FACTORS AFFECTING NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AT HOA BINH UNIVERSITY CURRENT SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges and potential solutions for improving English language proficiency among non-English major students at Hoa Binh University. Through an analysis of current teaching practices, learner attitudes, and institutional structures, the research identifies critical factors contributing to poor English outcomes. Key issues include limited classroom hours, inconsistent entry-level proficiency, overcrowded classes, and a lack of motivation or clear learning goals among students. The findings also highlight the inadequate alignment of teaching content with students' needs and interests, as well as insufficient opportunities for practical language use.

To address these challenges, the study proposes targeted solutions for both students and teachers. For students, strategies include fostering motivation and promoting self-directed learning with practical applications. For educators, recommendations emphasize differentiated instruction, reforming assessment methods, and incorporating engaging and relevant content into lessons. Comprehensive implementation of these measures can significantly improve the quality of English education, aligning learning outcomes with national proficiency standards and preparing students to thrive in a globally interconnected economy.

Keywords: English language proficiency, non-English major students, differentiated instruction, practical language use, Hoa Binh University.

Các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến năng lực tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên ngữ tại Trường Đại học Hòa Bình: Thực trạng và giải pháp

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này phân tích những thách thức và các giải pháp tiềm năng nhằm nâng cao năng lực tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên ngữ tại Trường Đại học Hòa Bình. Thông qua phân tích các phương pháp giảng dạy hiện tại, thái độ học tập của sinh viên và cơ cấu tổ chức, nghiên cứu xác định những yếu tố quan trọng góp phần dẫn đến kết quả học tiếng Anh kém. Các vấn đề chính bao gồm: thời lượng học trên lớp hạn chế, trình độ đầu vào không đồng đều, sĩ số lớp học đông, và sự thiếu động lực hoặc mục tiêu học tập rõ ràng của sinh viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra sự thiếu tương thích giữa nội dung giảng dạy với nhu cầu và sở thích của sinh viên, cũng như sự hạn chế về cơ hội sử dụng tiếng Anh trong thực tế.

Để giải quyết những thách thức này, nghiên cứu đề xuất các giải pháp cụ thể cho cả sinh viên và

giảng viên. Đối với sinh viên, các chiến lược bao gồm: khơi dậy động lực học tập và thúc đẩy việc tự học với những ứng dụng thực tiễn. Đối với giảng viên, các khuyến nghị nhấn mạnh đến việc giảng dạy phân hóa, cải cách phương pháp đánh giá, và tích hợp các nội dung hấp dẫn, phù hợp vào bài giảng. Việc thực hiện đồng bộ các biện pháp này có thể cải thiện đáng kể chất lượng giáo dục tiếng Anh, hướng tới việc đạt được các chuẩn năng lực quốc gia và chuẩn bị cho sinh viên khả năng thành công trong nền kinh tế kết nối toàn cầu.

Từ khóa: *Năng lực tiếng Anh, sinh viên không chuyên ngữ, giảng dạy phân hóa, sử dụng ngôn ngữ thực tiễn, Trường Đại học Hòa Bình.*

1. Introduction

In the Context of Globalization: Challenges for Foreign Language Education in Vietnam.

Globalization and regional integration, marked by the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community and Vietnam's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have introduced significant challenges for Vietnam's education sector, particularly in foreign language education. These developments necessitate a workforce equipped with the skills and qualifications to compete effectively in the global labor market. To address this, the government launched and updated the "National Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project for the 2017–2025 Period" (Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg). This initiative underscores the role of foreign language education as a critical tool for enhancing workforce competitiveness during economic integration. Proficiency in foreign languages has become a decisive factor in recruitment for state agencies, while university-level foreign language education is mandated nationwide. Students must meet strict proficiency requirements for graduation, and similar standards apply to postgraduate programs, where foreign language competency is a prerequisite for both admission and graduation, as well as for participation in state-funded training abroad. These policies highlight the growing importance of foreign language education in preparing a workforce capable of meeting the demands of international labor markets.

However, despite these efforts, the English proficiency of many university graduates across Vietnam, including those at Hoa Binh University, remains below the level needed to support the nation's development goals. This study examines the current state of English proficiency among students at Hoa Binh University and explores solutions to enhance their competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy.

