

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICIES IN HIGHER
EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY FOR VIETNAMESE
STUDENTS IN THE GLOBALIZED CONTEXT****PHAM HUY CUONG***

ABSTRACT: English language education takes a key role in the process of internationalization of higher education and enhances students' employability in the context of globalization. This article discusses central issues concerning English language policies, current practices, and stakeholders' endeavors to optimize students' advantages in the increasingly competitive local and global labor market. The findings reported here drew on contemporary literature and ministerial and institutional policies for language education at tertiary level in Vietnam. This study shows the value of English language teaching and learning for the internationalization of higher education, the efforts expended by educational stakeholders and the existing issues in implementing these policies and approaches. It concludes with implications for language policies and deployment of English language programs on both macro and micro scales.

KEYWORDS: higher education; foreign language policy; employability; globalization; language programs.

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1. Introduction

English language teaching has become one of the key sectors in education for national development, transnational business as well as other socio-economic and cultural activities in the context of globalization. English is considered a passport for academic advancement, job applications and career mobility in Vietnam as it offers versatility and opportunities for its users. It is also a pivotal factor impacting the process of internationalization and enhancing employability among university graduates (Le & Chen, 2019). Foreign language education in Vietnam has been drastically altered in response to local and global challenges and prospects. With an inundated influx of international organizations, global partnerships, and a higher demand of a workforce whose proficiency in English is a prerequisite for working and thriving in this context (Pham, 2022). It is also the language used in academic settings, research, and publication, particularly with the rising trend of using English as the medium of instruction (EMI). Most resources for education and research are issued in English making it essential to develop a strong command of the language. This rapidly shifting landscape and the emerging requirements have resulted in several changes in policies, teaching and learning practices, and stakeholders' attitudes towards foreign language education. This review draws on contemporary literature on ministerial and institutional policies for English language education at tertiary level in Vietnam, and industry demands for graduates' language proficiency. Its overriding aim is to address the major issues related to policies for tertiary language education, graduates' employability in the increasingly competitive labor market, and their implications for internationalization of higher education.

2. Language policies in higher education

The escalating role of English in foreign language education and socio-economic development of Vietnam has necessitated radical changes at both policy and practice levels. Bui et al. (2019, p.54) observe the following:

The global expansion of English has powerfully driven wide-ranging Vietnamese language policy

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shifts. The current policy promotes English as a competitive edge that supports the nation's socio-economic development. English education is mandated for all students. Since the 2000s, English has been emphasized as the vital skill-set necessary for Vietnamese students to fully participate in the twenty-first century, which will enable them in achieving success, privilege, and high status in regional and global employability.

English language education and the expected level of English proficiency among university graduates have become the focal concern of stakeholders in higher education. Ministerial efforts have been intensively expended to promote the teaching and learning of English and raise students' awareness of its significance. The Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) has issued several policies aiming to foster a viable environment for language education and language use nationwide. Dated back to 2008 with a project commonly known as National Foreign Language Project 2020 or Project 2020, MoET (2008) regarded foreign language education as an indispensable element in the educational sector and as a major driver for the workforce in the context of globalization and internationalization of higher education. It was stated that "by 2020, there will have been a dramatically increasing rate of Vietnamese learners who can communicate independently and confidently in foreign languages, study and work in multilingual and multicultural environments" (MoET, 2008, p. 32). One of MoET's actions to standardize language education across the country and measure learners' language achievement was the adaptation of the Common Framework of Reference European (CEFR). The Vietnamese version of the CEFR is known as the Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam (FLPFVN) which provides a description of the language ability on a scale from Level 1 for beginners to Level 6 for advanced users equivalent to A1 to C2 in the CEFR respectively. This Vietnamese framework offers detailed guidelines for language teachers to design lessons and tests commensurate with the proficiency levels of their learners, and evaluative criteria for educational institutions and potential employers. In MoET's (2014) circular, students in undergraduate programs are to attain Level 3 on the FLPFVN upon their graduation. This ministerial imposition on university graduates is a step forward aspiring to the overall goals of enhancing language awareness and mastery among students and teachers. In reviewing the outcome of Project 2020, MoET (2017) extended the duration of this project to 2025 as a further endeavor to boost language education and respond to the harsher demands of the labor market as well as the ongoing process of internationalization of higher education.

