156>
- Anber, M. M., & Jameel, A. S. (2020). Measuring university of anbar EFL Students' awareness of emoji faces in WhatsApp and their implementations. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 47(2), 582–593.
- Burgos, E. G., & Molina, S. S. (2020). University Students' Attitudes Towards EFL: A Case from the South of Chile. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 22(1), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n1.75401>
- Getie, A. S. (2020). Factors Affecting the Attitudes of Students towards Learning English as a Foreign Language. *Cogent Education*, 7(1), 1738184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184>
- Hromova, N. (2019). Students' Perceptions and Motivation for Learning Foreign Languages. *Advanced Education*, 11, 76–83. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.159810>
- Hynes, J. (2020). Teacher perceptions of the challenges of instructing middle school english language learner. Trident University International.
- Jameel, Ali, S. (2022). The Effects of story mapping and hortatory exposition techniques on students' compositions. *Education Research International*

- Volume 2022, Article ID 4300692, 11 pages
<https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/4300692>.
- Khasinah, S. (2014). Factors Influencing Second Language Acquisition. *Englisia*, 1(2), 256–269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/ej.v1i2.187>
- Mekael H. F., & Yavuz, M. A. (2021). Students' Attitudes towards Learning English in the North of Iraq. *Eastern Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literatures*, 1(1), 31–58. <https://qabasjournals.com/index.php/ejlll/article/view/12>
- Mutar, Q. M. (2019). Attitudes of Iraqi Students towards Learning English Language. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 6(2), 425–437. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v6i2.650>
- O'Malley J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1995). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Ochsenfahrt, K. (2012). *Motivation as a factor in second language acquisition*. GRIN Verlag.
- Pathan, Z. H., Ismail, S. A. M. M., & Fatima, I. (2021). English Language Learning Demotivation among Pakistani University Students: Do Resilience and Personality Matter? *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 13(4), 1024–1042. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184>.
- Pham, D. T. T., & Nguyen, T. H. (2021). A Study on Attitude Towards English Language Learning Among Non-English Majored Students at Tra Vinh University. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, 4(2), 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.52296/vje.2020.19>
- Rahimi, F., Bordbar, S., & Asadi, F. (2020). Challenges of Second and Foreign Language Education in a Globalized World Studies. Pawlak Mirosław & Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2018), Springer, ISBN 978-3-319-66974-8. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 9(1), 111–114. http://www.ijsc.net/article_47995_bebccd8fbcdf71e720a2a3520e775fac.pdf
- Rahman, N. A. (2016). *Factors Affecting the Level of English Proficiency: A Case Study among Undergraduate Students of the International Islamic University Malaysia*. Grin Publishing.
- Rebecca, L. (1996). *Language learning motivation: pathways to the new century*. National Foreign Language Resource Center.
- Reyes, A. (2019). *Factors that Influence Basic Level English Language Learning* (Ph.D. dissertation). Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED597657.pdf>
- Rodhan, S. M. (2021). Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the English Language Community and Culture in Motivating them to Learn English. *Journal of the College of Basic Education*, 27(110), 1210–1224. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/201000>
- Stipek, D. (1998). *Motivation to learn: from theory to practice*. Allyn and Bacon, Michigan University.
- Valizadeh, M. (2021). The Challenges Facing English Language Teachers in Turkey. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 12(4), 61–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.12n.4.p.61>
- Ying, Y. H., Siang, W. E. W., & Mohamad, M. (2021). The Challenges of Learning English Skills and the Integration of Social Media and Video Conferencing Tools to Help ESL Learners Coping with the Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review. *Creative Education*, 12(07), 1503–1516. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ce.2021.127115>