

Students' preferences for attributes of a B1 English level course: A conjoint analysis

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Abstract:

The increasing demand and requirements of the recruitment market towards foreign languages, especially English, has prompted many universities in Vietnam to consider English certificate as one of the mandatory conditions for students to be graduated. This has increased the demand for English courses. This study aims to ascertain students' preferences and willingness to pay for attributes of a B1 English level course. Through an experimental approach, we conducted a survey among students enrolled at An Giang University (Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City). The findings indicate that the most significant attribute influencing student preferences for an English course is the reputation of the foreign language centres offering the course, followed by the tuition fee, assurance policies for learning outcomes, and foreign teachers. Additionally, the course duration, availability of free materials, and proximity of the language centre to the student's residence are also important factors affecting student interests. Based on these results, several implications are suggested for foreign language centres to develop effective marketing strategies aimed at attracting learners.

Keywords: B1 English level course, conjoint analysis, preferences, student.

Classification number: 3.2

1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that one of the aims of education is to meet societal and professional requirements. Within the context of global integration, foreign languages, particularly English, are indispensable tools for university graduates. Many organizations now require candidates to possess a certain level of foreign language proficiency, which varies depending on the specific job position.

In response to the growing demands of the labour market, university graduates must acquire a certain level of English proficiency, as dictated by the regulations of their respective universities.

For instance, An Giang University mandates that students obtain a foreign language certificate at level 3 (e.g., a B1 English level certificate) or higher, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), in order to be eligible for graduation and receive a university degree. Consequently, there is a substantial demand for English language training courses at this level.

Recognising this need, numerous foreign language centres in An Giang province have begun offering B1 level English courses. These courses possess various attributes aimed at attracting learners. Understanding which attributes of the English course are crucial to learners is essential for foreign language centres in

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designing effective course policies and incorporating these key attributes in their communication strategies to engage students. Conjoint analysis (CA) has been widely used to explore customer preferences for the attributes of products or services [1-3]. However, few studies apply the CA method to elicit students' preferences for the attributes of a B1 level English course in Vietnam in general and in An Giang province in particular.

Therefore, this research aimed to identify the attributes of an English course that learners prefer. The study's findings provide valuable insights for foreign language centres, enabling them to understand the crucial aspects of a B1 English level course from the learner's perspective. This understanding can guide the centres in formulating effective policies to attract and engage students in their courses.

2. Methodology

This study employed a conjoint-type experiment to collect data on customer preferences regarding the attributes of an English course. Initially, the researchers carefully selected the attributes and their respective levels for the course. The determination of these attributes and levels was based on the following steps: (1) consideration of the course attributes offered by prominent foreign language centres in An Giang province, and (2) conducting group discussions with relevant customers, including students and potential learners. The outcomes of these group discussions revealed that customers demonstrated a keen interest in factors such as the prestige of the foreign language centres providing the course, followed by the tuition fee, assurance policies for learning outcomes, and the quality of foreign teachers. A summary of the attributes and their corresponding levels for the B1 English level course is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The attributes and levels of each attribute of a B1 level English course.

No.	Attribute	The level of the attribute		
1	Duration (50 minutes per period)	30 periods/course	40 periods/course	60 periods/course
2	Tuition fees	VND 2,000,000	VND 3,700,000	VND 4,500,000
3	Prestige of foreign language centre (1 star: bad, 2 stars: average, 3 stars: good)	1 star/3 stars	2 stars/3 stars	3 stars/3 stars
4	Distance to the centre	≤2 km	>2 km	
5	Policies to ensure output for learners	No	Learners can re-study for free if they do not pass the test for B1 level certificate	
6	Teachers are foreigners	No	Yes	
7	Document fees	Free	VND 50,000	

Source: Authors' calculation.

After identifying the attributes and their corresponding levels, we proceeded to design various course options. These options resulted in a total of 432 possible combinations of attribute levels (432=3332222). Evaluating all of these options would have been challenging for participants. Hence, we employed a fractional factorial design using the SPSS software [4] to create an orthogonal design. The outcome of this orthogonal design was 16 options, each representing a unique combination of attributes at different levels.