These statutory shifts and policies for education, particularly language education, show stakeholders' effort to address the salience of English teaching and learning and improve its efficiency; however, there are certain drawbacks ensuing from such endeavors. The adaptation of the CEFR in the local context was considered a quick-fix solution to issues existing in the language education system in Vietnam, especially its lack of uniformity in assessing learners' levels of proficiency. Although this was an important move for language education in Vietnam, Nguyen and Hamid (2020, p.10) note that "the CEFR itself is not a simple body of regulations and mandates. It aggregates a constellation of philosophical implications for teaching and learning foreign languages." In other words, the CEFR does not prescribe a specific way of teaching; instead, it offers teachers a frame of what learners can do at a certain level of proficiency. Further, more research is needed to reflect on its impact on language learning and acquisition as well as its washback on language assessment. This framework also fails to take account of the context parameters mitigating the level of difficulty corresponding to learners' actual performance (Weir, 2005). A contingent issue implicated in its implementation in Vietnam was that a substantial number of language teachers and learners (especially those in suburban or non-urban areas) are well behind their urban counterparts in English language competence. This outcome was partially attributable to the incapability of Project 2020 in fulfilling its initial goals of upgrading the English proficiency of learners at both secondary and tertiary levels of education.

3. Tertiary language education and research in the globalized context

Globalization is usually framed as an ongoing process of fostering and strengthening

interconnectedness of almost all aspects of human lives at local, national, and international levels (Block, 2008). To survive and thrive in this context, countries around the world have undertaken reforms in all industries to respond to the challenges caused by the constantly changing world, the needs of global integration, and the increasingly competitive global market. In relation to education, language is considered one of the two important “global literacy skills” that every global citizen is supposed to master (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). On this note, Price (2014) emphasizes that the English competence of the workforce is an indicator of a country’s readiness for transnational business and partnerships. According to Education First (2022), the English proficiency index score of Vietnam is 502 meaning that Vietnam is ranked 7/24 countries/regions in Asia and 60/11 countries/regions where English is used as a second or foreign language. Vietnam users of English are still classified as having moderate level of proficiency. In this context, tertiary institutions have made effort to promote English language teaching and learning and adopted English as a medium of instruction (EMI). They have also encouraged publication in English in both local and international journals with concrete pathways and activities to meet this end.

In terms of English language teaching and learning, many educational institutions have started to offer admissions for candidates with international certificates of language proficiency such as IELTS, TOEIC and TOEFL iBT. The entry benchmark is normally set from IELTS 5.0 or equivalent in any other recognized international language certificates. Some universities have also endorsed the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) certificate as proof of language proficiency for admission. For example, to be eligible for exemption or priority in admission into the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies (Vietnam National University, Hanoi), applicants must achieve VSTEP Level 5 (equivalent to C1 in the CEFR) in the English Language and English Language Teaching specializations and Level 4 (equivalent to B2 in the CEFR) in other selected specializations, together with obligations in terms of performance in other high school subjects. Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City has also approved of the VSTEP language exemption for admission of the 2023 intake. This practice has helped inculcate language awareness among students at lower levels of education and boosted their motivation to learn English, thus preparing them better for tertiary education. However, it has also led high school students to spend too much time on English to the detriment of other school subjects and important life skills. It has disadvantaged students coming from locations where learning English is constrained. A further repercussion is the tendency to view international language certificates as a sole means of evaluating students’ academic performance and attainment whereas other competencies and skills are no less important for students’ holistic development. For graduation, the language benchmarks are also based on international language certificates at most universities in Vietnam and the VSTEP certificate at a growing number of institutions. Undergraduate students are required to achieve Level 3 (FLPFVN) or B1 (CEFR) in accordance with MoET’s stipulation. This benchmark can be higher than the standard level in certain universities depending on their international orientations, resulting in apparent variations in the score conversion among institutions. The language benchmark is subjected to the field of study, varying from 4.0 to 7.0 in the IELTS test and from 400 to 700 in the TOEIC test. Regarding the TOEIC test, some institutions impose a four-skill obligation whereas others still accept the reading and listening-based format. For high quality programs or EMI ones, the exit language requirement is often set higher than other programs at some universities. An issue resulting from “this one-size-fits-all approach is that not all test-takers adopt desirable attitudes towards the policy as well as have sufficient knowledge and learning resources to satisfy test demands” (Pham & Bui, 2019, p. 3). It does not cater for the geographical distributions of students, their specific language needs, and discipline-related requirements. It is evident that there have been determined attempts from educational institutions in Vietnam to ensure students’ language competence upon admission and graduation despite some persistent limitations and inconsistencies.

