

A Case Study: Promoting Vietnamese Staff's English Language Ability and their Change of Conceptions of English Language Learning

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Abstract

In this study, a four-month English language training course was designed for the Vietnamese staff members of a manufacturing company in Vietnam. The English language course materials were designed according to the results of the need analysis of the Vietnamese staff and administration manager. The course focused on daily life English, English specifically related to their job, and improving the staff's listening and speaking skills. The lessons were communicative-driven and student-centered. The English course was divided into two parts (two months for each part) and was held after the staff's regular working hours twice a week in the evening. The aims of this study were to find out whether this particular English learning experience would influence the learners' conception of English learning and about their learning outcome. The results of this study showed that after the training course, there were changes in the conceptions of English language learning of the participants. They showed a deeper understanding of what English language learning is about. The participants' speaking skills were improved in both the first and second part of the training course, and listening skills were improved in the second part of the training course, which met the goals of the training course. Overall, there were improvements in the first and second parts of the course. In short, the training course did improve the participants' learning outcome.

Keywords: second language learning, conceptions of learning, adult language learners

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Introduction

In Vietnam, English language is gaining more importance nowadays. The scheme on foreign language in the national education system in the 2008-2020 period is approved in 2008. The Minister of Education and Training of Vietnam has been implementing the 10-year foreign language teaching program since then. Their goal is to set foreign language (i.e. English and some other foreign languages) as a compulsory subject from third grade at all levels of the general education nationwide by 2018-2019 school year (“Decision No. 1400/QD-TTg,” 2015). Furthermore, after Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2006, companies see English language as a vital key to get international business opportunities and to add value to their businesses. English language became a job requirement and many companies provide English training courses to their staff (Phan, 2017).

Literature Review

Problems in English Learning and Teaching in Vietnam

Tran (2013) found that although English was considered important for academic study and work, many university students was not able to communicate in English well. Starting from high school, students were afraid to speak English because they were afraid of making mistakes (Teaching English in Vietnam, 2017). The reasons could be that English language lessons were usually form-focused and oriented towards grammar and not communication skills (Tran, 2013). Also, they focused on passing tests and exams (Nguyen, T. H. A., 2002). Graceffo (2010) believed Vietnamese students just simply did not have enough listening input throughout their course of learning the language, which led to limited verbal output. Therefore, students might be good in English grammar and got high scores in exams, but they still could not communicate in English. The overall problem is that Vietnamese students lacked a communication environment for them to use English purposefully (Teaching English in Vietnam, 2017). Vo, Vo, and Vo (2014) found that “if Vietnamese speakers use more English, their spontaneous speech will be found to be more comprehensible than those who use less English” (p.12).

Culture Influence

Vietnamese students’ poor English communication skills could be due to their culture and traditional ways of teaching in English classroom. Face is important to Vietnamese culture and in Asian culture in general. Vietnamese students are afraid to lose face so that they feel more comfortable listening to teachers rather than speaking up or asking and answering questions in class (Graceffo, 2010; Huong, 2008). Since many Asian cultures value verbal perfection, Vietnamese students tend to be cautious when speaking and they do not want to make a mistake (Graceffo, 2010; Lewis & McCook, 2002). If they are not confident enough about the correctness of what they want to express in English, they would rather not speak at all. Besides, another culture characteristic of Vietnamese is that they do not want to stand out in class, which further inhibit oral expression (Graceffo, 2010). In addition, under the influence of Confucian values, English language lessons are often teacher-centered and textbook-centered. Grammar-translation method is also prevalent (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). That means Vietnamese students lack opportunities of authentic or purposeful

English communication in class. Nevertheless, due to the constraints of the test and exam oriented education context and Vietnamese culture, communicative language teaching methods and student-centered approach have not been implemented successfully in regular schools (Dang, 2010; Nguyen, T. H. A., 2002).

