REVISTA INVECOM
ISSN en línea: 2739-0063

Attitudes toward learning Basic English as a FL and linguistic competence in university students

Actitudes hacia el aprendizaje del inglés básico como LE y la competencia lingüística en estudiantes universitarios

Received: 15/05/2025 - **Accepted:** 13/08/2025

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research was to determine the relationship between university students' attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language (FL) and their level of linguistic competence at the Universidad Peruana Los Andes, Lima Branch. To this end, an applied quantitative approach was adopted, with a non-experimental, cross-sectional, descriptive, and correlational design. The study population consisted of 76 students, who were given a questionnaire as a data collection tool. This questionnaire was validated by specialists and achieved an adequate level of reliability, determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

The results of the descriptive analysis showed that half of the students evaluated (50%) had favorable attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language, while the remaining percentage had unfavorable attitudes. In terms of linguistic competence, 14.5% of the participants were at a poor level, 46.1% at an average level, 14.5% at a good level, and 25% at an excellent level. Finally, the inferential analysis, performed using the chi-square test, yielded significance values below 0.05, which allowed us to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. These findings show that attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language have a statistically significant relationship with students' level of linguistic competence.

Keywords: attitude, learning, language proficiency.

Resumen

El propósito central de esta investigación fue determinar la relación existente entre las actitudes que los estudiantes universitarios manifiestan hacia el aprendizaje del inglés básico como lengua extranjera (LE) y su nivel de competencia lingüística en la Universidad Peruana Los Andes, Filial Lima. Para ello, se adoptó un enfoque cuantitativo de tipo aplicado, con un diseño no experimental, de corte transversal, descriptivo y correlacional. La población de estudio estuvo conformada por 76 estudiantes, a quienes se les aplicó un cuestionario como

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instrumento de recolección de datos. Dicho cuestionario fue validado por especialistas y alcanzó un nivel adecuado de confiabilidad, determinado mediante el coeficiente alfa de Cronbach. Los resultados del análisis descriptivo evidenciaron que la mitad de los estudiantes evaluados (50%) mostró actitudes favorables hacia el aprendizaje del inglés básico como LE, mientras que el porcentaje restante presentó actitudes desfavorables. En cuanto a la competencia lingüística, el 14,5 % de los participantes se ubicó en un nivel deficiente, el 46,1 % en un nivel regular, el 14,5 % en un nivel bueno y el 25 % alcanzó un nivel excelente. Finalmente, el análisis inferencial, realizado a través de la prueba de Chi-cuadrado, arrojó valores de significancia inferiores a 0,05, lo que permitió rechazar la hipótesis nula y aceptar la hipótesis alternativa. Estos hallazgos evidencian que las actitudes hacia el aprendizaje del inglés básico como LE mantienen una relación estadísticamente significativa con el nivel de competencia lingüística de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: actitud, aprendizaje, competencia lingüística.

Introduction

The mastery of English as a foreign language has solidified as a fundamental element in the academic and professional training of university students. The processes of globalization, access to specialized information, and the increasing demands of the labor market have turned learning this language into a key competency for communication in international contexts as well as for the generation and exchange of knowledge.

Previous research indicates that, beyond the curricular content and didactic strategies employed, the attitudes that students adopt toward learning English have a decisive impact on the educational process and in the achievements attained (Barón & Byrne, 2005). These attitudes are not merely momentary perceptions; rather, they constitute relatively stable dispositions that encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, directly influencing the way students engage with knowledge, participate in academic activities, and maintain effort in the face of challenges that arise during their training (Worchel et al., 2003).

Attitudes toward English do not develop in isolation; they are constructed from prior experiences, personal beliefs, motivations, and the social and cultural contexts that shape the student's perception of the language and its relevance. Garay (2017) argues that linguistic competence is achieved only when the student, in addition to knowing grammatical rules and vocabulary, possesses the affective disposition and motivation necessary to communicate confidently and effectively. In this sense, positive attitudes foster more meaningful learning and facilitate consistent practice of the language, while negative or ambivalent attitudes can become significant barriers to overcome. The relationship between attitude and learning acquires special relevance in the teaching of a foreign language, given that contact with the language primarily occurs in educational settings and requires the deliberate effort of the student for its consolidation.