Contemporary practices in curriculum design in Vietnam tend to adopt an outcome-based approach in accordance with the entry and exit language requirements (Pham, 2022). Course design

is normally claimed to be based on preliminary surveys of learners' needs and the demands of the labor market. They are also informed by the can-do statements described in the CEFR and the guided learning hours issued by Cambridge Assessment English (n.d.). However, the duration of the general English program varies depending on the time distribution and number of courses in the overall program frame of the specialization. This is a challenge as there is an ongoing controversy on the number of credits and time allocation among English courses, specialized courses, and those for other essential university skills. As a result, students may not have enough time for language practice in the classroom and may have to put in a lot of autonomous learning effort or resort to external support from foreign language centers at their own expense. In the face of this constraint, many universities have made intensive use of digital resources accompanying the coursebook they use. These resources are highly significant in providing additional learning hours and practice to satisfy the CEFR guided learning hours as well as encouraging students to develop a habit of learning English beyond the classroom.

As part of internationalization of higher education, EMI courses have become a trend in universities in Vietnam. It has been pointed out that the notion of internationalization of university is a contested one with various interpretations. However, one of the measures commonly adopted is preparing students for an international environment with a focus on enhancing their English language competence through the general English program and EMI courses (Dearden, 2014). In Vietnam, EMI originated from collaborative programs at graduate levels between local universities and higher education institutions overseas in early 1990s. The EMI phenomenon has been fervently pursued in most universities at both undergraduate and graduate levels at different degrees and in various modes ranging from lectures completely delivered in English to a mixture of English and Vietnamese depending on the language capacity of lectures and students. For successful implementation of EMI, a number of conditions must be met including access, personnel, resources, curriculum, materials and methods, community and evaluation (Nguyen et al., 2017). The first condition entails the learners and their entry level of English whereas the second condition requires teachers and academic staff to reach a certain level of proficiency and undertake proper training. These two conditions are rather formidable challenges in Vietnam and may undermine the effectiveness of EMI as their language skills and ability to convey professional knowledge in English are points of scrutiny. It is also important to provide teachers and learners with sufficient learning resources and materials for EMI courses. The fourth and fifth conditions mandate that the program must reflect the needs of the wider community, especially potential employers, and there should be tools to ensure that the program meets the expected outcomes.

Another crucial element in the internationalization of higher education is research publication in English and research collaboration with tertiary institutions overseas. According to Circular 20/2020/TT-BGDĐT, lecturers are to dedicate one third of their work hours in an academic year to research engagement which is equivalent to 586 administrative hours. Research and publication have thus been a compulsory task in the academic career of a lecturer. In addition, each university has devised its tools for evaluating the research performance of lecturers as well as policies and financial incentives for publication in international and prestigious journals as well as collaborative research projects with overseas partners. Apart from their professional expertise and research capacity, researchers need to be able to present their manuscripts in English for acceptance in such journals. With the overwhelming dominance of journals published in English, English language competence has been found to be a major barrier for a large numbers of Vietnamese researchers (Vuong, 2019). This involves the ability to not only write in accurate English in terms of wording and syntax but also utilize jargons specific to the researcher's field of study.

4. Tertiary language education for employability in the globalized context

One of the chief goals of tertiary education is to prepare students for the labor market. In the context of globalization, graduates face fierce competition locally and internationally, and more intense demands from prospective employers. Tertiary programs not only have to equip students with

professional knowledge and skills dedicated to specific areas of study but also ensure their employability. According to Pool and Sewell (2007), “employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.” As discussed earlier, language, particularly English, has become a global literacy skill for working in this context. For higher employability, graduates need to master English for both regular communication and diverse workplace purposes such as English for marketing, English for negotiation and English for drafting contracts. However, most language programs tend to focus too much on the former and overlook the value of developing the latter. Contemporary research shows that there has been a mismatch between the curriculum and the skill sets desired by industry (Bui & Nguyen, 2019). It is thus necessary to embed these aspects of employability in language programs so that students can effectively use English for work-related purposes. This could be achieved by the formal integration of courses on such essential soft skills in the English curriculum or through informal activities such as seminars, workshops, or field trips to businesses. It is also important to help students feel confident in using English for workplace communication as they may have knowledge of English but poorly perform when it comes to real-life communication. Many universities have hosted job fairs for graduating students to approach the labor market; however, such events are normally conducted in Vietnamese. These events could benefit students better in terms of career preparation and opportunities for language practice if English is mandated for on-site communication.