The research focuses on identifying key factors influencing the English learning outcomes of non-English major students through detailed analysis and surveys. Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted recommendations to address challenges in non-specialized English education. These measures aim to improve learning outcomes and elevate the overall quality of education at Hoa Binh University, aligning it with societal demands and fostering a more competitive workforce.

2. Research Content

2.1. Research Subjects and Methodology

The subjects of this study are first-year non-English major students enrolled in disciplines other than English language studies at Hoa Binh University, including Pharmacy, Business Administration, and Tourism. Currently, all programs at the university follow a credit-based training system, with English being a mandatory subject in their curriculum. The English courses comprise a total of 12 credits distributed across four stages: Basic English 1, Basic English 2, Basic English 3, and English for Specific Purposes. First-year students were chosen as the focus of this study because this stage represents a critical period for establishing foundational skills and attitudes toward English learning. Their performance and engagement during these initial courses significantly influence their subsequent learning outcomes and overall proficiency, making them an ideal group for

identifying challenges and implementing targeted interventions.

This study employs a quantitative research method. Data were collected from the final course grades of 197 first-year non-English major students from the three aforementioned disciplines. The organization of exams and grading processes was conducted rigorously, ensuring academic integrity. All students were prohibited from using reference materials, mobile phones, or engaging in any form of academic dishonesty during the exams.

2.1.1. Paper-Based Test (Listening, Reading, and Writing)

The paper-based test was designed by English language lecturers using the Speakout Elementary 2nd Edition by Longman, the prescribed textbook for Basic English 1 for non-English major students. As a result, the final assessment aligns with the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), accurately evaluating students' proficiency across four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The test for listening, reading, and writing skills was conducted in one session, while the speaking assessment was held separately.

The written exam comprised 75 questions to be completed in 90 minutes, structured as follows:

- *Listening: 15 questions*
- *Reading comprehension: 40 questions*
- *Sentence rewriting: 10 questions*
- *Paragraph writing: 1 task*

To minimize cheating, each class was provided with two different versions of the test (even-numbered and odd-numbered variants).

Table 1. Structure of the Paper-Based Test for Basic English 1 at Hoa Binh University

Section	Content	Number of Questions	Points
Listening	Part 1: Listen to a conversation and choose the correct answer	5	5
	Part 2: Listen and fill in the blanks	5	5
	Part 3: Listen to a conversation and answer questions	5	10
Reading	1. Grammar and vocabulary structures	10	10
	2. Reading comprehension	5	10
	3. Fill in the blanks	10	10
Writing	4. Rearrange words to form complete sentences	10	10
	5. Write a reply email (50-80 words)	35-50 words	20
Total	**8**		**80**

Source: Author's survey results

2.1.2. Speaking Test (Interview Format)

The speaking test was conducted immediately after the students completed the three other skills (listening, reading, and writing). The interview questions were designed in a Cue Card format, comprising two parts:

- **Part 1 (10 points):** The candidate introduces themselves.

- **Part 2 (10 points):** The candidate speaks freely on a given topic, with guidance provided through prompts or questions.

Example of a Cue Card:

Part 1: Introduce yourself (e.g., your name, age, hometown, and interests).

Part 2: Talk about your favorite hobby.
- What is it?
- How often do you do it?
- Why do you enjoy it?

2.2. Research Results

After the department completed grading all tests from various classes, I randomly selected the test results from three different disciplines

(Pharmacy, Business Administration, Tourism), totaling 197 students, to analyze the current state of English proficiency among non-English major students based on their test performance.

The results indicate that the **Grammar and Vocabulary** section achieved the highest accuracy rate, approximately 50% of the total questions in this section. However, the **Fill-in-the-Blank** and **Reading Comprehension** sections remained challenging for students.

For the reading comprehension questions, two formats were included:

- Students read a passage of about 200 words and selected the correct answer to the given questions.

- Students identified whether a statement was True or False, e.g., "The Silk Route Tour travels through seven countries in eighty weeks (T or F)" or completed sentences like "Thanksgiving Day is celebrated... (A. to honor the new country, B. to remind people of cold winter, C. to honor their ancestors, D. to remind people of Indians)."