To gather data on students' preferences for the B1 English level course within a CA study, we conducted an online survey. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants were instructed to carefully evaluate the 16 options mentioned above and rate each option using a 5-level Likert-type scale (1: strongly unfavourable, 5: strongly favourable). The second part of the questionnaire focused on collecting demographic information about the participants. In total, 188 students from An Giang University participated in the survey.

Based on the participants' evaluations of the design options, the authors employed the CA method

to estimate the part-worth utility value assigned by the participants to each level of the attributes. This estimation was carried out using the following model [5]:

$$U = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^m \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_{ij} X_{ij}$$

where U is the total utility of the participants for an option, α is a constant, β_{ij} is the part-worth utility for level j of attribute i , m is the number of attributes, n is the number of levels of attribute i , and X_{ij} is the j level of attribute i [5].

3. Results

According to the data presented in Fig. 1, approximately 60% of the participants in the survey were first-year students (academic year 2021-2022), while second-year students (academic year 2020-2021) accounted for 26.6% of the sample population. These students are of particular significance as they are the primary focus of Decision No. 656/QĐ-ĐHAG, issued on 27/5/2020 by the Rector of An Giang University, which outlines the English language proficiency requirements for university students. The decision stipulates that students must attain a B1 English level certificate or its equivalent in order to obtain a university diploma.

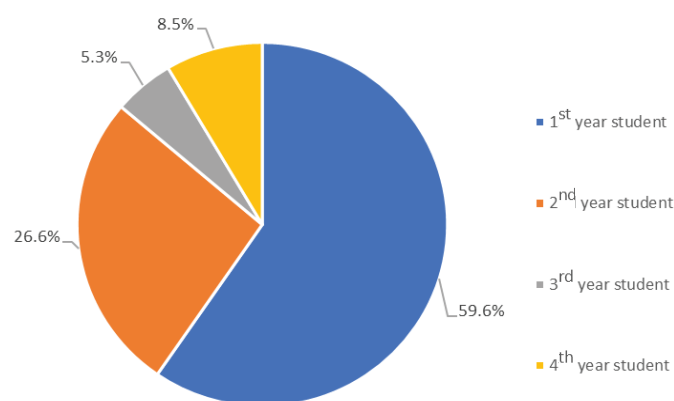


Fig. 1. Participants' information. Source: Authors' survey on information of the participants.

The participating students expressed that they are currently dedicating less time to English language learning. It is important to note that none of the students in the sample has possessed a B1 English level certificate yet. Consequently, the majority of students acknowledged the need for further training and have been seeking English language courses at foreign language centres.

Table 2 presents the results of the CA model. Part A of Table 2 demonstrates the goodness of fit of the model, as indicated by Pearson's R and Kendall's tau statistics, which reveal a correlation between observed preferences and the estimated model. Part B of Table 2 displays the estimated part-worth utility for each level of the attributes in a B1

Table 2. Results of the conjoint analysis.

Part A			
(Correlations ^a)		Value	Sig.
1	Pearson's R	0.969	0.000
2	Kendall's tau	0.933	0.000
Part B			
Attributes	Attribute levels	Part-worth utility	Std. error
Teachers are foreigners	Yes	0.104	0.031
	No	-0.104	0.031
Document fees	VND 50,000	-0.059	0.031
	Free	0.059	0.031
Policies to ensure output for learners	Yes	0.136	0.031
	No	-0.136	0.031
Tuition fees	VND 4,500,000	0.191	0.038
	VND 3,700,000	0.382	0.076
	VND 2,000,000	0.574	0.113
Duration	60 periods/course	-0.072	0.038
	40 periods/course	-0.145	0.076
	30 periods/course	-0.217	0.113
Prestige of foreign language centre	1 star/3 stars	0.291	0.038
	2 stars/3 stars	0.582	0.076
	3 stars/3 stars	0.873	0.113
Distance from the student's residence to the centre	2 km	-0.047	0.063
	>2 km	-0.093	0.125
Constant		2.571	0.151

Note: ^a: Correlations between observed and estimated preferences. Source: Authors' calculation.

