

EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS RESEARCH AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Research competence has become an essential component of higher education as it contributes significantly to students' academic achievement, critical thinking, and professional development. Understanding students' attitudes towards research is therefore crucial for fostering research engagement and enhancing educational outcomes. This study aimed to investigate the attitudes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students towards research at a university in Vietnam. A quantitative research design was employed, involving 156 English-major undergraduate students from different academic years. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire focusing on five dimensions of research attitudes: research usefulness, relevance to life, research anxiety, positive research disposition, and perceived research difficulty. Findings revealed that the students generally held a neutral attitude towards research. Among the five dimensions, research usefulness was rated most favorably by the participants, followed by relevance to life, positive research disposition, and research anxiety, whereas research difficulty received the lowest rating. The findings highlight the need for universities to strengthen research instruction, mentorship, and institutional support to cultivate more positive research attitudes.

Keyword: attitudes, research, EFL students, higher education, research usefulness

1. INTRODUCTION

Research, a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to obtain new knowledge and increase understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013), has become an essential component of contemporary higher education, contributing significantly to students' academic success, skills development, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, analyzing, evidence-based decision-making, and professional growth (Kumar, 2019; Nguyen & Marjoribanks, 2021). Accordingly, universities increasingly emphasize inquiry-based learning and innovation, and research competence is now considered a key graduate attribute that supports lifelong learning and employability (Kakupa & Xue, 2019). However, research competence is not developed merely through acquiring research knowledge and skills; affective factors are equally important in this process, one of which strongly influences students' engagement in research is attitude. Attitude refers to an individual's tendency to evaluate an object, activity, or phenomenon positively or negatively (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In educational settings, attitudes influence students' motivation,

participation, persistence, and achievement. Positive attitudes toward research encourage students to engage more actively in research, whereas negative attitudes may lead to avoidance or reduced participation (Kakupa & Xue, 2019).

To gain an insight into students' attitudes toward research, Papanastasiou (2014) proposed the Attitudes Toward Research (ATR) framework, which conceptualizes research attitudes through five dimensions: research usefulness, research anxiety, relevance to life, positive attitudes, and perceived difficulty. Research usefulness focuses on students' perceptions of the benefits of research for academic and career development. Research anxiety relates to feelings of fear, stress, or uncertainty when carrying out research. Relevance to life refers to the extent to which students view research as meaningful and applicable to real-life situations. Positive attitudes toward research activities, whereas perceived difficulty concerns beliefs about the complexity of research tasks. These dimensions provide a comprehensive theoretical ground for understanding how students perceive and respond to research in this study.

Extensive studies on general learners' attitudes towards research have been conducted globally and reported mixed findings. Several studies found generally positive attitudes among students (Firdoos et al., 2023; Kakupa & Xue, 2019; Roxas, 2018; Tran et al., 2023). Moreover, students who perceive research as useful and relevant to their academic and professional goals are more likely to participate actively in research (Le & Huynh, 2024; Papanastasiou, 2014; Tran et al., 2023). In contrast, other studies have identified less favorable attitudes among students, who often perceive research as difficult, stressful, and disconnected from their future careers (Ho, 2026; Papanastasiou, 2014).

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative research design was employed to investigate EFL students' attitudes towards research at a university in Vietnam, as it enables researchers to generate measurable evidence and produce findings grounded in objective, statistically verifiable data (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). A survey questionnaire was therefore considered the most appropriate method.

2.1. Research context and participants

The study was carried out at a university in northern Vietnam, where only senior students are formally taught research methodology. Consequently, the majority of students have not engaged in formal research training. Those who have conducted research projects for their personal interest rather than as part of their curriculum.

The target population of the study was undergraduate English majors recruited from different academic years at a Vietnamese university, including freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, to obtain a broad representation of the student population. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participant selection for a study is based on practical criteria such as geographical proximity, accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate (Dörnyei, 2007), was utilized. As a result, 156 undergraduate students majoring in English were invited to participate in the study voluntarily. The participants comprised 30 males and 136 females, with varying levels of English proficiency and research experience. Most participants reported

having little or no prior experience conducting formal research projects.

