

# Sociocultural factors in the success of Vietnamese English learners

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## Abstract

This research paper analyzes the current English learning and teaching situation in Vietnam through collated data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were taken from the survey entitled, “Factors influencing Vietnamese learners’ success in learning English” (see Appendix A). The survey asked participants to describe their demographics and opinions about teaching and learning English in Vietnam. The participants consisted of the author’s living and teaching network, which was comprised of 31.8% acquaintances and 68.2% students at the Premier Language School. The secondary sources were compiled from scholarly articles, news, books, and online sources. These sources provide a broad scope when looking into the country’s identified issues concerning English learning and teaching.

## Introduction

President Bill Clinton lifted the nineteen-year-old trade embargo against Vietnam on February 3, 1994 (Cockburn, 1994). This was a great threshold of the Vietnamese socioeconomic development. One year later, in a review in *The New York Times*, Mydans (1995) wrote:

Twenty years after the end of the war and the disappearance of Americans from Vietnam, this Communist country is in the throes of an English-language boom that has little to do with the past and everything to do with the nation's rush to join the international marketplace. The war seems all but forgotten as ordinary Vietnamese welcome American visitors not as former soldiers but as future investors.

It has been twenty-two years since the early advancement of the English language, and Vietnam has witnessed a lot of far reaching contributions and achievements in teaching and learning English. According to Education First (EF), the English Proficiency Index (EPI) places Vietnam thirty-first out of the seventy-two countries reviewed in terms of the ranking of language proficiency among Vietnam's adult population (2017). This information confirms an improvement from 2.13 points to 55.94 points compared to last year's index. This is a positive sign for the country's general situation regarding teaching and learning English. However, the feelings of positivity are still controversial among Vietnamese people, who may quickly voice dissatisfaction regarding the general environment of English teaching and learning. Therefore, this paper seeks to discover what Vietnamese English learners truly think about the issue for a more impartial look, which can be the fundamental to the quality of English teaching throughout the country.

### *Research Findings*

#### *Secondary Sources*

##### *The English language in the Vietnamese society.*

Vietnam is a Far East Asian country with the long tradition respect for teachers and ethics. This beautiful humane value has been embraced and developed throughout many generations. The dedication to respect is found across the country, from rural to urban areas and from remote villages to economic-financial centers. The Vietnamese government has

always emphasized the importance of enhancing foreign language levels among the citizens, especially the English language, which is in part why it is such a respected profession.

*A bright and clear picture.*

According to the current data recorded by EF's EPI, the level of proficiency has increased considerably in Vietnam throughout the previous few years. The following figures give strong evidence to support that claim.

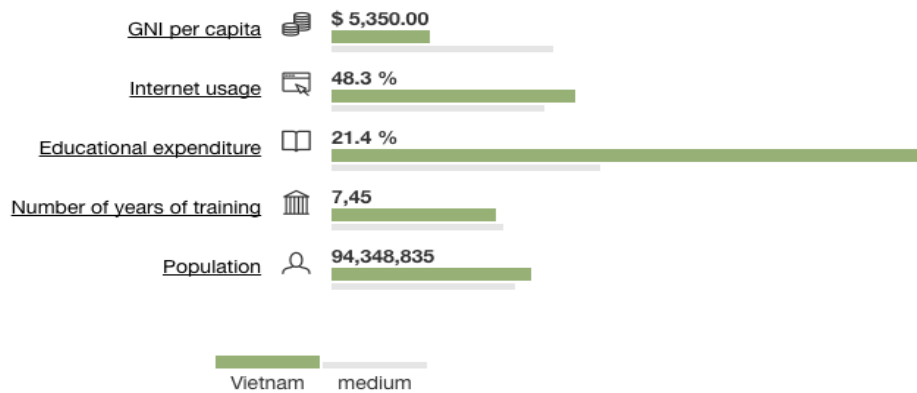


Figure 1. Summary of Vietnamese teaching and learning English. Reprinted from EF EPI in *EF Education First*, n.d. Retrieved July 16, 2017, from <http://www.ef.com.vn/epi/regions/asia/vietnam/>. Copyright 2017 by EF Education First. Adapted with permission.