Most students provided few correct answers. When asked about these reading comprehension tasks, students noted that the passages were too long and contained many unfamiliar words, indicating a lack of vocabulary to perform well on this section.

In the **Paragraph Writing** section, most students left the space blank or wrote very short responses for the email reply task.

Regarding the **Listening** section, even though the test featured short dialogues with simple vocabulary, only 10% of students could correctly answer nearly all 15 questions.

Follow along, the performance results across the four skills are summarized in the chart below.

English Proficiency Scores of Non-English Major Students at Hoa Binh University, Hanoi
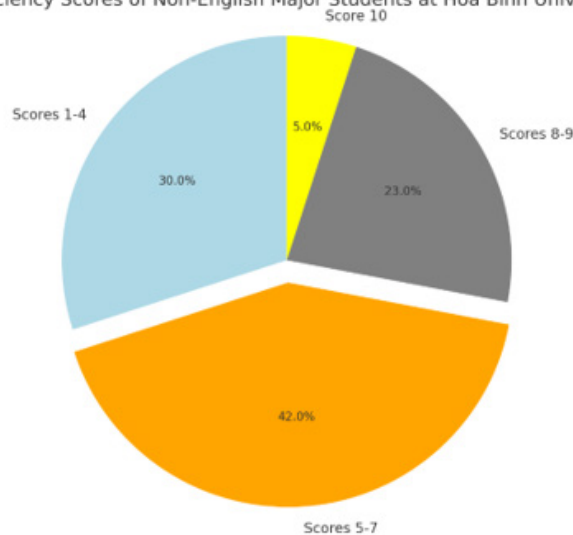
Source: Author's survey results

Here is the pie chart illustrating the distribution of English proficiency scores among non-English major students at Hoa Binh University. It highlights the percentage of students in each score range, with most students concentrated in the moderate range (5-7). Below is an analysis based on the pie chart:

- **Scores 1-4:** Representing 30% of the students, this group demonstrates the lowest level of English proficiency.

- **Scores 5-7:** The largest segment, accounting for 42% of students, indicates a moderate level of English proficiency.

- **Scores 8-9:** Comprising 23% of the students, this group achieved relatively high proficiency levels.

- **Score 10:** Only 5% of the students attained the highest score, reflecting exceptional performance.

2.2.1. Current State of English Proficiency Among Incoming Students

The chart reveals that the English proficiency

of first-year students at Hoa Binh University is uneven, with low overall quality. Most students fail to meet the English proficiency standards, demonstrating significant limitations. Only 28% of the surveyed students scored between 8 and 10, corresponding to levels A2 and above according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Meanwhile, 72% scored between 1 and 7, equivalent to levels A1 or below.

According to Plan *No. 808/KH-BGDĐT* issued on August 16, 2012, by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), under the framework of the "National Foreign Language Project 2020" implemented from the 2011–2012 academic year, non-English major students are required to achieve at least Level 3 (equivalent to CEFR B1) on the Vietnamese Language Proficiency Framework upon graduation. This standard expects students to: *"Understand the main ideas of clear, standard texts on familiar topics such as work, school, or leisure... Handle most situations encountered in areas where the language is spoken. Write simple texts on familiar topics or personal interests. Describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions, and briefly explain opinions or plans".* Given this proficiency benchmark, the data highlights a pressing issue: why is the quality of English so poor among students, and what solutions can be implemented to equip them with the necessary language skills to meet societal and integration demands? This underscores the urgent need to improve the effectiveness of English teaching and learning at Hoa Binh University.

2.2.2. Causes of Students' Poor English Proficiency

There are various explanations for the poor English learning outcomes among students, as previously discussed. Similar to other private universities in Hanoi, Hoa Binh University admits students based on either national high school examination results or high school academic transcripts. While the general academic knowledge of students is relatively consistent, their English proficiency levels vary greatly.

With the exception of a small number of students who took the D-stream exams (Mathematics, Literature, and English) or obtained international certifications such as IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC, the majority of students at Hoa Binh University were admitted without English proficiency being a criterion for entry. This highlights the inconsistency in students' English skills upon admission. Moreover, the university does not conduct placement tests for English proficiency after enrollment. Consequently, students of varying English levels are placed into the same entry-level English courses. This approach demotivates students with stronger English skills, as they feel unchallenged, while weaker students may feel discouraged and lack confidence due to the disparity with their peers.