2.2. Data collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Papanastasiou's Revised Attitudes Toward Research Scale (2014), which has been widely used in educational research and has demonstrated acceptable validity and reliability across diverse contexts (Kakupa & Xue, 2019; Le & Huynh, 2024; Roxas, 2018). The questionnaire consisted of 32 items grouped into five dimensions: research usefulness (9 items), research anxiety (8 items), relevance to life (4 items), positive attitudes (8 items), and perceived difficulty (3 items). Participants responded to each item using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To facilitate comprehension and ensure accuracy of responses, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese. The translated version was carefully reviewed by experts to ensure semantic equivalence with the original instrument. The questionnaire was delivered to the students through both online and face-to-face channels for their convenience.

2.5. Data analysis

The collected data were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 for analysis. Prior to statistical analysis, negatively worded items were reverse-coded to ensure consistent interpretation (George & Mallery, 2018). Descriptive statistics, embracing means (M) and standard deviations (SD), were calculated to examine students' overall attitudes and attitudes across the five dimensions. The verbal interpretation adapted from Pimentel (2019) was used to interpret students' attitudes towards research based on a 7-point Likert scale. Mean scores of 1.00–3.57 were classified as negative attitudes, 3.58–4.43 as neutral attitudes, and 4.44–7.00 as positive attitudes. Higher mean scores exhibited more positive attitudes, whereas negative statements were reverse-scored.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings regarding EFL students' attitudes towards research across five dimensions.

3.1. Students' overall attitudes towards research

Overall, the respondents held a neutral attitude towards research (M = 4.360, SD = 0.726). Table 1 indicates that among the five attitude aspects, research usefulness received the highest mean score and was interpreted as positive (M= 5.442, SD= 1.256), followed by relevance to life (M = 4.912, SD= 1.123) and positive attitudes (M= 4.490, SD= 0.856), both of which were slightly positive. Research anxiety was interpreted as neutral (M= 3.583, SD = 0.881), whereas research difficulty received the lowest score and was categorized as slightly negative (M= 3.365, SD= 1.531).

| Dimension | M | SD | Weight |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Research usefulness | 5.442 | 1.256 | Positive |
| Relevance to life | 4.912 | 1.123 | Slightly Positive |
| Positive attitudes | 4.490 | 0.856 | Slightly Positive |
| Research anxiety | 3.583 | 0.881 | Neutral |
| Research difficulty | 3.365 | 1.531 | Slightly Negative |
| Overall | 4.360 | 0.726 | Neutral |

Table 1. Students' Overall Attitudes towards Research

The students' neutral attitude towards research suggests that they appreciated its value while simultaneously experiencing challenges that limited their confidence and participation. This result is consistent with that of Ho (2026), in which multiple university students acknowledged the significance of research, but remained hesitant to participate actively in research-related activities. One underlying rationale is that at many Vietnamese universities, research courses are introduced relatively late in students' academic programs. Consequently, learners may understand the theoretical importance of research without adequate opportunities to develop practical research skills; they thus have little experience conducting research projects (Le & Huynh, 2024). However, this result differs from that of Tran et al. (2023), who reported that Vietnamese undergraduates generally perceived research favorably, yet often lacked sufficient confidence in their research competence due to limited research experience.

3.2. Students' attitudes towards research regarding five dimensions

Of the five dimensions, research usefulness was generally rated most favorably (M= 5.442, SD= 1.256), indicating a positive attitude among students. Particularly, the item "Research is very valuable" received the highest score (M = 5.769, SD = 1.634), followed by "Research is useful for my future career" (M= 5.744, SD= 1.763) and "Knowledge from research is useful for writing" (M= 5.724, SD= 1.597). Despite their overwhelming positive attitude towards research, the respondents exhibited their slight support for the indispensability of research in language learning, the recommendation of research instruction for all students, and the employment of research approaches in their profession, with the mean scores ranging from M= 5.186, SD= 1.684 to M= 5.032, SD= 1.584. This overall finding aligns with those of Le & Huynh (2024) and Tran et al. (2023), in which students viewed the usefulness of the research positively. They perceived research not merely as an academic requirement but also as a useful skill for future employment and academic writing, which, in turn, is more likely to motivate them to engage in scientific activities.

The relevance of research to life was evaluated slightly positively (M= 4.912, SD= 1.123). Students strongly agreed that research-oriented thinking plays an important role in daily life (M = 5.551, SD = 1.612) and that research is used in everyday settings (M= 5.205, SD = 1.645). Also, they showed slightly positive support for the perception that research is relevant to life (M= 4.660, SD= 2.293). However, the application of research thinking to personal life was evaluated neutrally (M= 4.231, SD= 2.190). These findings echoed those of Healey and Jenkins (2009) and Tran et al. (2023), and imply that research instruction should be more closely connected to real-life contexts so that students can gain a deeper insight into the practical role of research in problem-solving, decision-making, and professional development.