In the context of Peruvian higher education, significant challenges have been identified in the teaching of English. Despite institutional efforts to strengthen language programs, students still show limitations in developing the linguistic competence necessary for competitive academic and professional performance. Research such as that by Delfín (2006) reveals that ambivalent attitudes and inconsistent behaviors toward learning English constitute one of the main factors hindering the achievement of advanced levels of proficiency. This finding aligns with observations made by Figueroa (2017), Iriarte (2014), and Vivar (2013), who conclude that while most students express moderately positive attitudes toward English, these do not always translate into better communicative performance. This demonstrates that having a favorable predisposition is not enough; it is also necessary for pedagogical strategies to consider socio-affective dimensions that reinforce students' confidence, autonomy, and motivation.

A similar scenario can be observed internationally. Jiménez (2003) documents that, in university contexts, the advances made in written competence contrast with persistent deficiencies in the appropriate use of grammatical structures and vocabulary in real communicative situations. Moreover, Merino (2012) and Brady (2015) indicate that students' attitudes toward English are influenced by psychosocial factors, such as family support, prior language learning experiences, and opportunities for interaction with native speakers. Rodríguez (2016) emphasizes the need to implement extracurricular activities and immersive experiences that strengthen learning outside the classroom, while Delfín (2007) demonstrates that students with contradictory or inconsistent attitudes often show limited progress in their learning. These international precedents reinforce the idea that success in acquiring English does not depend solely on the linguistic skills of the student but also on the complex interaction of internal and external factors that shape their attitude toward the language.

All of the above highlights that learning English cannot be approached from an exclusively structural perspective or one centered on memorizing content. It is essential to understand that the student is the primary agent of their own learning and that their active involvement, motivation, and emotional disposition are crucial

elements for achieving functional mastery of the language. Ignoring this dimension means overlooking that acquiring a foreign language requires a balance between theoretical knowledge, constant practice, and personal commitment. For this reason, it is imperative to design pedagogical strategies that not only develop linguistic skills but also promote positive and resilient attitudes toward learning (Worchel et al., 2003). Such strategies must be adapted to the socio-cultural context of the students and provide meaningful experiences that enhance their confidence in their own abilities.

In this framework, the present research aims to determine the relationship between attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language (FL) and the level of linguistic competence of students at the Universidad Peruana Los Andes, Lima Branch. Understanding this association is fundamental for identifying the socio-affective variables that influence academic performance and generating evidence that serves as a basis for designing more comprehensive educational programs. Thus, the goal is to contribute to improving the processes of teaching and learning English in the Peruvian university context, strengthening autonomous learning, professional insertion, and the global competitiveness of future graduates.

Methodology

According to Hernández et al. (1991), the quantitative approach is characterized by the careful and orderly execution of a series of steps. This process begins with the formulation of a precisely defined topic, which allows for clearly establishing the objectives of the research. Subsequently, a review of the previous literature is conducted, from which the theoretical framework is constructed to guide the formulation of hypotheses. These hypotheses are tested through an appropriate research design and subjected to statistical analysis, enabling the support or refutation of the initial propositions.

In this study, the research problem focuses on two main factors: attitudes toward learning and linguistic competence in English. Therefore, a quantitative approach was employed, allowing for the collection and analysis of numerically coded data to respond to the research question posed. This approach relies on statistical assessment to establish relationships between variables and test theories (Hernández et al., 1991).

This work corresponds to a descriptive-correlational study with a cross-sectional design. It is descriptive because it seeks to detail the characteristics and links between the variables of interest; correlational, as it analyzes the degree of relationship between attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language (FL) and linguistic competence; and cross-sectional, since data collection was conducted at a single point in time (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

Moreover, the adopted reasoning method was deductive, as it began with generally accepted theories and propositions to arrive at specific conclusions applied to the case study. According to Sierra (2004), the design utilized was non-experimental, since the variables were not deliberately manipulated but observed in their natural context.

Population and sample

The population consisted of 360 students enrolled in the Language Center of the Universidad Peruana Los Andes (UPLA), Lima Branch, from Basic Level I to Basic Level VIII. The sample comprised 76 students, selected through a stratified random sampling method, ensuring that all members of the population had the same probability of being chosen.