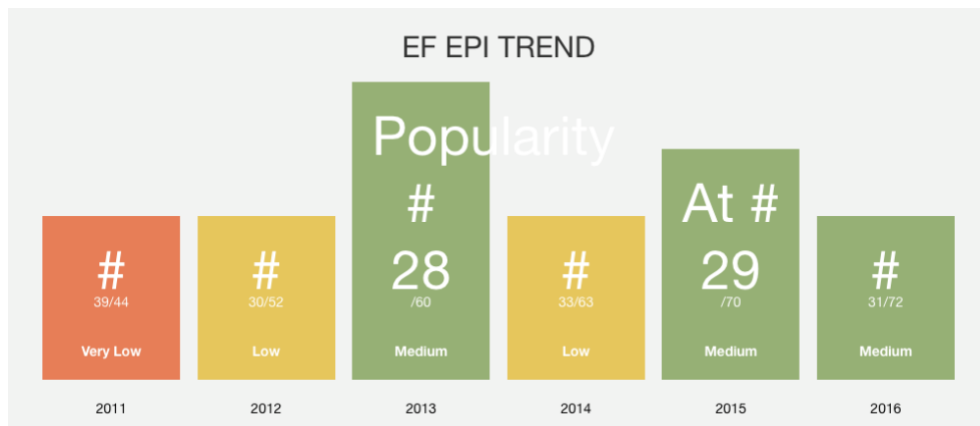


Figure 2. EF EPI Trend in Vietnam. Reprinted from EF EPI in *EF Education First*, n.d. Retrieved July 16, 2017, from <http://www.ef.com.vn/epi/regions/asia/vietnam/>. Copyright 2017 by EF Education First. Adapted with permission.

English proficiency in Vietnam has improved recently, which lends to a belief that there has been an improvement in the quality of teaching, and thus, learning. *The Economist* (2011) expressed that, “The quality of English instruction in Vietnam lags far behind government aspirations” (para. 1). In 2012, Vietnam’s ranking increased by seventeen despite the fact that the country was still in the “low” group. By 2013, the country’s ranking had steadily increased to twenty-eight out of sixty countries total. In the 2014-2016 period, the country’s English language ranking made stable steps and stood at the “medium” level out of the five identified possible levels: very high, high, medium, low, very low. In 2016, Vietnam proudly was ranked one space below Hong Kong, an old English colony with high proportions of English speakers. Optimistically speaking, Vietnam’s ranking could be in “high” in near future.

*Regional comparison.*

Vietnam is one of the three nations in Indochina, along with Cambodia and Laos, that were affected by the war and the socio-economic conditions that arose because of it. This had a direct impact on the ranking of these identified countries for many years. Vietnam has only just risen surpassed the rankings of Laos and Cambodia.

Table 1

*English proficiency comparison in 2016 (Indochina)*

<b>Vietnam</b>	<b>Laos</b>	<b>Cambodia</b>
Rank 31	Rank 70	Rank 69
EF EPI Rating: 54.06	EF EPI Rating: 38.45	EF EPI Rating: 39.48
High	Very low	Very low

*Note:* Reprinted from EF EPI in *EF Education First*, n.d. Retrieved July 16, 2017, from <http://www.ef.com.vn/epi/compare/regions/vn/kh/>. Copyright 2017 by EF Education First.

Judging the position of Vietnam in Figure 3 below, gives more insight in terms of its overall ranking. Vietnam’s English proficiency rate is ranked within the top ten of all countries within the continent of Asia. Asia only has one country which has a “very high” EPI rating – Singapore, where English is the official language. Vietnam is even ranked before some more developed countries, such as Japan, China, and Thailand.

EF EPI Average:

