

## Current Situation and Solutions to Improve the Quality of Non-Specialized English Teaching at Universities in Vietnam



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**ABSTRACT:** Vietnam has deeply integrated into regional and international communities. As a result, English has become increasingly important because it's widely used in areas such as commerce, economics, science, and technology, and is a common requirement in human resource recruitment, especially in foreign companies and organizations. For many years, foreign language learning has become increasingly popular and is now a compulsory subject in universities in Vietnam. Despite significant achievements, the quality of non-specialized English teaching at universities in Vietnam still faces many limitations. This situation requires appropriate solutions to enhance quality.

**KEYWORDS:** Current status, solutions, quality improvement, English teaching, universities, Vietnam.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is deeply integrating into the international community across various fields such as economics, tourism, and technology, especially high technology. This integration process necessitates foreign language proficiency. Recognizing the importance of foreign languages, particularly English, on September 30, 2008, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 144/QĐ-TTg approving the project for teaching and learning foreign languages within the national education system for the 2008-2020 period. Later, on December 22, 2017, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg to adjust and supplement the project for the 2017-2025 period. Thus, training to develop foreign language proficiency in general, and English in particular, for non-specialized students at universities is one of the essential tasks. Over the years, the government has devoted significant attention to improving the overall quality of education and specifically the quality of English teaching for non-specialized students.

However, in practice, English teaching and learning activities, as well as the management of English education for non-specialized students at universities, still face many limitations. In reality, many graduates have weak English skills, which are not highly regarded by society or employers. This can be attributed in part to the ineffective management and organization of the English teaching process for non-specialized students at some universities. Furthermore, the curriculum is overly focused on theoretical knowledge, and the management of teaching and assessment processes has not adequately accounted for students' diverse capabilities.

### 2. CURRENT STATUS OF NON-SPECIALIZED ENGLISH TEACHING AT VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES

Foreign languages hold a significant role, and societal expectations for young people's language proficiency are high. However, students' current foreign language competency falls short of these expectations. Specifically:

**Listening skills are the most challenging:** Most students find listening comprehension to be the hardest skill, with some considering it relatively new, despite having studied English for 7 years or at least 3 years during secondary and high school education (An. N. N, 2011).

**Weak English skills:** In 2012, the University of Danang reported that only 20-30% of students could follow English courses at university. The remaining students required remedial classes before starting official courses (UND, 2012).

**Employers' dissatisfaction:** Businesses have highlighted that graduates' English proficiency often fails to meet workplace requirements. While students can comprehend documents, their communication, writing, and presentation skills remain weak (Duc. N, 2016).

**Confidence levels are low:** Jobstreet.com data from 2015 revealed that only 5% of recent graduates were confident in their English abilities, while 27% admitted to having very poor foreign language skills. This lack of proficiency creates barriers for graduates seeking jobs and undermines Vietnamese professionals' confidence in international integration.

Moreover, in 2017, at a conference organized by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM), it was reported that as of December 2016, only 10-15% of undergraduates met English proficiency standards (VNU-ETP certification).

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For postgraduate students, the percentage of those failing to meet English graduation requirements increased from 41% in the 2013 cohort to 50.8% in 2015 (Ha Anh, 2018).

A survey by the Higher Education Department revealed the following regarding English skills after graduation: About 49.3% of students met employers' requirements. 18.9% did not meet these requirements. 31.8% needed additional training. This data indicates that over half of university graduates lack sufficient English skills, a worrying reality. Developing language skills requires a balanced focus on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, Vietnamese students, despite strong grammar training during school, lack practical opportunities for speaking and listening. This results in weak application of English in real-world scenarios (HUTECH, 2020).