Trend

Nonetheless, communicative language teaching seems to be welcome in private English language schools in Vietnam (Nguyen, T. H. A., 2002). Since many Vietnamese students do realized the importance of English language to their future career, those who want to improve their English communication skills would choose to attend private English language schools (Nguyen, T. H. A., 2002). In the communicative language teaching environment in private English language schools, Nguyen, T. H. A. (2002) maintained that “Vietnamese learners are no longer completely passive;” “they enjoy participating in activities that help them to use the language” (para.15).

Pronunciation Problems

Although Vietnamese alphabet, Quốc-ngữ, looks similar to English alphabet, it is not the Roman or Latin alphabet. In fact, the pronunciation of the letters is different from the English letters (Graceffo, 2010). Graceffo (2010) pointed out the distinctive pronunciation of Vietnamese as follow:

The pronunciation of combinations of letters differs from the pronunciation of the same letters pronounced separately. The pronunciation of letter occurring at the ends of words is often different than when those same letters appear at the beginning or in the middle of a word (para.23).

When Vietnamese learn English, they could be influenced by the knowledge of their native language and cause pronunciation problems.

Nguyen, T. D. (2015) reported that Vietnamese have problems with tense and lax vowels, voiced and voiceless stops, fricative consonants, consonant clusters, and inflectional suffix “-s”, etc. Below are some examples of Vietnamese pronunciation problems:

1. Tense and lax vowels

Vietnamese recognize the differences between /i/ and /ɪ/ and /u/ and /ʊ/, but they would pronounce them the same. When they pronounce “sheep” and “ship,” there will be no difference. When they pronounce “food” (/fud/) and “good” (/gʊd/), they would pronounce the two vowels (/u/ and /ʊ/) the same. For Vietnamese, /e/ and /æ/ sound the same, and they cannot recognize the differences between them. They would pronounce “bed” and “bad” the same (Nguyen, T. D., 2015).

2. Voiced and voiceless stops

In Vietnamese, there are voiceless stops /p/, /t/, /k/ at the end of words, but not voiced stops /b/, /d/, /g/. However, they usually pronounce the ending voiceless stops very short in English, therefore, they are hardly heard (Nguyen, T. D., 2015).

3. Fricative consonants

Fricatives (/f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/) do not appear at the end of Vietnamese words. Therefore, Vietnamese often miss these sounds at the end of English words. Vietnamese also are confused with the consonants /s/ and /z/ and have pronunciation problems with /θ/ and /ð/. “Zip” would pronounce just as “sip.” They would say “thank” like “tank.” The /ð / sound are sometimes replaced by /d/ or /z/ sounds, so Vietnamese may say “than” as /dæn/ or /zæn/ (Avery & Ehrlich, 2012; Nguyen, T. D., 2015).

4. Consonant clusters

Vietnamese are unfamiliar with consonant clusters and they do not occur in initial or final position of Vietnamese words. Therefore, Vietnamese have difficulties producing these sounds in words as in “problem,” “train,” “climb,” “lacks,” “ask,” “seats,” and “restaurant,” etc. (Avery & Ehrlich, 2012; Nguyen, T. D., 2015; “Thought on Teaching Vietnamese Learners,” 2015; “Vietnamese Pronunciation Problems in English,” n.d.)

5. Inflectional suffix “-s”

Vietnamese language does not have the plural or third person singular suffix “-s.” Therefore, it is often omitted (Nguyen, T. D., 2015; “Thought on Teaching Vietnamese Learners,” 2015). For example, “Mary likes chocolate” may sound like “Mary like chocolate.”

Besides having problems on the segmental side of English pronunciation, Vietnamese also face problems on the suprasegmental side. Figure 1 illustrated the segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 120).