Students reported a slightly positive orientation towards research (M= 4.490, SD= 0.856). Specifically, students rated the merits of research most favorably (M= 5.263, SD= 1.631), followed by its pleasantness (M= 5.083, SD= 1.907) and their interest in research (M= 5.051, SD= 1.573). More moderate scores were obtained for careful engagement with research procedures (M = 4.635,

SD = 1.863), liking research (M= 4.622, SD= 1.478), and love for research (M= 4.256, SD= 1.741). However, viewing research as interesting (M = 3.513, SD= 2.117) and enjoyable (M = 3.494, SD = 2.065) received slightly negative evaluations. The students' slightly positive attitudes towards research predispositions align with those reported by Tran et al. (2023) and Roxas (2018). These results suggest that although students acknowledged the research value and demonstrated moderate interest in it, their intrinsic enjoyment and emotional engagement remained limited. Therefore, making research learning more interactive, practice-oriented, and relevant to students' academic interests may enhance their affective engagement.

Regarding research anxiety, students reported a neutral attitude, with an overall mean score of 3.583 (SD = 0.881). In particular, the respondents' feelings of anxiety (M= 4.500, SD= 1.892) and fear towards research were slightly high (M= 4.962, SD= 1.696), whereas their insecurity in data analysis (M= 4.013, SD= 1.907) and nervousness when doing research (M= 3.699, SD= 1.761) were rated neutrally. However, slightly negative and negative responses were reported for research-related stress (M= 3.032, SD = 1.754), complexity (M= 2.884, SD= 1.827), difficulty (M= 2.859, SD= 1.660), and the perception of research as complicated (M= 2.712, SD= 1.516). These figures uncovered that although anxiety was not extremely high overall, a large number of students still experienced emotional discomfort when approaching research tasks. This may partly result from the fact that most of the participants had never conducted research. Their limited exposure to research may therefore contribute to their uncertainty, fear, and lack of confidence. The students' neutral attitude towards research anxiety, to some extent, supports that exhibited by Firdoos et al. (2023) and Le and Huynh (2024).

The dimension of research difficulty received the lowest mean score (M= 3.365, SD= 1.531), falling within the slightly negative range. This result matches those reported by various researchers, such as Tran et al. (2023) and Firdoos et al. (2023). In particular, the students reported slight difficulties with arithmetic-related aspects of research (M= 3.532, SD= 1.808), understanding research concepts (M= 3.462, SD= 1.655), and avoiding mistakes in the research process (M= 3.103, SD= 1.639). These results suggest that

students encountered technical and cognitive challenges when conducting research, particularly in conceptual understanding, numerical skills, and procedural accuracy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated EFL students' attitudes towards research at a Vietnamese university. Overall, the findings uncovered that the students held a neutral attitude towards research. Their perceptions differed noticeably across five dimensions. They most strongly supported the usefulness of research, especially for academic writing, future careers, disciplinary learning, and professional growth. Additionally, they perceived research as somewhat relevant to daily life and moderately beneficial. However, their attitudes were less favorable due to their anxiety, low level of enjoyment, and perceived difficulty. These results imply that enhancing students' attitudes towards research requires earlier exposure to research, clearer methodological guidance, step-by-step practice, real-life applications, and regular feedback, which may help reduce anxiety, increase confidence, and foster more positive engagement with research among students.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, it was conducted at only one Vietnamese university; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to EFL students in other institutional contexts. Secondly, a quantitative survey design was employed in the study, which offered useful descriptive data but did not capture students' deeper explanations, personal experiences, or specific sources of research anxiety and difficulty. Finally, the study focused primarily on students' attitudes and did not examine how these attitudes might relate to other components, such as age, research experience, and engagement.

Future studies should involve larger, more diverse samples from multiple universities to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, a mixed-methods design is recommended, particularly through interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questionnaires, to shed more light on why students viewed research as difficult or anxiety-provoking. Furthermore, future research should examine the correlation between students' research attitudes, research experience, research competence, and actual engagement in research activities. Longitudinal studies would also be

valuable in exploring how students' attitudes change after taking research methodology courses or participating in guided research projects.

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