**55.94**

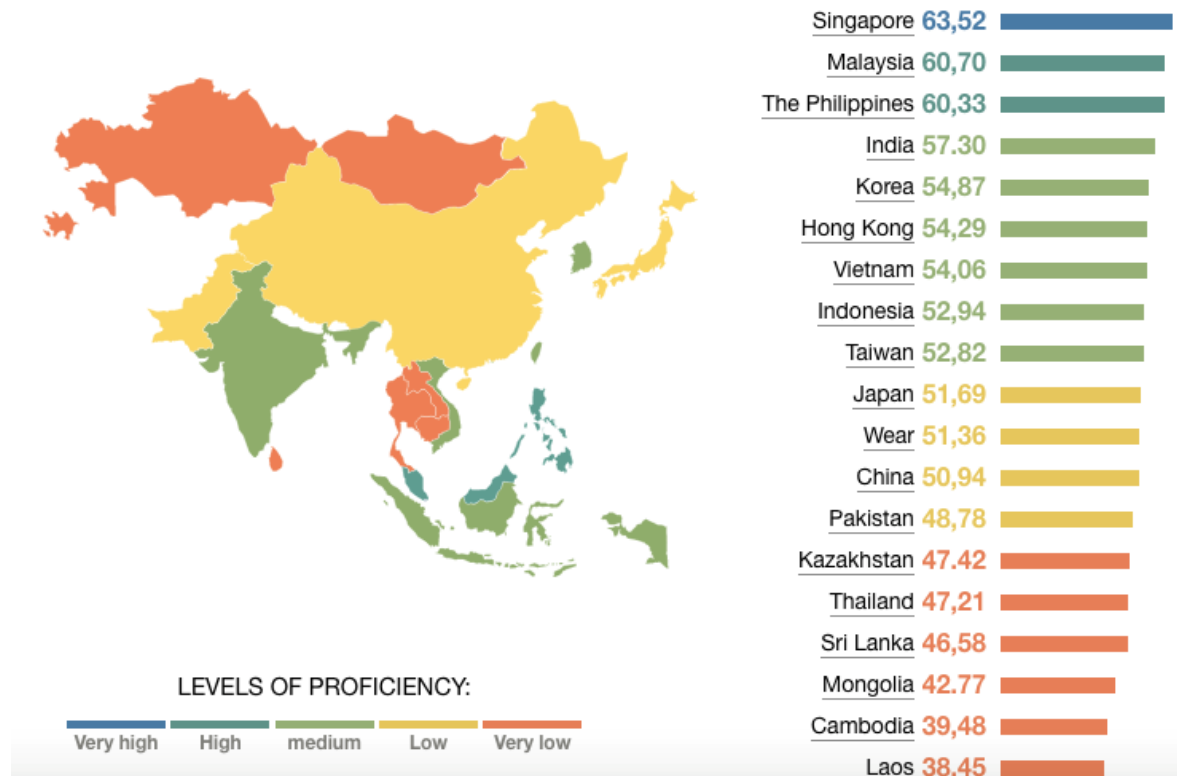


Figure 3. EF EPI Trend in Vietnam. Reprinted from EF EPI

in *EF Education First*, n.d. Retrieved July 16, 2017, from <http://www.ef.com.vn/epi/>. Copyright 2017 by EF Education First. Adapted with permission.

### *Primary sources*

#### *Data collection.*

The primary sources provide information regarding the research of this author's current living and teaching context. Among the forty-four participants surveyed, fourteen (31.8%) were friends with the author who have learned or are in the process of learning English as a second language. The remaining participants (68.2%) were students currently enrolled in the Premier Language School. The participants were asked to describe their location, age group, financial position, and English certificates earned. The questions were in multiple-choice format. The findings have been summarized in the table below.

#### *Demographic factors.*

Table 2

*Vietnamese English Learners' demographics*

<b>1. Genders</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Male	25%
Female	72.70%
Undefined	2.30%
<b>2. Occupations</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Office worker	25%
Student	50%
Education	18.20%
Self-employed	0%
Manual labor	2.30%
Housewife	2.30%
Business owner	2.30%
<b>3. Age groups</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Under 20	25%
20-35	68.20%
35-50	6.80%
Over 50	0%
<b>4. Place of living</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Ho Chi Minh City	88.60%
Hanoi City	0%
Da Nang City	0%
Other	11.40%
<b>5. Financial Abilities</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Low	18.20%
Average	81.80%

High	0%
<b>6. Certificates earned</b>	<b>44 subjects</b>
TOEFL	6.82%
TOEIC	52.27%
IELTS	11.36%
CPE	6.82%
Other	22.73%
No certificates	18.18%

There were more female learners (72.7%) than male learners (25%) surveyed, with the undefined-gender learners encompassing 2.3%. The majority of learners were adolescents of the 20-35 age group (68.2%), followed by 25% of learners who were under twenty years old. 88.6% of the subjects are living in Ho Chi Minh City, 11.4% in other cities, although none of the participants were living in either of the other two largest cities in Vietnam, Hanoi and Da Nang. 81.8% of the subjects fall within the average range of financial status, whereas 18.2% value their finance status as “low.” No participants identified having a “high” financial status. English certificates, a reflection of a learner’s qualifications, were also included in the survey. TOEIC® was the most popular certificate, which was earned by 52.27% of participants. 11.36% received an IELTS® certificate, 6.82% received a TOEFL® and CPE® certificate, and 22.73% identified receiving other certificates. 18.18% participants did not receive any certificates.