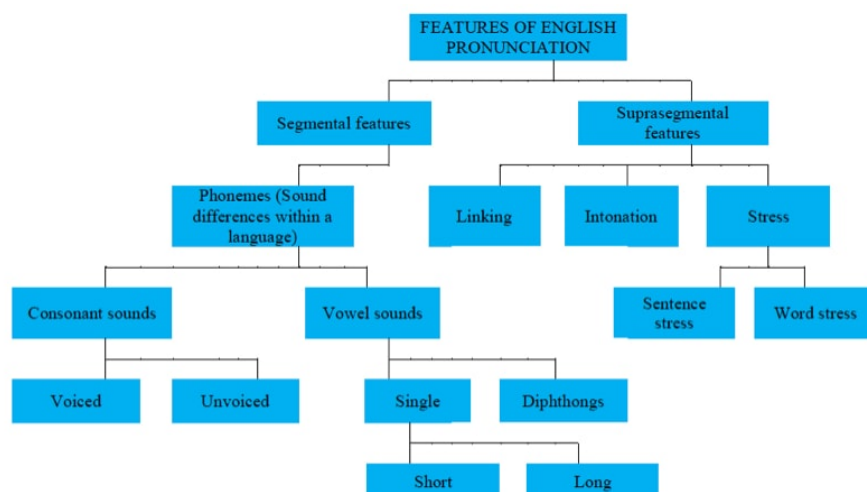


Figure 1. Segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 120).

Among the suprasegmental features, Vietnamese have difficulties on English word stress (Nguyen, T. D., 2015; Nguyen & Ingram, 2005). Vietnamese is a tonal language and a syllable-timed language whereas English is a stress-timed language. An English word can have one or more syllables, and a multi-syllable English word can have multiple stresses. For example, there is a primary stress on the third syllable and a secondary stress on the first syllable in the four-syllable word “interaction.”

When the stress is on the first syllable in the word “present,” it can be a noun meaning “gift.” When the stress is on the second, it can be a verb meaning “to give something to someone.” The position of stress can make a difference in meanings in English. In contrast, Vietnamese does not have a stress system like English (Nguyen, T. D., 2015; Nguyen & Ingram, 2005). Vietnamese words have a system of six tones. When the pitch changes, the meaning changes. Nguyen and Ingram (2005) stated that in English, stressed syllables are longer than unstressed syllables (i.e., duration is an active correlate in producing word stress), and unstressed vowels tend to be reduced. In contrast, in Vietnamese, a syllable-timed language, no systematic difference in duration or vowel quality among syllables has been found. (p.311) Nguyen and Ingram (2005) found that Vietnamese “failed to differentiate English stressed and unstressed syllables in terms of duration” (p.317) when they were beginners, but not advanced speakers. It would take some time for Vietnamese to get accustomed to the stress system in English.

Conceptions of Learning

When someone accumulates experiences of a particular event in a particular environment, a conception about the particular event will be formed (Pratt, 1992). As someone learns in a particular environment, he/she will begin to form a conception of learning, realizing what learning is about and what the learning objectives, processes, and activities are to himself/herself (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999; Marton, 1981; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004). Phan (2008) maintained that the conception of learning may affect how someone would learn, which also affect the learning outcome (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Chan (2014) also found that the conceptions of English language learning may change after exposing the learners to a particular English language learning experience. Under the unique English language learning environment in Vietnam, Vietnamese learners of English would form a particular conception towards English learning.

Aims of this Study

In this study, a set of English learning materials was developed for a company’s staff training course which lasted for about four months in Vietnam. The materials were tailored according to the needs of the staff and the company. The English course was divided into two parts (two months for each part) and was held after the staff’s regular working hours twice a week in the evening. The staff participated in the course voluntarily. As mentioned above, how one thinks about learning influenced how he/she goes about learning (Phan, 2008) and the learning outcome (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Also, a different English language learning experience could change someone’s conception of English learning (Chan, 2014). Therefore, the aims of this study were to find out whether this particular English learning experience would influence the learners’ conception of English learning and about their learning outcome.