**Challenges in Non-Specialized English Teaching.** A study by Chu Thi Bich Lien (2022) at the Academy of Journalism and Communication with 40 second year students revealed significant challenges: **Large class sizes (40 students):** This hinders organizing speaking activities and providing adequate attention to all students. **Uneven skill levels:** Teachers spend more time reinforcing grammar and vocabulary for weaker students, leaving insufficient time for speaking practice. **Over reliance on Vietnamese:** Teachers often use Vietnamese for grammar instruction and communication outside class, which impacts students' English usage habits. **Speaking and listening skills:** 40% of students found speaking the most challenging skill, 30% struggled with listening, and 18% reported difficulties with writing, whereas reading was considered the easiest (12%) (Lien C.T.B, 2022).

Some main reasons affecting the quality of English training in universities are as follows: **Inconsistent pre-university English learning:** Students have varying amounts of exposure to English before entering university; *English not being an entrance examination subject:* This leads to uneven English proficiency among incoming students, who are not grouped or taught according to their competency levels; *Lack of specialized teacher training:* Teachers are often not adequately trained to teach non specialized or professional English; *Unclear course objectives:* English courses lack clearly defined goals for each stage of learning and academic level; *Unsystematic curriculum design:* Teaching materials are not systematically developed; *Overcrowded classrooms:* Large class sizes hinder effective teaching and individualized attention; *Insufficient teaching resources:* There is a lack of tools and equipment to support language instruction, such as multimedia tools and specialized facilities; *Limited practice environment:* Students lack a supportive environment to practice English communication; *Mismatch in goals and motivation:* The relationship between learning objectives, student motivation, and their needs or aspirations is not adequately addressed; *Disconnect from professional knowledge:* English learning often lacks relevance to students field specific knowledge and career development; *Lack of incentives for specialized English instruction:* There are few mechanisms to encourage the integration of English into subject specific teaching.

These issues relate to various aspects of the teaching and learning process, including societal needs, occupational requirements, personal motivation, infrastructure, and educational organization.

It's a fact that students in a single class often come from various localities both within and outside the province-most from rural districts, communes, and villages with differing learning conditions. This naturally leads to a wide range of diversity in their English proficiency and skills (English competence). Additionally, students have different learning motivations. Many do not recognize the importance of English as a key to job opportunities and future success. This disparity means that even with the same content and teaching methods, the level of comprehension and practice among students in a specialized class varies significantly. As a result, some difficulties in the teaching and learning process are inevitable.

The uneven proficiency levels among students lead to significant challenges: Classes often include students at varying levels, from beginners (those learning English for the first time) to intermediate level learners (those who have undergone seven years of English instruction); Urban students generally have better English skills than their rural peers due to earlier exposure and more resources; Such multi-level classes pose significant challenges for instructors as they find it difficult to meet all the needs of their students, thereby hindering the teaching and learning process.

When first year students enter university, some may have no prior knowledge of English and require basic training from scratch. Conversely, some students possess advanced English skills, and training them at the same level as beginners would be both inefficient and time consuming.

The amount of English training provided is not sufficient to equip all students with the fluency required to meet the needs of employers. In fact, both teachers and students at these institutions do not have enough time to teach and learn comprehensively.

Survey data from 18 universities in Vietnam revealed that first-year students scored an average of 220-245 out of 990 points on the TOEIC test. At this level, students would require approximately 360 hours (480 periods) of training to achieve a TOEIC score of 450-500, which is considered the minimum requirement by many employers. However, according to a survey conducted by the Higher Education Department, universities typically allocate only about 225 periods of English instruction (Tien Phong, 2017). This limited duration is insufficient for lecturers and students to fully cover and master all four skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing especially in overcrowded classrooms.

Overcrowded classes further exacerbate the issue: Non-specialized English classes often have more than 50 students, making it challenging for lecturers to provide individualized attention. Lecturers spend a significant amount of time maintaining

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classroom order and face difficulty managing and addressing the needs of all students, particularly those seated at the back. Consequently, many students, especially passive or shy individuals lacking confidence in their language abilities, miss out on opportunities to practice and develop their skills. The number of such students is not insignificant, given the diverse backgrounds and proficiency levels discussed earlier.