5. Conclusion

This article provides a snapshot of the ongoing changes occurring in English language education, related policies, and approaches to tackling emerging issues in the context of globalization. From a top-down perspective, stakeholders at ministerial level have striven to adapt to the global socio-economic shifts and the needs implicated in the process of internationalization of higher education. Project 2020, its projection for 2025, and the adaptation of the CEFR, despite certain shortcomings, have brought about major innovations in policies and practices in language education. At institutional level, alterations in curriculum design and language benchmarks for admission and graduation have also been effected in an effort to enhance students’ awareness of the significance of learning English, create a well-resourced environment for language learning and ultimately promote employability for university graduates. The popularity of EMI programs in recent years has substantially contributed to internationalizing tertiary education and fostering positive morale for language learning and language use among academic staff and students. The promotion of research publication in English through dedicated policies and financial boosters is a further endeavor to align research in Vietnam with international standards.

These changes have profound implications for language teaching and learning in the intensely competitive global market. The CEFR or FLPPVN has provided a more standardized approach to curriculum design ensuring that teachers and students are cognizant of the expected outcomes and guided steps to achieve them. The addition of VSTEP to the list of accredited language certificates for university entrance and exit requirements has facilitated language assessment with the integration of technology, an affordable fee, and a high degree of transparency. Compared with the IELTS or TOEIC, VSTEP is more cost-effective and accessible to a gigantic population of Vietnamese test takers as more and more educational institutions in Vietnam have become the legitimate test sites. It also ensures constant testing service with the ease of local administration taking advantage of available facilities. However, certain challenges have occurred in streamlining English language education nationwide due to geographical and socio-economic discrepancies among different regions of Vietnam. Inequality of access to language resources, test preparation materials and qualified lecturers to attain the mandatory outcomes remains largely unresolved. The inconsistencies in test score requirements for graduation and the test format remain relatively significant among educational institutions and fields of study. On one hand, the variations in the expected test score are contingent on the prestige of the institution, the field of study and ultimately the demands from industry. On the

other hand, this has provoked anxiety among students who are academically strong but do not perform well in English. Potential employers may have dissimilar language demands owing to the nature of their business and the extent of international partnership. Further, the TOEIC reading-listening format may not truly reflect test-takers' competencies in speaking and writing while these two productive skills are highly needed for the workplace. It is crucial that universities currently endorsing the TOEIC reading and listening format reconsider their policy and implementation.

These limitations in language education and non-uniform language requirements for graduation call for more effort to identify issues confronting teaching and learning practices in specific regions and allocate sufficient resources and support to students. The English proficiency index is still at the moderate level meaning that more rigorous measures are to be undertaken at both macro and micro levels. Specific actions involve providing further teacher training, peer mentoring in which teachers who are more proficient in English support lower achievers, and regular platforms for regular communication among language teachers. It is also advisable that educational institutions pay more attention to language education and use through the promotion of English as a language for communication on campus, adhere more closely to CEFR guidelines and the guided learning hours in designing classroom and out-of-class activities, and utilize technology and digital resources for language teaching and learning. Stakeholders need to regard language education and language policy as an essential part of their strategies for internationalization. More importantly, the primary goal of language education does not solely lie in supporting learners in attaining the desired score in any standardized language tests; instead, it should aim at optimizing their performance for communicative purposes both in the academic settings and workplaces. The test-oriented tendency in language teaching and learning or the culture of teaching and learning for the test fails to respond to such a goal. Language courses should provide learners with ample opportunities for language practice that simulates real-life communication in alignment with CEFR can-do statements and foster their confidence in using the target language. Test-taking preparation courses are useful but should be a minor component in the language program.

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**Chính sách đào tạo tiếng Anh bậc đại học
và khả năng xin việc làm của sinh viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa**

Tóm tắt: Việc đào tạo tiếng Anh đóng vai trò then chốt trong quá trình quốc tế hóa giáo dục bậc đại học và nâng cao khả năng xin việc làm của sinh viên tốt nghiệp trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa. Nghiên cứu này thảo luận các vấn đề liên quan đến chính sách đào tạo ngoại ngữ, các giải pháp hiện đang áp dụng, nỗ lực của các bên liên quan nhằm tối ưu hóa lợi thế của sinh viên trong thị trường lao động ngày càng cạnh tranh trong nước lẫn ngoài nước. Nội dung phân tích dựa trên các nghiên cứu và các chính sách được ban hành trong thời gian gần đây. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy giá trị của việc đào tạo ngoại ngữ đối với việc quốc tế hóa giáo dục bậc đại học, những nỗ lực của các cấp và các vấn đề tồn đọng trong việc triển khai các chính sách và giải pháp này. Kết thúc bài viết, tác giả đưa ra một số khuyến nghị về mặt chính sách và việc triển khai chương trình đào tạo tiếng Anh tại các trường.

Từ khóa: giáo dục bậc đại học; chính sách đào tạo ngoại ngữ; khả năng xin việc làm; toàn cầu hóa; chương trình đào tạo.