Research Methods

The participants in this study were five Vietnamese staff members who had completed the entire four-month staff English language training course in Pro Active Global Vietnam Co., Ltd. (鋒明(越南)國際有限公司), which is a Taiwan

manufacturing company located in Binh Duong Province, Vietnam. At the beginning, seven Vietnamese staff members were enrolled in the training course and later on two dropped out due to their heavy work load and busy time schedule, leaving five completed the whole course. The seven participants' personal information regarding their English learning history and belief was collected before the course started. All of them stated that they had learned English before the training course, 28.7% in junior high school, 71.4% in senior high school and 28.6% in university. In average, they had learned English for 3 years. Six of them expressed that they could briefly introduce themselves in English and only one could not. The participants expressed that they liked or really like English. It was rated at 4.43 on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Really dislike English to 5=really like English). Also, they believed that English was very important to them. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "very unimportant" to "very important," the importance of English was rated at 4.57.

Before the development of the English learning materials for the staff training course, a need analysis was done to find out what the Vietnamese staff members wanted to learn and what the company wanted the staff to learn in the English course. A Vietnamese version of the need assessment survey was given to the Vietnamese staff members and a Chinese version was given to the administration manager. Then, the data of the surveys was analyzed. Most of the Vietnamese staff members (85.7%) expressed that they wanted to learn daily life English, and 14.3 % wanted to prepare for English proficiency tests. All of them wanted to improve their English speaking skills, 85.7% listening skills, 71.4% pronunciation, 57.1 % writing skills, 42.9% reading skills and 28.6% grammar. On the other hand, the administration manager wanted the staff to learn English related to their job and he thought that improving the staff's English listening and speaking skills was more important for the company. Based on the results, a set of English learning materials was designed to match with their needs. The materials were focused on both daily life English and English specifically related to their job, and improving the staff's listening and speaking skills was the main goal. Also, to maximize the opportunities of communication, student-centered approach was used to design the lessons.

In this study, the concepts of phenomenography were adopted as it is often used to explore people's thinking and learning (Marton, 1986) and conceptions of teaching and learning (Gao & Watkins, 2010). Phenomenography is a non-intrusive way to study the ideas of learning. In this study, the descriptions of experience of English language learning was collected before and after the training course. The collected descriptions were put into qualitatively different categories to identify different conceptions of learning (Marton & Booth, 1997). At the beginning of the course, a pre-survey asking the participants' conceptions of English learning was given to the Vietnamese staff members. At the end of the course, they were given a post-survey to find out whether they have changed their conceptions of English learning. The pre- and post-surveys included the question "What do you think English learning is like?" in Vietnamese. The data from the pre- and post-surveys were translated to English and analyzed separately, and similar ideas were put in the same category. Each idea will be counted and the categories were ranked according to the popularity of the ideas appeared in the data. To clarify the categories, some of the categorized data was quoted as examples in the result section of the study. To ensure reliability and validity of the results, a second rater were employed to review and to seek agreement on the results of the data analysis.

An English language pre-test and a post-test were also given to the participants before and at the end of each part of the training course. The pre-test and post-test of the first part of the course included 30% listening, 25% speaking, 20% reading and 25% writing questions. The pre-test and post-test of the second part of the course included 50% listening, 10% speaking, 20% reading and 20% reading questions. To find out the participants' learning outcome of the course, the scores of the pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using dependent-sample t-tests on the on the Social Science Statistics website.

(<http://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/ttestdependent/Default2.aspx>)

Results

Conceptions of English learning prior to the training course

In the pre-survey data, there were a total of 11 entries of ideas about English learning. From these 11 entries, 3 categories of conceptions of English learning appeared – attitude towards English learning, acquisition knowledge, and application (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

The most popular conception of English learning concerned the attitude towards English learning. Some participants showed fondness towards English learning; some thought it was difficult, but one participant thought it was easy.

Examples:

I like learning English, but English language is difficult and complicated.

Learning English is easy to me. It will not give me stress.

Acquisition of knowledge referred to acquisition of English language skills and knowledge in general.

Examples:

Learning English can improve English skills, vocabulary and structures.

Learning English gives you power because I can learn more new things.

Application referred to using English language at work and the usefulness of English language in general.

Examples:

Although learning English is a little difficult, it can enhance work effectiveness and give your higher salary.

