



## FACTORS INFLUENCING VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' CHOICES TO ATTAIN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY STANDARDS IN A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

In the current era of globalization, English is considered a necessary skill for education and work and a criterion for evaluation in recruitment and graduation assessments in many places in Vietnam. According to the project entitled "*Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System Phase 2008 - 2020*", non-English majored university students must achieve a minimum of Level 3 according to the 6-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework used in Vietnam. Several universities have diversified their ways to meet these standards to facilitate students in meeting the English language outcomes, allowing students more opportunities to choose ways that are suitable for them. However, this also indicates that various influencing factors will impact students' selection of ways to meet these standards. This research explores the primary ways students choose to fulfill English language standards as stipulated and analyzes the factors influencing the choices of non-English major students in universities in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** English proficiency standards, factors, non-English major students, ways

### 1. Introduction

Completing English proficiency requirements is a mandatory prerequisite for students in Vietnam to be eligible for graduation. Currently, universities in Vietnam offer various ways for students to consider in order to fulfill these English proficiency standards. This variety of options allows students to select the most suitable approach, ensuring they attain the required level. However, practical experience reveals that many students need help meeting these requirements. Among these challenges is the need for students to determine a fitting way to achieve the required English proficiency level. Consequently,

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this has led to a rise in delayed graduation cases and limited students' English language utilization abilities, failing to meet the expected B1 level. Thus, investigating the factors influencing students' choices of ways to meet these proficiency standards plays a crucial role in assisting students in overcoming difficulties, minimizing graduation delays, and enabling effective English language utilization. The study seeks to address the following questions:

- 1) What are the common ways non-English majored students choose to gain their target English proficiency?
- 2) What factors have influenced their choices?

## 2. Literature review

English proficiency standards for the undergraduate level are detailed in each specific outline for a language course through specifications in each skill group so that students can identify specific goals. Specifically, the output standard at level 3 prescribed for non-English major students is regulated by Circular 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT as follows:

*“Learners understand the main ideas of a clear, standard paragraph or speech on familiar topics at work, school, in leisure activities, etc. They can handle most situations that arise when visiting an area where that language is spoken. They can write simple passages related to familiar topics or of personal interest. They can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions, and can briefly state reasons, explanations for opinions and plans.”*

Typically, in most Vietnamese universities, regulations on output standards have been implemented and applied according to the Circular of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. Specifically, students in the mass training program need to achieve the English output standard at Level 3 in Vietnam's 6-level foreign language competency framework. Currently, students have a variety of ways to gain the output standards. In general, the common ways across the country are completing the university's General English courses or taking the exam for English certificates VSTEP, IELTS, TOEIC... with a score equivalent to the university's standard level.

There are various factors that affect students' choices for attaining English proficiency standards. In the research conducted by Nguyen (2021), there are two major groups of factors that have a fundamental impact on students' selection of ways, including one group related to personal characteristics (language abilities, learning styles, and motivation), and one group indicating learning environments (learning contents, teaching methodology and assessment). Additionally, according to a study by Phung and Bui (2022), besides the acquisition of academic knowledge, the majority of students have also prepared themselves with crucial skills required for their future careers, including English language skills. This indicates that future goals are also

considerable elements that have an influence on learners' decisions of ways to achieve the English proficiency standards.

### 3. Material and Methods

This research employs a survey questionnaire to investigate the preferred methods adopted by students to gain English language proficiency standards and the factors influencing their choices. The study participants comprised 436 non-English major students enrolled in various schools, departments, and institutes at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The questionnaire was designed based on the findings of Nguyen Thi Hong Duyen's research conducted in 2021 at the School of Foreign Languages - Hue University, as well as insights drawn from non-English major students' real-life situations. Following the collection of survey data, the research combines various research methods, including synthesis analysis and statistical analysis, to examine the data collected.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1. Students' understanding of English Proficiency standards

In terms of student's understanding of English Proficiency standards, the figures below show that there are 388/436 students (accounting for 89% of surveyed students) who chose "Level 3 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (B1)", which indicates that the majority of students has an accurate understanding of the English Proficiency standard required to be eligible for graduating. Meanwhile, there is still a minor part of students who selected incorrect options. This might stem from the lack of thorough research on the language standards, or there might be a mistake while completing the survey that led to this result.