Insufficient facilities are another limitation: Non specialized English classrooms often lack dedicated spaces and essential equipment such as projectors, which are crucial for illustrating activities or specialized terms during lessons. These tools are vital for helping students grasp concepts more easily, retain knowledge quickly, and stay engaged with lessons through dynamic and practical visuals.

### 3. SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF NON-SPECIALIZED ENGLISH TEACHING IN VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES

#### *For Students*

In the past, learning a foreign language was perceived primarily as studying grammar and translation. Students were taught to read and appreciate literary works in the target language. Through foreign language grammar, they also enhanced their understanding of native grammar. Students would listen to explanations in their mother tongue and then write answers to questions in the foreign language. The goal was not communication proficiency, and learners played a passive role, absorbing knowledge imparted by the teacher. The depth of their knowledge depends entirely on the guidance of their teachers.

Later, language pedagogy evolved, recognizing that understanding a language without being able to use it rendered learning objectives unsatisfactory.

*Practical learning emphasizes communication:* Language is fundamentally about "speaking," and the ultimate goal of learning is to use the target language, primarily through listening and speaking activities. Students need to engage in a variety of mechanical exercises, such as practicing pronunciation or reading aloud. During the learning process, they should independently deduce grammatical principles through usage. To achieve this, students must actively participate in communicative activities such as conversation drills (conversational activities), pair work, or group practice, alongside whole-class exercises, including choral practice.

*Modern language teaching emphasizes communication skills:* It requires students to build communicative competence. According to this perspective, errors caused by external factors (e.g., noise, psychological stress, nervousness) are not considered a lack of communicative ability. This approach influences attitudes toward mistakes in language use, focusing instead on active engagement in skill-building activities. With teacher support as a facilitator and initiator, learners themselves lead the skill-building process.

Another principle highlights the importance of "information gaps" in communication. Without these, communication becomes meaningless. In class activities should help students recognize the practical value of what they are learning. This mindset influences the entire learning process, especially exercises focused on sentence structure, helping students avoid meaningless or artificial expressions. Genuine communication with real information makes it easier for students to remember and retain what they have learned. For example, two people might create fictional stories about past experiences using required sentence patterns. If the information is fabricated, the exercise may leave only a vague impression. A modern pedagogical concept explores the relationship between language and culture. Language is seen as a tool for communication, while culture represents the everyday lifestyle of those who speak the language (Hung. N. Q, 2004, pp. 18–19).

Incorporating real life contexts into the classroom has been a long standing goal of language educators. This vision has become more achievable with technologies like audio recordings, videos, and computers. Both in class and homework activities should incorporate these tools, as not doing so deprives learners of opportunities to engage with authentic language usage.

#### *Recommendations for Students:*

To effectively use the foreign language being studied, students should engage in the following activities: Actively watch television, videos, listen to the radio, read newspapers in English, or converse with native speakers whenever possible; Use English in various settings, not just in the classroom.; When speaking English, try to express yourself in any way possible, including gestures; Never fear making mistakes when speaking or writing in English; ask for clarification when unsure. Self-correct before seeking feedback from peers or teachers; Apply learned vocabulary and grammar structures in different situations. Try to infer the meaning of words or sentences from the context of lessons, listening exercises, or communication scenarios rather than relying too heavily on dictionaries; Practice correct pronunciation using tapes or CDs. Study in pairs or groups to enhance communication and collaboration skills.

Most importantly, each student must identify clear learning goals, adopt a positive attitude, and implement appropriate learning strategies to achieve high academic performance.

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### *For Lecturers*

In the early stages of English language teaching, the goal was to enable students to understand English literature and translate English literary works. The learning process demanded students to always be correct in their language usage, and errors were often punished. Consequently, the teacher became the sole source of knowledge and the one responsible for delivering it to students. The teacher determined everything in the classroom, what was right or wrong, whether students were allowed to participate, and when they should be disciplined or excused. In essence, the teacher was the central figure and sole authority in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p. 11).