Learning English is useful.

Conceptions of English learning after the training course

In the post-survey data, there were a total of 13 entries of ideas about English learning. From the 13 entries, 4 categories of conceptions of English learning emerged – ways of learning, application, attitude towards English learning, and acquisition of knowledge (see Table 1 and Figure 3). Among the 4 categories, the category “ways of learning” was a new conception of English learning, which did not appear before the training course. Also, it was the dominant conception of English learning after the training course. The next most popular conceptions concerned application, followed by the attitude towards English learning and acquisition of knowledge.

Ways of learning referred to how English language was to be learned.

Examples:

Learning English is to speak English every day.

Learning English is to learn a lot of vocabulary.

Application referred to being able to use English language to communicate with others and using English language in daily life and at work.

Examples:

Learning English is mainly to communicate.

Learning English is to apply it in daily life and at work.

About attitude towards English learning, one participant thought that learning English was difficult and one thought it was exciting.

After the training course, acquisition of knowledge referred only to acquisition of English language skills.

Example:

Learning English is to speak and pronounce accurately.

Table 1. Conceptions of English Learning Prior to and After the training course

Prior	After
<p>Attitude towards English learning 63.64%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I like learning English (36.36%) ▪ Learning English is difficult (18.18%) ▪ Learning English is easy (9.09%) <p>Acquisition of knowledge 18.18%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acquisition of English language skills (9.09%) ▪ Acquisition of Knowledge in general (9.09%) <p>Application 18.18%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning English is to apply it at work (9.09%) ▪ Learning English is useful (9.09%) 	<p>Ways of learning 38.46%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ways of learning concerning methods (38.46%) <p>Application 30.77%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning English is to be able to use English to communicate with others (15.38%) ▪ Learning English is to apply it in daily life (7.69%) ▪ Learning English is to apply it at work (7.69%) <p>Attitude towards English learning 15.38%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning English is difficult (7.69%) ▪ Learning English is excited (7.69%) <p>Acquisition of knowledge 15.38%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acquisition of English language skills (15.38%)

*n = 5

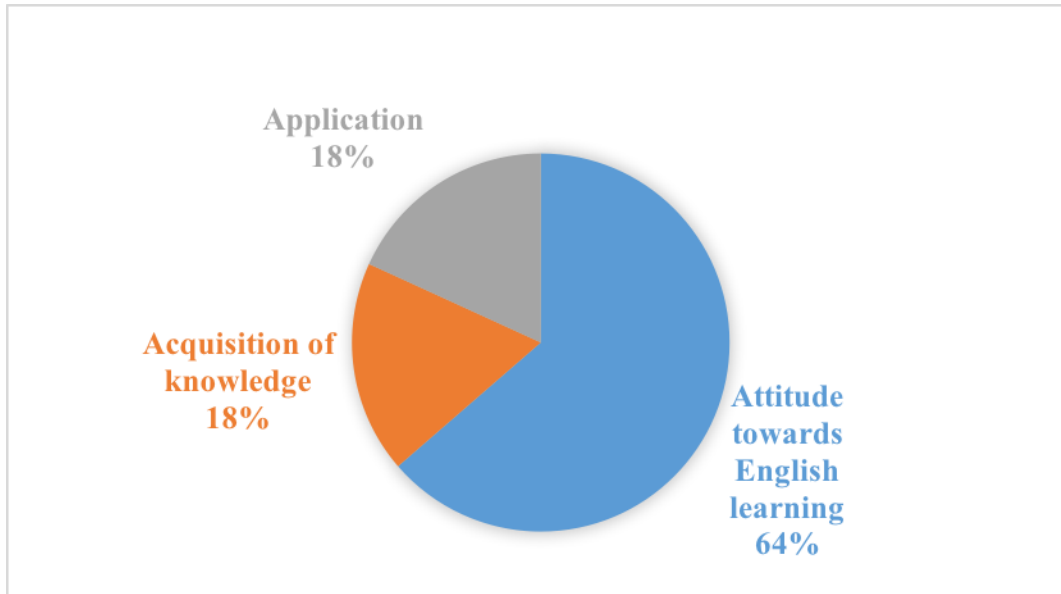


Figure 2. Percentages of the categories of conceptions of English learning prior to the training course