Although English is a mandatory subject, non-English major students often approach it with a "just to pass" mindset, with no specific goals or motivation for meaningful improvement. This lack of clear objectives and intrinsic motivation significantly hinders progress in English proficiency.

In addition, classroom conditions are suboptimal. English classes often accommodate 30-50 students, which is unsuitable for a subject that requires direct interaction and regular practice with teachers. Students lack opportunities for hands-on practice in such overcrowded environments. These conditions also create significant challenges for instructors, who struggle to fully deliver lesson content, implement effective teaching methodologies, or provide personalized attention to students with varying proficiency levels.

To address this issue, several studies have been conducted, including those focusing on self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is defined as the process by which individuals actively engage their senses to acquire information, followed by utilizing their intellectual abilities (such as observation, comparison, analysis, and synthesis), and, in some cases, their physical efforts (e.g., using tools). This process also involves their qualities,

motivation, emotions, worldview, and philosophy of life to master a certain area of knowledge, specific skills, or qualities of humanity or the community, ultimately transforming them into their own assets (Nguyen Canh Toan, 2001, p. 407). For instance: Nguyen Cao Thanh (2011): Focused on developing self-directed learning. Nguyen Van Loi and Franken (2010): Explored effective teaching methodologies. Vo Thanh Long and Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa (2010): Investigated teacher development. For English learning, the findings remain consistent with broader research. According to Little (2007), a student's success in language acquisition depends heavily on their motivation and ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Chou (2007) further highlighted that learning methods have the most significant impact on English proficiency. Meanwhile, the University of Southern Queensland (2016) defines English proficiency as "the learner's ability to convey information in spoken or written forms during their academic journey."

This evidence underscores the need for targeted interventions to improve students' motivation, classroom practices, and learning methodologies, addressing the systemic factors affecting English proficiency at Hoa Binh University.

2.2.3. Solutions to Enhance Students' English Proficiency

Based on the research findings, current challenges, and the identified causes, the following solutions are proposed:

2.2.3.1. For Learners

First, Set Clear Goals and Build Learning Motivation. Students should establish clear and achievable learning objectives while fostering intrinsic motivation. According to Jin-Jun (2012), the key to enhancing students' motivation lies in "creating conditions for students to achieve success" and "promoting self-directed learning." Only when learners take responsibility for their own learning can the teaching and learning process become truly effective. Similarly, Alresheedi (2014) emphasized that students with intrinsic motivation to learn English are more likely to exert consistent effort and adopt effective learning methods. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering students' learning by guiding and supporting them in a natural and engaging manner, rather than rigidly delivering information. To succeed, students should set clear, specific goals, such as earning international certifications like IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC, or focusing on incremental improvement in skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

To stay motivated, students can adopt strategies such as tracking their progress to acknowledge and celebrate small accomplishments. They can also participate in extracurricular activities or join English clubs to practice in an informal setting. Additionally, seeking opportunities to use English in real-life contexts such as volunteering, attending workshops, or engaging with native speakers can make learning more practical and rewarding.

Second, Encourage and Support Self-Learning Using Online Resources. To enhance their English proficiency, students should fully leverage online learning platforms and available resources. Apps like Duolingo, Quizlet, and BBC Learning English can provide structured, engaging ways to improve independently. Regularly reading English books, newspapers, or stories is another effective method for expanding vocabulary and familiarizing oneself with various writing styles. Additionally, students can improve their listening skills by engaging with English podcasts, movies, or videos, which help in developing better comprehension and pronunciation over time. These resources not only provide flexibility for learners but also encourage a habit of continuous learning.

Third, Daily Practice and Communication. Daily practice and real-world communication are crucial for mastering English. Students can start by practicing speaking in front of a mirror to boost their confidence and self-awareness. Conversations with friends in English and participation in English-speaking clubs provide excellent opportunities to apply the language in practical settings. Building a habit of incorporating English into daily routines, such as summarizing the day's events or narrating

personal experiences in English, helps develop fluency and natural reflexes. This consistent effort to use the language daily significantly enhances both confidence and practical skills, ensuring steady progress in English proficiency.