English level course, as derived from Model (1). The findings highlight that the combination of attributes consisting of a foreign teacher, provision of free materials (i.e., documents), assurance policies for learning outcomes, a tuition fee of VND 2,000,000 per course, a course duration of 60 periods, a highly rated prestige of the language centre (3 stars), and a short distance (≤ 2 km) between the student’s residence and the language centre, yields the highest utility for the course ($U=2.571-0.047+0.873-0.072+0.574+0.136+0.059+0.104=4.198$).

The research results, as depicted in Fig. 2, highlighted that the most crucial attribute influencing student preferences for a B1 English level course is the prestige of the language centre that offers the course. Following closely in importance is the attribute of tuition fee, accompanied by the assurance policies provided by the centre to learners, among other attributes.

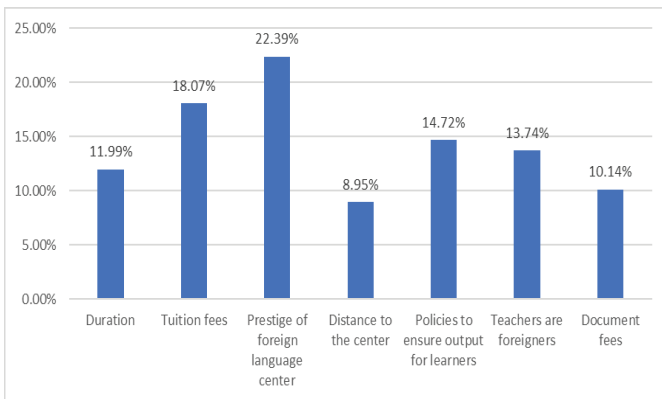


Fig. 2. The importance of the B1 English level course’s attributes. Source: Authors’ calculation.

Furthermore, the estimated part-worth utility value obtained from Model (1) provides insights into the monetary value of utility. Specifically, each unit of utility corresponds to VND 6,527,000 $[(VND 4,500,000-2,000,000)/(0.574-0.191)]$. This information allows us to determine the additional amount of money students are willing to pay when considering trade-offs with other attributes of

the course. For instance, learners demonstrate a willingness to pay an additional VND 1,775,000 $[(0.136-(-0.136))*6,527,000]$ for a language centre that provides assurance policies, and a premium of VND 1,357,000 $[(0.104-(-0.104))*6,527,000]$ for a centre that employs foreign teachers.

The findings also indicate that students are willing to pay an extra VND 300,000 $[(0.047-(-0.093))*6,527,000 VND]$ for a course at a language centre located within a 2 km radius of their residence. In-depth interviews further support this, with more than 60% of students expressing a preference for studying near their homes to facilitate travel. Consequently, foreign language centres aiming to attract a larger number of learners should consider establishing small or medium-sized centres in residential areas, as opposed to establishing a single large language centre.

The estimated part-worth utility value derived from model (1) can be utilised to forecast the market share of student preferences for each option of B1 English level courses offered by different language centres [5]. In order to predict students’ course choices, the authors employed a maximum utility model. This model assumes that individuals will select the option that provides them with the highest level of utility, and the market share of these choices can then be calculated.

To conduct the simulation, the authors developed two scenarios. The first scenario (Part A, Table 3) serves as the reference and comprises three options: three B1 English level courses offered by three language centres (referred to as Centre A, Centre B, and Centre C) in An Giang province. The second scenario (Part B, Table 3) introduces a simulation in which Centre C (i.e., option 3) offers learners assurance policies for learning outcomes and employs foreign teachers, while simultaneously increasing the tuition fee from VND 2,000,000 to VND 3,700,000. The attributes of the other options remain unchanged.

Table 3. Market share simulation scenarios.