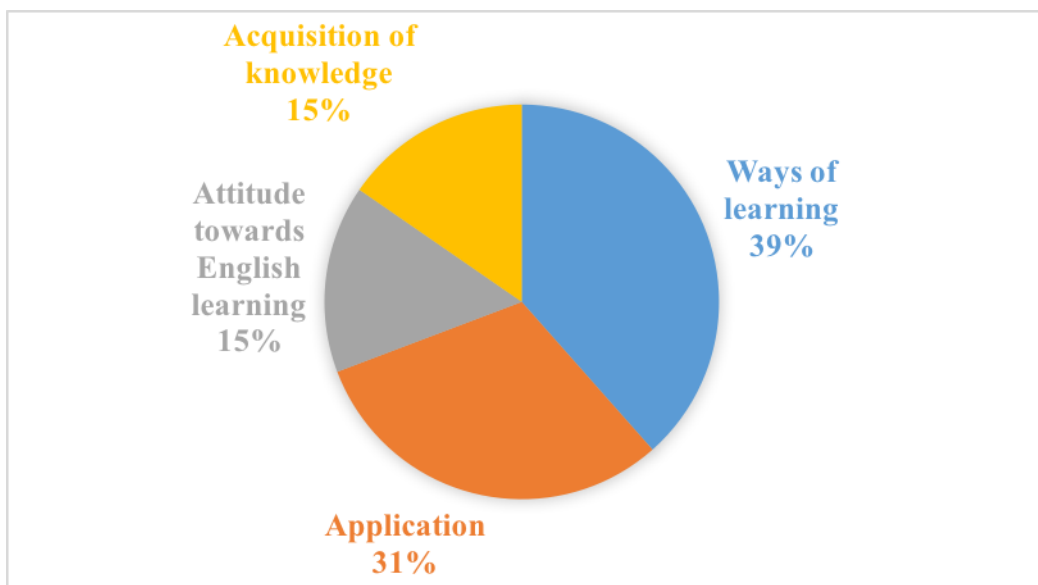


Figure 3. Percentages of the categories of conceptions of English learning after the training course

Learning outcome

In order to find out the learning outcome of the training course, dependent-sample t-tests were conducted to analyze the pre-test and post-test scores of the first and second parts of the training course separately.

The analyses of pre-test and post-test of the first part of the training course showed significant improvement in the speaking, writing and overall scores ($P < 0.05$) with mean differences at 4.40, 12.20 and 21.00 respectively while the reading scores did not show a significant difference at $P \leq 0.05$ but it showed a significant difference at $P \leq 0.10$ with a mean difference at 2.40, and the listening scores did not show a

significant difference ($P>0.10$) (see Table 2 and 3).

The analyses of pre-test and post-test of the second part of the training course showed significant improvement in the listening and overall scores ($P<0.05$) with mean differences at 9.00 and 13.50 respectively while the speaking scores did not show a significant difference at $P \leq 0.05$ but it showed a significant difference at $P \leq 0.10$ with a mean difference at 0.90, and the reading and writing scores did not show a significant difference ($P>0.10$) (see Table 2 and 3).

In short, all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were significantly improved in some points of the training course. Also, the overall scores in both the first and second parts of the training course showed significant improvement.