*Attitudes and learning methods.*

In the next part of the survey, the participants were asked about their opinions and judgments regarding attitudes, learning methods, family and teachers’ support, teachers’ qualifications, and overall satisfaction. Questions were given in an open-ended format with some embedded within the Linkert scale.

Table 3

*Vietnamese learners' attitude towards learning English*

<b>6. Attitude towards learning English</b>	
<b>6.1 Spending</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
No more than 10% of my income	27.30%
No more than 20% of my income	34.10%
No more than 30% of my income	25%
No more than 50% of my income	13.60%
<b>6.2 The importance of English</b>	<b>44 subjects</b>
It is a necessary universal language.	79.50%
It is popular, but not the most.	11.40%
It helps me get my desired job.	81.80%
It is compulsory to learn English.	36.40%
English proficiency is unessential.	4.50%
I must be English-competent for university graduation.	22.70%
<b>6.3 English (L2) interference</b>	<b>44 subjects</b>
Its vast knowledge	31.80%
Its complicated grammar and structure	50%
Its large vocabulary	70.50%
Its difficult accents	36.40%
Its writing styles	25%
Its diversity	34.10%
<b>6.4 Purposes</b>	<b>44 subjects</b>
Well-paid jobs	54.50%
Better international communication	63.60%
More business opportunities	43.20%
Higher positions in the workplace	50%



Better entertainment (more access to books, movies, etc.) 31.80%

A hobby 29.50%

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**6.5 Personal difficulties 44 subjects**

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Lack of time 56.80%

Too much homework 15.90%

Lack of money 22.70%

Lack of good schools 6.80%

Inadequate teaching methods 15.90%

Lack of motivation 20.50%

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**6.6 The most important contribution factor in success/failure 44 subjects = 100%**

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Teachers' quality 9.10%

Self-learning ability 36.40%

Motivation 22.70%

Learning methods 15.90%

Teaching methods 13.60%

Facilities 2.30%

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**6.7% Time (per week) spent on learning English 30 subjects = 100%**

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less than 7 hours 36.70%

7 to 14 hours 26.70%

over 14 hours 36.60%

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In terms of the participants' attitudes regarding cost of courses, 34.1% of participants were willing to spend no more than 20% of their income on learning English. The other 27.3%, 25%, and 13.6% of learners were willing to spend 10%, 30%, and 50% on English courses respectively. The general attitude in Vietnam regards learning English as important because it helps them to get their desired jobs (81.8% of participants validated this claim). 79.5% of

participants surveyed identified that their reason to learn English was because it is a universal language. 36.4% of learners believed it was compulsory to learn English. 22.7% needed to prove competence in English to graduate from university. Only 4.5% agreed that English proficiency was unnecessary.

In terms of the purpose behind learning English, the majority of those surveyed (63.6%) identified international communication as the main reason. Secondly, 54.5% identified securing well-paid jobs as their purpose, 50% of the participants believed it would help them get promoted in their career, and 43.2% believed it would provide them with more business opportunities. 31.8% identified their purpose for learning English was to access better entertainment. 29.5% stated that they learn English as a hobby.

In regard to problems associated with learning English, two aspects were selected: English interference and personal difficulties. 70.5% agreed that large vocabulary necessary was the biggest problem. 50% were afraid of its complex grammar and structure. The need for vast knowledge, ability to understand difficult accents, and diversity were chosen by 31.8%, 36.4%, and 34.1% of participants respectively. The subjects' personal difficulties were various with lack of time being the biggest obstacle (56.8%). The second major hindrance was lack of money (22.7%). "Too much homework" and "inadequate learning methods" were equally selected at 15.9%. "Lack of motivation" was identified as a popular problem amongst 20.5% participants, and the least common problem chosen was lack of quality schools at 6.8%.

36.4% of participants identified the ability to self-learn as the driving factor of success in learning English. 22.7% identified the leading factor as motivation. Learning and teaching methods were chosen by 15.9% and 13.6% of participants respectively. Only 9.1% agreed that the quality of a teacher was significant in their success. "Facilities" did not seem to be valued with only 2.3% of participants identifying that this was a factor of success.