Part A - References scenarios			
Attribute	Option 1 Centre A	Option 2 Centre B	Option 3 Centre C
Tuition fees (VND)	4,500,000	3,700,000	2,000,000
Duration	60 periods/ course	40 periods/ course	30 periods/ course
Prestige of foreign language centre	3 stars/3 stars	2 stars/3 stars	2 stars/3 stars
Distance from student residence to the centre (km)	2	2	2
Teachers are foreigners	No	No	No
Document fees	Free	Free	Yes
Policies to ensure output for learners	Yes	Yes	No
Part B - Simulation scenarios			
Tuition fees (VND)	4,500,000	3,700,000	3,700,000
Duration	60 periods/ course	40 periods/ course	30 periods/ course
Prestige of foreign language centre	3 stars/3 stars	2 stars/3 stars	2 stars/3 stars
Distance from student residence to the centre (km)	2	2	2
Teachers are foreigners	No	No	Yes
Document fees	Free	Free	Yes
Policies to ensure output for learners	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors' calculation.

Market share simulation results for both scenarios are presented in Table 4. In the reference scenario, Option 1 emerges as the dominant choice with a market share of 62.80%. Option 3 follows with a market share of 21.50%, while Option 2 captures 15.70% of the market. These findings closely align with the actual market shares of the foreign language centres offering B1 English level courses in An Giang province. In the simulation scenario, the results demonstrate that despite a substantial 1,700,000 VND (85%) increase in tuition fees, Centre C manages to significantly increase its market share by 14.9 percentage points, rising from 21.50 to 36.40%.

Table 4. Market share simulation results.

The service providers	Option 1 Centre A	Option 2 Centre B	Option 3 Centre C
Current actual market share (%)	64.17	10.83	25.00
References scenario market share (%)	62.80	15.70	21.50
Simulation scenario market share (%)	52.10	11.40	36.40

Source: Authors' calculation.

4. Conclusions and implications

This study utilised the CA method to ascertain students' preferences for attributes of a B1 English level course. The findings highlight several key attributes that significantly influence student preferences, namely the reputation of the language centre, tuition fees, assurance policies for learning outcomes, presence of foreign teachers, course duration, availability of free materials, and proximity to the student's residence.

Based on these results, several implications can be drawn to assist foreign language centres in developing marketing strategies to enhance competitiveness and attract learners. Firstly, it is crucial for a B1 English level course to encompass attributes that strongly resonate with and influence the interests and choices of learners, with the reputation of the language centre being of utmost importance. Centres should strive to improve teaching programs and the quality of instruction, thereby creating genuine value for learners and fostering positive word-of-mouth promotion. Secondly, the provision of assurance policies for learning outcomes is vital, as it instils confidence in learners when selecting a foreign language centre. Thirdly, the inclusion of foreign teachers is recommended to attract more students. Lastly, it is advisable for foreign language centres to continually monitor and adapt their course attributes in response to competitors' strategies, thereby enhancing competitiveness.

The paper does have certain limitations that should be considered for future research. Specifically, expanding the survey scope to encompass a wider

geographical area would enhance the generalisability of the research results. In summary, this research represents an initial and significant effort in providing insights into the preferences of customers (students) regarding a B1 English level course.

5. Suggestions for further studies

Based on the research results and an limitations, several future research directions are proposed. Firstly, expanding the survey scope to cover the entire country would yield more comprehensive and generalisable findings. Additionally, extending the research duration to maximise the sample size would ensure more representative analyses.

This research serves as a baseline and an important step towards gaining a deeper understanding of the decision-making process and preferences of customers (students) when selecting a B1 English course. It provides preliminary insights into the psychological factors influencing customers' decision-making processes. However, to apply these results to real-life cases, further practical studies are necessary, which can build upon the foundations established by this study.

CRediT author statement

Tran Chi Kiet: Literature Review, Data Collection, Data Analysis; Doan Vinh Thang: Literature Review, Methodology, Data Analysis, Writing Manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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