Table 2. The Means and Standard Deviations of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Scores of the Pre-tests and Post-tests of the First and Second Parts of the Training Course

Part Items	Pre-test Scores		Post-test Scores	
	Means	SD	Means	SD
First part (n=5)				
Listening (30)	26.00	5.48	30.00	0.00
Speaking (25)	17.00	3.81	21.40	1.34
Reading (20)	17.60	2.19	20.00	0.00
Writing (25)	9.80	5.67	22.00	2.00
Total (100)	72.40	12.99	93.40	2.97
Second part (n=5)				
Listening (50)	39.00	4.18	48.00	2.74
Speaking (10)	7.00	0.71	7.90	0.55
Reading (20)	17.20	4.09	19.80	0.45
Writing (20)	12.20	4.44	14.00	1.87
Total (100)	75.40	9.21	88.90	3.68
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Part – Items	Mean Difference		Sig. (2-tailed)	
First part – Listening				
Pre – Post	4.00		0.178	
First part – Speaking				
Pre – Post	4.40		0.024*	
First part – Reading				
Pre – Post	2.40		0.070**	
First part – Writing				
Pre – Post	12.20		0.005*	
First part – Total				
Pre – Post	21.00		0.016*	
<hr/>				
Second part – Listening				
Pre – Post	9.00		0.037*	
Second part – Speaking				
Pre – Post	0.90		0.088**	
Second part – Reading				
Pre – Post	2.60		0.240	

Pre – Post		
Second part – Writing		
Pre – Post	1.80	0.244
Second part – Total		
Pre – Post	13.5	0.023*

**The result is significant at $p \leq 0.10$.

*The result is significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

Table 3. Significance of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Scores between the Pre-tests and Post-tests of the First and Second Parts of the Training Course

Discussion

In this study, a four-month English language training course was designed for the Vietnamese staff members in Pro Active Global Vietnam Co., Ltd. The English language course materials were designed according to the results of the need analysis of the Vietnamese staff and administration manager. The course focused on daily life English, English specifically related to their job, and improving the staff's listening and speaking skills. The lessons were communicative-driven and student-centered. The results of this study showed that after the training course, there were changes in the conceptions of English language learning of the participants. Before the training course, the conceptions of English language learning dominated by personal feelings towards learning English language itself (e.g. "I like learning English"), which belonged to the category of attitude towards English learning. However, after the training course, the dominant category was "ways of learning," and the category "application" became more prominent than before. It could be that after the unique English language learning experience in the training course, the participants came to realize that there were methods to learn English language and realize the usefulness and purpose of learning English language. In other words, they showed a deeper understanding of what English language learning is about. It was consistent with research's findings that as someone learns in a particular environment, he/she will begin to form a conception of learning, realizing what learning is about and what the learning objectives, processes, and activities are to himself/herself (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999; Marton, 1981; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004) and Chan's (2014) finding that the conceptions of English language learning may change after exposing the learners to a particular English language learning experience.

Looking at the learning outcome, participants' speaking skills were improved in both the first and second parts of the training course, and listening skills were improved in the second part of the training course, which met the goals of the training course. It seemed that the communicative activities in the course played an important role in improving listening and speaking skills. Nevertheless, the listening scores did not show a significant difference in the first part. It could be that the listening scores were already high at the beginning of the course; therefore, there was little room to find out whether there was improvement after the first part of the course. In the second part of the course, the difficulty of the listening part of the pre- and post-tests was raised and the number of questions was also increased. With these changes, a significant improvement on listening skills was found. Communication involves listening and speaking skills. Listening is a receptive skill and speaking is a productive skill. Without listening input, speaking skills will be hard to improve. As speaking skills improved, the improvement of listening skills could be expected. Overall, there were

significant improvements in the first and second parts of the course. In the first part, the total scores went up from 72.40 to 93.40. In the second part of the course, the total scores went up from 75.40 to 88.90. In short, the training course did improve the participants' learning outcome.

There were limitations in this study. The number of participants were small. The results could only apply to the particular environment in this study. Since the formation of conceptions of learning is context-dependent, to understand more about the conceptions of English learning of Vietnamese staff in manufacturing companies, further research should be done. Furthermore, how the participants went about learning English language was not investigated in this study. Nevertheless, how one thinks about learning may influence how he/she goes about learning (Phan, 2008) and the learning outcome (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Therefore, it should be done to explore how it could be related to their change of conceptions of English language learning and their learning outcome in future studies.

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