Around one third of the participants spent less than seven hours per week studying English. 36.6% spent more than fourteen hours a week studying, and 26.67% dedicated seven to fourteen hours.

#### *Learning methods.*

Another part of the survey focused on Vietnamese learners' learning methods. The findings are shown in Table 4. Nearly half of the participants felt confident in their self-learning abilities (47.7%). 31.8% could not identify their self-learning ability, and 20.5% were not confident in this regard. When asked about reactions in class when not understanding a point, most subjects expressed that they would raise their questions immediately (54.5%), and 25% voiced that they prefer to save their questions until the end of class. 15.9% agree that they choose to figure the answers out by themselves later, and only 4.5% expressed that they feel shy to ask a question in front of the class.

Regarding ways to improve their English skills, half of the subjects decided to enroll in a language center. Nearly 16% watch movies in English, while 13.7% go traveling. 11.3% listen to English, and 6.8% read books in English. Only 2.3% try to find English tutors.

Table 4

*Learning methods*

<b>7. Learning methods</b>	
<b>7.1 Confidence in self-learning ability</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Yes	47.70%
No	20.50%
Maybe	31.80%
<b>7.2 Reactions when not understanding a point in class</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Raise my question immediately.	54.50%
Wait until the end of the class since I want to ask more.	25%
Wait until the end of the class since I am shy.	4.50%
I will figure it out by myself.	15.90%
<b>7.3 Ways to improve English skills</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Go to a language center	50%
Seek for an English tutor	2.30%
Watch movies in English	15.90%

Listen to English songs	11.30%
Go Traveling	13.70%
Read books in English	6.80%

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*Family and school factors.*

Table 5 shows the subjects' responses to questions about factors related to family and school. Some high school students in the subjects were asked to give answers in a Likert scale about their satisfaction with the quality of their high school's English courses as well as their personal results.

84.1% of the participants identified that they were supported by their families, yet 15.9% claimed to get no family support. Among the types of support referred to, "financial support" was selected as the most popular form (70.2%). Mental and physical support were chosen at 19.1% and 10.6% respectively.

55.8% of participants agree that they received support from their English teachers. 34.1% expressed high satisfaction with teachers' support. 6.8% gave neutral answers. Only 4.6% identified their teacher's support as being bad or very bad.

The results of the surveyed high school students in terms of their satisfaction in their performances were as follows: 44.4% of the students agreed and 33.3% strongly agreed that they were happy with their results as well as with the quality of their courses. Still, 16.7% were dissatisfied and 5.6% remained neutral.

Table 5

*Family and school support*

<b>8. Family support</b>	
<b>8.1 Yes/No</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Yes	84.10%
No	15.90%
<b>8.2 Major support</b>	<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>
Financial	70.20%
Mental	19.10%
Physical	10.60%
<b>9. Teachers' support</b>	
<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>	
Very bad	2.30%
Bad	2.30%
Neutral	14%
Good	55.80%
Very good	25.60%
<b>10. Teachers' qualification</b>	
<b>44 subjects = 100%</b>	
Very bad	2.30%
Bad	2.30%
Neutral	6.80%
Good	54.50%
Very good	34.10%
<b>11. High schools' good teaching methods and satisfaction in results</b>	
<b>18 subjects = 100%</b>	
Strongly disagree	0%
Disagree	16.70%
Neutral	5.60%
Agree	44.40%
Strongly agree	33.30%

**Conclusion**

The reliable information shown through the secondary sources cited has clearly shown that English language proficiency has developed throughout Vietnam. The country's traditions and customs have always supported teaching and learning English. The improvement in the EF EPI ranking indicates a promising future for the Vietnam's rate of English acquisition. Compared to other countries in Indochina, Asia, and the world, Vietnam has been progressing at a consistent rate in terms of English proficiency.

The survey given reflects a small but bright picture of English learning and teaching in Vietnam. The opinions of English learners show overarching satisfaction, in spite of some dissatisfaction.

In particular, the majority of learners identify their “self-learning ability” as the main determinant in their success, meaning an educator’s role should be focused on guiding them towards how to improve their self-learning skills. Furthermore, the fact that most learners are not confident in their self-learning abilities and choose going to language centers to improve their English skills proves that language centers in Vietnam need to improve their teaching quality to help learners solve these problems.