2.2.3.2. For Teachers

First, Enhancing Learners' Engagement. To foster greater interest in learning, teachers should observe and listen to their students, exploring topics that resonate with them and using these as foundations for instruction, rather than rigidly adhering to the textbook order. Developing a diverse list of learning tasks allows students to choose those that align with their preferences and abilities. As Lennon observed, successful teachers create a space of freedom that enables students to learn in their own way, even within the confines of a structured curriculum. Additionally, James Chapman, through extensive research and convincing data, highlighted the limitations of the "constructivist approach" and the "one-size-fits-all" method, advocating instead for "differentiated instruction" to meet the varied needs of learners. This approach not only enhances student engagement but also optimizes learning outcomes within their individual capabilities. Yap (1998) argued that teachers should provide opportunities for students to share their learning strategies. Creating an environment that encourages interest and listening to learners ensures greater connection to lessons and maximizes their potential within their personal abilities.

Second, Building Learners' Confidence. To increase students' confidence in learning English, four key factors should be emphasized: interest, confidence, knowledge, and skills (Littlewood). Confidence is a critical factor, yet many students at Hoa Binh University lack it due to passive learning methods focused on theory and achievement, which prevent practical application of their knowledge. Teachers can address this by creating real-world communication opportunities tied to topics of interest, such as games for children, career projects for young adults, or community programs for youth. Learning tasks should

require critical thinking, implementation, and the creation of tangible outcomes, enabling learners to use English as a tool for expressing ideas and solving problems. As students take pride in their outputs, their confidence grows, reducing anxiety in language communication.

Third, Diversifying English Content and Teaching Methods. The current knowledge-centered approach overly relies on imported textbooks that may not suit learners' needs or backgrounds. Greater effectiveness can be achieved by aligning content with students' interests. Teachers should expand beyond phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary, incorporating age-appropriate and interest-driven social topics. For instance, traditional lessons can be replaced with activities like reading books, watching films, or listening to instructional audio for practical tasks such as cooking, assembling items, planning tours, or building learning forums. This shift encourages learners to use English as a tool for communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, rather than merely constructing grammatically correct but impractical sentences.

Fourth, Promoting Self-Directed Learning. Teachers should act as organizers, guides, advisors, and motivators to encourage students' independent learning both in and outside the classroom. This requires dedicating serious time to guiding self-learning and continually improving their teaching skills. The "teach less, learn more" philosophy, which brought significant advancements to Singapore's education system, emphasizes that teaching less does not mean working less, but rather preparing lessons that inspire active and autonomous learning. Similarly, Finnish educators focus on careful lesson planning, personalized student consultation, peer collaboration, and tailored learning outputs. Outside classroom hours, teachers and students should collaboratively design creative learning tasks to replace routine textbook exercises. For example, students could be guided to write journals, summarize books or stories, role-play characters, explore online resources for reading and listening, or complete projects that enhance their practical language

use. These activities foster a dynamic, creative, and connected learning community.

Fifth, Reforming Assessment Methods.

In addition to assessing core skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) at specific milestones, students should participate in group projects and present their results in English. Initial results show that while fluency and accuracy in presentations still need improvement, engaging in projects has boosted students' confidence in learning English. Furthermore, such tasks develop teamwork and public speaking skills. While implementing new assessment methods may be challenging, particularly in large classes, this shift is essential for fostering learner independence, autonomy, and practical language application in work and life.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article highlights the critical challenges affecting the quality of non-English major English education at Hoa Binh University and offers practical solutions to address these issues. Factors such as inconsistent entry-level proficiency, limited classroom hours, overcrowded classes, and a lack of motivation and practical application have hindered students' English language development. To tackle these problems, the proposed strategies focus on fostering student motivation, leveraging online learning resources, encouraging self-directed learning, and implementing differentiated teaching and assessment methods. By systematically applying these solutions, the university can enhance the effectiveness of English education, ensuring students achieve the desired learning outcomes. This improvement will not only equip students with essential language skills for their academic and professional journeys but also contribute to developing a competent workforce, capable of thriving in an increasingly globalized and competitive economy.

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