**Table 1:** The percentage of students' understanding of English Proficiency standards required for graduation

English Proficiency Standards	Participants and percentage responses
Level 1 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (A1)	12 (2.8%)
Level 2 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (A2)	17 (3.9%)
Level 3 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (B1)	388 (8.9%)
Level 4 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (B2)	15 (3.4%)
Level 5 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (C1)	2 (0.5%)
Level 6 in the six-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (C2)	2 (0.5%)

#### 4.2. Common ways chosen by non-English major students to gain their target English proficiency

In terms of the ways that non-English major students normally choose to complete the English proficiency standard, we can see that the way "Completing 03 General English courses in university" is the most chosen by the students (307 students, accounting for 70.2%). The reason is that this makes it easy for students to achieve and still get instruction from qualified instructors at a cheaper cost than going to many other English centers. The trend of choosing this way also shows similarity to the study conducted by Azam Noora (2008), where Iranian students similarly selected fundamental English courses at all universities to meet graduation standards. Following that, the way of getting English certificates in general accounted for 29.8%. Specifically, the way "Registering and preparing for the English certification exam at Center for Foreign Languages" received the second highest choice (with 86 students, the rate is 19.7%). Next, one after one selected position are respectively "Studying together with friends or groups to prepare for the English certification exam" with 15 students, rating 3.4%, "Self-studying resources for studying and preparing for English certification exam at home" with 13 students, rating 3%, "Registering for online English certification courses and preparing for the English certification exam" with 10 students, rating 2.3%. Finally, the way "Having the results of the Foreign Language entrance test for new students that are eligible for exemption from 03 General English Courses" with 5 students, accounting for 1.1%. This is considered a difficult method, requiring students' ability to use the language in advance.

**Table 2:** Common ways EFL students choose to gain their target English proficiency

Ways to gain their target English proficiency	Participants and percentage responses
Completing 03 General English courses in university.	307 (70.2%)
Registering and preparing for the English certification tests at Foreign Language Center.	86 (19.7%)
Registering for online courses and preparing for the English certification tests.	10 (2.3%)
Studying together with friends to prepare for the English certification tests.	15 (3.4%)
Self-studying the learning resources and preparing for the English certification tests at home.	13 (3%)
Having the results of the Foreign Language entrance test for new students that are eligible for exemption from 03 General English Courses.	5 (1.1%)

#### 4.3. Factors have influenced their choices

Determining the ways to achieve an English proficiency standard for students is not merely a random choice, but also depends on various factors. Through the survey result, we identified three prior factors considering of chosen ways to achieve their English proficiency standards.

**Table 3:** The factors have influenced the students' choice

Factors	Frequency and percentage responses
1. The choice aligns with my English proficiency level.	235 (53.9%)
2. The choice aligns with my future direction.	129 (29.6%)
3. The choice helps me improve my English level.	93 (21.3%)
4. The choice meets my study and research needs.	136 (31.2%)
5. The choice depends on my affordability.	98 (22.5%)
6. I like studying with my friends.	114 (26.1%)
7. I like self-studying.	20 (4.6%)
8. I like studying in small class sizes.	43 (9.9%)
9. I was advised to choose this way by my former classmates/friends.	50 (11.5%)
10. I was advised to choose this way by my academic advisor.	45 (10.3%)
11. I found the information by myself through the school's website.	21 (4.8%)
12. I found the information by myself through the group/fanpage on Facebook.	27 (6.2%)
13. I found the information by myself through the centers for foreign languages.	25 (5.7%)

The first and most significant factor is *"The choice aligns with my English proficiency level"* with survey results indicating that 235 students (53.9%) chose this as their primary consideration. This underscores the importance of ensuring that the chosen way aligns with the student's current English proficiency level, enabling effective study strategies to achieve the target.

The second factor is *"The choice meets my study and research needs"* chosen by 136 students (31.2%). This highlights the importance of selecting a study way that aligns with a student's individual learning and research objectives.