Since the population is finite, the following formula was applied:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \bullet p \bullet q \bullet N}{Ne^2 + Z^2 \bullet p \bullet q}$$

Where:
N = universe
e = estimation error 10% =0.1
n = sample size
z = 1.96 (normal distribution table for 95% confidence and 5% error)
p = Probability in favor. 0.50
q = Probability against. 0.50

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \ (0.5)\ (0.5)\ (360)}{360(0.1)^2 + (1.96)^2\ (0.5)\ (0.5)}$$

n= 76

Data collection technique and instrument

The technique used was the survey, defined by Lerma (2002) as a standardized procedure that allows for the obtaining and analysis of information from a representative sample of a larger population. The instrument employed consisted of a questionnaire with a Likert-type scale, designed to measure both attitudes toward learning English and linguistic competence, following the proposal by Ruiz (2002).

Validity and reliability of the instrument

Content validity was established through expert judgment. Four specialists evaluated the matrix of operationalization of variables and the validation form, granting an average validity of 90% for both variables, categorizing the instrument as "very good" (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

Regarding reliability, a pilot test was conducted with 10 participants from the target population, calculating the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results obtained were 0.94 for the attitude variable and 0.90 for linguistic competence, values that far exceed the minimum acceptable (0.72), indicating excellent internal consistency of the instrument.

Data analysis techniques

The statistical treatment was carried out at two levels:

Descriptive analysis: contingency tables, figures, and descriptive statistics were employed to characterize the variables and meet the specific objectives.

Inferential analysis: hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square test, suitable for analyzing categorical variables, to determine the existence and magnitude of the relationship between attitudes and linguistic competence.

Results

Descriptive level

Concerning the general objective, which seeks to analyze the relationship between attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language (FL) and linguistic competence, the descriptive findings reveal relevant trends.

Table 1

Frequency table of the relationship between attitudes toward learning basic English and linguistic competence

			Linguistic competence				Total
			Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	
Attitude toward learning basic English	Negative	Count	11	27	0	0	38
		% of Total	14.5%	35.5%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Positive	Count	0	8	11	19	38
		% of Total	0.0%	10.5%	14.5%	25.0%	50.0%
Total		Count	11	35	11	19	76
		% of Total	14.5%	46.1%	14.5%	25.0%	100.0%

According to Table 1, 50% of the surveyed students exhibit a negative attitude toward learning basic English as a FL. From this group, 14.5% show a poor level of linguistic competence, and 35.5% demonstrate a fair level. Conversely, the remaining 50% display a positive attitude; within this group, 10.5% achieve a fair level of linguistic competence, 14.5% a good level, and 25% an excellent level.

In general terms, it is observed that 50% of students present a positive attitude while the other 50% display a negative attitude. Regarding linguistic competence, regardless of attitude, 14.5% of students are at the poor level, 46.1% at the fair level, 14.5% at the good level, and 25% at the excellent level.

Table 2
Descriptive results of the three specific objectives

Specific objective	Negative attitude	Linguistic competence (negative attitude)	Positive attitude	Linguistic competence (positive attitude)
SO1: Connection between cognitive attitude and linguistic competence	44.7%	14.5% poor, 30.3% fair, 0% good, 0% excellent	55.3%	15.8% fair, 14.5% good, 25% excellent
SO2: Connection between affective attitude and linguistic competence	55.3%	14.5% poor, 40.8% fair, 0% good, 0% excellent	44.7%	5.3% fair, 14.5% good, 25% excellent
SO3: Connection between behavioral attitude and linguistic competence	34.2%	14.5% poor, 19.7% fair, 0% good, 0% excellent	65.8%	26.3% fair, 14.5% good, 25% excellent

In the dimensional analysis, the following results are evident:

Cognitive attitude: More than half of the students exhibit a positive disposition toward learning basic English. This group shows a higher percentage of good and excellent levels in linguistic competence, while those with a negative attitude are concentrated in low or fair levels.

Affective attitude: In this case, the negative disposition predominates, which is reflected in low or fair levels of linguistic performance. In contrast, students with a positive attitude achieve better results, especially at the good and excellent levels.

Behavioral attitude: This is the most favorable dimension, as the majority of students demonstrate positive attitudes toward learning the language. This group attains higher levels of linguistic competence compared to those with negative attitudes, who tend to be at lower or fair levels.

These results suggest that positive attitudes, in any of their dimensions, are associated with better development of linguistic skills.

Inferential level

To test the general hypothesis and the specific hypotheses, the Pearson Chi-square test was applied to determine the existence of a significant association between attitudes toward learning basic English as a FL and the linguistic competence of students at UPLA, Lima Branch. This analysis considered the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of attitudes.