Many subsequent teaching trends continued to view the teacher as a "model" for students to emulate, even in methods aimed at changing foreign language learning habits, such as pronunciation, sentence construction, and cultural conventions. The teacher's role was considered pivotal, akin to a conductor managing and directing students' activities.

With the evolution of modern pedagogy, the image of the teacher has been refined. Teachers are now seen as facilitators who enable students to communicate effectively. While students engage in communication, teachers act as advisors, helping them overcome challenges such as word usage and guiding the coordination of speech and actions. Teachers sometimes adopt roles as "peers" in certain communicative scenarios.

Modern teaching approaches redefine the teacher's role. It emphasizes communication as the primary goal of language learning and considers students as active communicators. Errors made during language use are seen as a natural part of the learning process and are not penalized. Consequently, the teacher's role in controlling classroom activities diminishes, while their role as a communication consultant, motivator for collaboration, and advisor to students' activities increases.

Despite the advances in technology, the role of the teacher remains irreplaceable. Ben Shneiderman, co-founder of AT&T Teaching at the University of Maryland, highlighted this point: "A computer is no smarter than a pencil and the sound of education is the buzz of students exchanging ideas" (Hung. N. Q, 2004).

### *Recommendations for Lecturers:*

To foster students autonomy and learning capacity, lecturers should consider the following: Design diverse activities: Create various types of activities with gradually increasing levels of difficulty tailored to different student groups; Use visual aids: Incorporate various visual teaching tools to make lessons more engaging and comprehensible; Timely rewards: Apply a reward system to recognize and encourage students' efforts and progress, promoting their motivation and determination to learn; Encourage active English use: Motivate students to use English actively during class to build confidence in their communication skills.

By adopting these strategies, lecturers can enhance the effectiveness of their teaching and better support students in developing their language abilities.

### *For Universities*

Enhance teaching and learning facilities: Universities should invest more in teaching and learning infrastructure to meet the demands of innovative teaching methods. This includes ensuring that classrooms are equipped with necessary tools and technology to support interactive and modern teaching practices.

*Reduce class sizes:* Implementing smaller class sizes (30-35 students per class) will provide students with more opportunities for communication practice and individualized attention from instructors.

*Organize networking events:* Universities should facilitate exchanges and interactions with representatives from domestic and international organizations and businesses. These events will help students understand employer expectations, enabling them to align their learning objectives with career requirements.

*Focus on effective content and methods:* Regardless of the complexity of the subject matter or the novelty of the teaching method, the crucial factor is whether the content and teaching methods are appropriate for the learners. It is essential to ensure that students can effectively absorb the material presented. Another critical consideration is the alignment of course content and teaching methods, particularly assessment and evaluation processes, with the goals and objectives of the course. If the quality of instruction is low, it is necessary to reassess and raise the objectives.

*Avoid external benchmarks that are misaligned with the course:* Universities should not adopt external benchmarks that are unsuitable for the course's context and learning goals. Confidence in internal standards allows for the design of appropriate objectives, content, and teaching methods tailored to specific courses.

By adhering to these principles, universities can hope to improve the quality of non-specialized English language education. This will better prepare students to meet the demands of regional and global educational integration.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In the current era of globalization and Vietnam's international integration, foreign languages in general, and English in particular, have become indispensable requirements. Thus, training students at universities to develop and enhance their foreign language skills, especially English, is a critical task. This contributes to the development of a high quality workforce for the labor

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market and improves the quality of higher education. To effectively teach non-specialized English, solutions are needed from various stakeholders, including management, lecturers, and students. Key areas of focus include: Developing policies and addressing management issues in English training at multidisciplinary universities; Innovating methods and practices in English teaching; Eliminating barriers for non-specialized students in learning English; Improving assessment methods for evaluating student performance in English programs. By addressing these areas, universities can better equip students with the language skills needed for success in both the domestic and global markets.

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