The third factor is *"The chosen way aligns with my future direction"* selected by 129 students (29.6%). This demonstrates that students often select ways that align with their future career aspirations, allowing them to prepare effectively for their desired professions. Additionally, 114 students (26.1%) expressed a preference for studying with friends, emphasizing the comfort and opportunities for interaction and knowledge sharing within study groups.

Two factors, *"The choice depends on my affordability."* and *"The choice depends on whether it helps me improve my English level"* received 98 students' (22.5%) and 93 students' (21.3%) choices, respectively. This indicates the significance of considering financial

capabilities and personal goals in the selection process. *"I like self-studying"* received the least support, with only 20 students (4.6%) choosing this option. Self-study is typically suitable for students with high English proficiency and strong self-management skills. *"I like studying in small class sizes"* garnered support from 55 students (10.9%), reflecting some students' preference for smaller learning environments where they have more opportunities for interaction with instructors and peers. A total of 53 students (10.5%) chose *"I was advised to choose this way by my former classmates/friends"* highlighting the influence of peer experiences in the decision-making process.

In contrast, 45 students (10.3%) selected *"I was advised to choose this way by my academic advisor"* underscoring the pivotal role of guidance from faculty and academic advisors in decision-making.

Other factors, such as *"I found the information by myself through the school's website"* chosen by 21 students (4.8%), *"I found the information by myself through the group/fanpage on Facebook"* selected by 27 students (6.2%), and *"I found the information by myself through the Center for Languages"* preferred by 25 students (5.7%), received relatively fewer selections. These factors also influence students' decisions but to a lesser extent compared to the primary factors mentioned above, and therefore, they are not as popular among the majority of students.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose solutions built upon the factors influencing students in their way of selection. These solutions aim to alleviate students' difficulties in achieving English proficiency standards, eliminate graduation progress delays, and ensure effective English language utilization in their daily lives:

- 1) Students should begin by evaluating their own English language proficiency to determine their current level of academic readiness.
- 2) Students should identify their motivation for learning English choosing suitable ways of achieving the prescribed English proficiency standards.
- 3) Students should actively explore and combine various sources of information available to them, such as electronic resources, friends, academic advisors, and instructors.
- 4) Students need to define their post-graduation aspirations and ambitions.
- 5) Students should define their future goals early on is crucial for structuring a reasonable learning pathway and achieving the desired English proficiency standards.
- 6) Students must consistently build upon their English language skills and develop appropriate learning strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated and analyzed three major points: non-English major university students' understanding of the English Proficiency standard required for graduation, students' preferences of ways to attain the standard, and factors that influence students' selection of way. Firstly, according to the data collected from the questionnaire, the majority of students are aware of the required English Proficiency standard of their university. This can be interpreted that most students have an accurate understanding of the English Proficiency standards, which helps them have a better consideration of the appropriate way to fulfil the requirement.

In terms of the ways chosen by students to complete English proficiency standards, based on our survey results, students will have priority over the selection method to complete the three General English courses. This is considered a method with suitable difficulty and easy access for students due to the fact that they learn in a good educational environment with dedicated lecturers and the modules are designed in accordance with standard specifications. On the other hand, in terms of the ways of using English certificates in general to complete the English proficiency standard, students have fewer choices. These methods require high English learning ability and more time. This will cause more difficulties for students. The reason is that the volume of lessons and study time is high, but there is little time to invest in this way.

The choice of students' preferred ways for achieving English proficiency standards is not influenced by a single factor but rather by a combination of several essential factors. Some factors substantially impact students' way selection, such as the difficulty level of the ways, future orientation, alignment with learning and research needs, and the enhancement of one's English proficiency. Relying on needs and capabilities helps students determine suitable ways for themselves, thus mitigating difficulties in achieving their aims. Factors like the affordability of the chosen plans and studying with peers also have a particular influence on students. Regarding information sources, students are influenced by information obtained from academic advisors, peers, or seniors who have experience, providing them with practical guidance in way selection. Finally, factors receiving the slightest consideration from students include information they find through social media, center for foreign languages, or self-study. These factors do not significantly impact students. In summary, the process of choosing a learning way is a complex one, dependent on numerous factors. It requires careful consideration on the part of students to ensure success in achieving English proficiency standards.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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