Table 3
Results of the Chi-square test for the general and specific hypotheses

Hypothesis	Pearson Chi-square (Value)	df	Asymptotic Sig. (two-tailed)	Decision
General hypothesis: Attitudes toward learning basic English as a FL and linguistic competence	51.314	3	0.000	Reject H0 and accept H1. There is a significant association.
Specific hypothesis 1: Cognitive attitude and linguistic competence	44.104	3	0.000	Reject H0 and accept H1. There is a significant association.
Specific hypothesis 2: Affective attitude and linguistic competence	61.670	3	0.000	Reject H0 and accept H1. There is a significant association.
Specific hypothesis 3: Behavioral attitude and linguistic competence	37.916	3	0.000	Reject H0 and accept H1. There is a significant association.

The results indicated significance levels below 0.05 for all evaluated hypotheses (χ^2, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Consequently, null hypotheses were rejected, and alternative hypotheses were accepted, confirming the existence of a statistically significant relationship between attitudes toward learning basic English and linguistic competence among students.

In interpretive terms, it can be concluded that students with more favorable attitudes toward learning English tend to achieve better linguistic performance. Conversely, those exhibiting negative attitudes demonstrate lower levels of competence. This illustrates that factors such as interest, motivation, and academic commitment directly influence the consolidation of linguistic skills, highlighting the importance of fostering positive attitudes in the teaching-learning process of the language.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that 55.3% of students exhibit a positive cognitive attitude toward learning basic English, and within this group, 25% achieve an excellent level of linguistic competence. These findings align with those reported by Vivar (2013), who found that students with positive attitudes toward English attained better academic performance in this area. Similarly, Figueroa (2017) discovered that favorable attitudes directly influence the acquisition of linguistic competencies, reinforcing the idea that the cognitive dimension is a key predictor of foreign language learning. However, 44.7% of students express negative attitudes, and within this group, 30.3% achieve only a fair level of linguistic competence. This result confirms that unfavorable attitudes limit the development of communicative skills, as noted by Vázquez and Manassero (2008) in their research on the relationship between attitudes and learning.

Regarding affective attitude, the descriptive analysis revealed that 55.3% of students maintain a negative stance, with 40.8% of them presenting only a fair level of linguistic competence. These results are consistent with the observations of Hernández et al. (2011), who argue that motivation and positive emotions toward the language are determining factors for successful learning. Additionally, the inferential analysis using the Chi-square test confirmed the existence of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between affective attitude and linguistic competence. This finding coincides with the assertions of Brady (2015) and Vázquez, Acevedo, and Manassero (2007b), who state that the emotional dimension of students directly influences their persistence and willingness to improve their communicative skills in English. Thus, there is a clear need to promote educational environments that foster motivation, interest, and confidence in foreign language learning.

Finally, in the behavioral dimension, the highest percentage of positive attitudes was observed (65.8%), and within this group, 25% achieved an excellent level of linguistic competence. This result is consistent with the findings of Rodríguez (2016) and Aparicio and Mazzitelli (2009), who assert that proactive behaviors in class—such as participation and constant practice—are directly related to the development of linguistic competencies. The statistical significance found in the hypothesis testing ($p < 0.05$) supports the claims made by Jiménez (2003) and Díaz Pareja (2002) regarding the role of behavioral attitude as a driver of continuous improvement in learning. These results reaffirm that students who adopt active behaviors in their English learning are better positioned to consolidate their communicative competence, while those exhibiting passive behaviors face greater limitations in making progress.

Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrated that attitudes toward learning basic English as a foreign language are closely related to the level of linguistic competence achieved by students. It was found that those exhibiting more positive attitudes in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components perform better compared to those with unfavorable attitudes. This finding allows us to assert that a student's disposition toward learning not only conditions their level of motivation but also their progress in developing the communicative skills inherent to the language.

Furthermore, it was verified that the three evaluated dimensions of attitude exert a complementary and significant influence on strengthening linguistic competence. The evidence obtained supports the importance of implementing pedagogical strategies aimed at increasing students' interest, their personal valuation of learning, and active participation in the educational process, as these factors are directly related to achieving educational objectives. Consequently, the conclusions reinforce the need to design and integrate educational actions that promote positive attitudes toward learning English, which directly favors academic success in this area.

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