In order to assist learners in overwhelming obstacles regarding learning English, language centers and/or English teachers should design appropriate curricula. Specifically, “lack of time” is chosen as a major personal problem, so the amount of homework should not make the students feel overwhelmed or burdened. Instead, teachers should focus on a specific target and limit the amount of homework students need to do to practice that target language. With regard to English interference, curriculum should focus on effective vocabulary learning methods since vocabulary was identified as the biggest problem in learning the language. Besides, more pronunciation classes should be offered as many learners are afraid of difficult English accents.

Taking into account learners’ attitudes towards learning English, the learners were aware of the importance of English in that it helps develop their career. Therefore, curricula should be career focused. Even though most surveyed learners agree that learning English is compulsory, and it is a universal language, only 36.6% of them spend more than fourteen hours per week learning English, which equates to two hours a day.

The majority of participants showed satisfaction when asked about their high schools’ teaching quality and English learning results. However, there were concerns regarding the teaching quality. The quality of teaching remains a complex issue, as Parks (2011) projects that “all school leavers will have a minimum level of English by 2020 under ambitious education reforms, but teachers fear that they are not getting the help they need to upgrade their own skills”. Teacher training remains the trickiest aspect in improving the quality of teaching. That is

why teachers themselves should improve their qualifications and experience rather than waiting for governmental support.

## Appendix A

### Factors Influencing Success in Vietnamese Learners' English Learning

Hello everybody, I am conducting a survey on the factors that affect Vietnamese students' English learning performances. Your time spent on answering this questionnaire is valuable. Thank you very much.

1. You are

- Male                       Female       Undefined

2. What can your occupation be classified as?

- Office worker  
 Student  
 Education  
 Self-employed  
 Manual labor  
 Housewife  
 Business owner

3. How old are you?

- Under 20  
 20-35  
 35-50  
 over 50

4. Where are you living now?

- Ho Chi Minh City  
 Hanoi City  
 Da Nang City  
 Other

5. How would you judge your financial ability? (including parental support)

- Low  
 Average  
 High

6. How much would you spend on learning English?

- No more than 10% of my income  
 No more than 20% of my income  
 No more than 30% of my income  
 No more than 50% of my income

7. What is your opinion about the importance of English? (You can choose more than one option)

- It is a necessary universal language.  
 It is popular, but not the most.  
 It helps me get my desired job.  
 It is compulsory to learn English.  
 English competence is enough, and English proficiency is unessential.



- I must be English-competent for university graduation.
8. Do you have any English certificates? (If yes, please go to question 9)
- Yes  
 No
9. What is (are) your English certificate(s)? (You can choose more than one option)
- TOEFL     TOEIC     IELTS     CPE     Other
10. Do/Did you have family support in learning English? (If yes, please go to question 11)
- Yes    No
11. What is the major support they give/gave you?
- Financial (paying your fees, etc.)  
 Mental (encouraging you, etc.)  
 Physical (picking you up from school, taking care of you, etc.)
12. What are the difficulties in learning English? (You can choose more than one option)
- Its vast knowledge  
 Its complicated grammar and structure  
 Its large vocabulary  
 Its difficult accents  
 Its writing styles  
 Its diversity
13. What is/are your purpose(s) of learning English? (You can choose more than one option)
- Well-paid jobs  
 Better international communication  
 More business opportunities  
 Higher positions in the work place  
 Better entertainment (more access to books, movies, etc.)  
 A hobby
14. What are your own difficulties in learning English? (You can choose more than one option)
- Lack of time  
 Too much homework  
 Lack of money  
 Lack of good schools  
 Inadequate teaching methods  
 Lack of motivation
15. What do you do to improve you English skills?
- Go to a language center  
 Seek for an English tutor  
 Watch movies in English  
 Listen to English songs  
 Go Traveling  
 Read books in English

16. What is the most important contribution factor in your success/failure in learning English?

- Teachers' quality
- Self-learning ability
- Motivation
- Learning methods
- Teaching methods
- Facilities

17. What do you do when you do not understand a point during the class time?

- Raise my question immediately.
- Wait until the end of the class since I want to ask more.
- Wait until the end of the class since I am shy.
- I will figure it out by myself.

18. Your teacher gives/gave you good support.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

19. Your teacher(s) is/are qualified

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

20. Are you confident in your self-learning ability?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

21. (Please answer this if you are a high school student) Your school is offering good teaching methods and you are happy with you results.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

22. How much time per week do you spend on learning English?

- less than 7 hours
- 7 to 14 hours
- over 14 hours

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