

Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community

Tran Le Huu Nghia · Ly Thi Tran ·  
Mai Tuyet Ngo *Editors*

# English Language Education for Graduate Employability in Vietnam




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# **Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community**

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Editors

# English Language Education for Graduate Employability in Vietnam

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# Abbreviations

AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEFR	The Common European Framework of References for Languages
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EALTA	European Association for Language Testing and Assessment
ECAs	Extra-Curricular Activities
EF EPI	EF English Proficiency Index
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
EMI	English Medium of Instructions
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
ETCF	English Teacher Competency Framework (Vietnam)
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
L1	The First Language/Mother Tongue
L2	The Second language
MEXT	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Japan)
NFLP	The National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Vietnam)
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TLF	Three Language Formula (India)
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication

TRA	Theory of Reasoned Action
UAE	The United Arab Emirates
UK	The United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	The United States
VSTEP	Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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# Chapter 1

## The Nexus of English Education and Graduate Employability: The Need to Re-Position and Modify the Approach to English Education



Ly Thi Tran , Tran Le Huu Nghia , and Mai Tuyet Ngo 

**Abstract** This chapter provides an introduction into the book. It briefly summarizes issues related to graduate employability and points out that English language competency is an essential employability capital itself, and English language education can help develop other types of employability capital. Based on evidence from the literature, it points out that there is a mismatch between the current delivery approach (content and structure of the curriculum, learning materials, teaching–learning methods, and assessment purpose) and students’ learning approach to English language education in Vietnam, and other Asian countries. This requires a change in the approaches to English language education to better accommodate the demands of the society and economy for students’ English competency and better position English language education to match its importance in this globalized world. The chapter then narrows down to the current context of teaching and learning English in Vietnam, arguing that Vietnam can provide an appropriate case to investigate how English language education can help develop graduate employability for students. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the content of each chapter presented in the book.

**Keywords** Graduate employability · English language competency · Employability capital · English education · English proficiency

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## 1.1 What is This Book About?

This book is a unique volume that investigates English language education and graduate employability. They are two hot yet independent research areas. As far as we are concerned, there is virtually no book in the market that holistically puts them side by side and examines the relationship between them, especially in the context of non-English speaking developing countries. Therefore, this book can be considered the first to examine the intersection between English language education and graduate employability.

Specifically, this book reports the nature, characteristics, and the context underpinning the nexus of English language education and graduate employability in Vietnam. It tackles specific aspects of how English language education contributes to employability and career development for students and graduates. English proficiency has been reported in the literature as a crucial factor influencing graduates' employment outcomes and career advancement in our increasingly interconnected and globalized world. However, in many non-English speaking countries, English language education at universities has predominantly concentrated on developing linguistic knowledge for students (e.g., Cha, 2015; Ploywattanawong & Trakulka-samsuk, 2014; Tran, 2007). This approach does not appear to motivate students to invest in their English language learning or capitalize from that learning for their future life and work. It can be because the link between English language learning and graduate employability is often not explicitly articulated to students. In addition, there seems to be a lack of support mechanisms at the classroom and institutional levels to help students develop and translate their English (or foreign) learning and language capability into employability. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the nexus between English language education and employability as well as enabling and disabling factors for students' development of employability in English courses.

Despite the focus on Vietnam, the book embraces an international and comparative perspective in understanding English language education and employability. This was possible through the provision of a broad theoretical background and framework about English language education, employability models, and English language policies in Asian countries, and through critiques on the limitations of the approach that these countries adopted to deliver English programs. The book draws on empirical evidence from a range of qualitative and quantitative studies. It also compares the findings reported in these studies with relevant research in other non-English speaking countries. It reports different stakeholders' perceptions of and experiences with the contribution of English language education to the development of students' employability capital. The book also reports the effectiveness of current practices in English language education with a focus on its preparation of students for work, using a variety of stakeholders' experiences. Despite recent achievements, stakeholders generally believe that English language programs in Vietnamese higher education have failed to prepare students for employability and employment purposes.

Based on the empirical evidence reported in the chapters and a critical review of policies across Asian countries, the book proposes that English language education

in higher education needs a new approach that links to graduate employability frameworks. It argues that English language programs should not limit itself within the notion of transmitting a foreign language under the umbrella of developing cultural or linguistic competence. Rather, English education should be framed from a socio-economic perspective because in many non-English speaking countries, English has been a critical employability capital required by employers. Yet, a shift in the delivery approach and curriculum content will need time to deploy and evaluate the outcomes. Through providing both conceptual knowledge and practical implications, the authors of the book believe that such deep-rooted changes in approach would help English language education reforms in Vietnamese higher education and elsewhere more effectively develop English language skills for students and accordingly enhance their work-readiness in an increasingly globalized world.

## 1.2 Overview of Graduate Employability

Graduate employability has become a priority in the higher education agenda of many countries across the world over the past two decades. It is not only the concern of individual students and institutions for their students, but it is often tied to the broader social responsibility of higher education regarding the need to equip the future workforce with adequate skills, knowledge, and attributes to perform and engage in the changing world. Students and graduates are considered as (potential) key actors in the economy given their positioning in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2016) and in the long-term social and economic development of nation states. Graduate employability is situated at the intersection of universities' education, individual graduates' capabilities, and the broader economic, social, cultural, and political context which shapes the nature of the labour market. It is heavily affected by local and global financial, health and climate crises, which determine the demand, structure, and operation of the labour market. Currently, the financial and labour markets have been severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising unemployment, heightened job competition, shifting characteristics of the labour market, and changing demands for employability have been reported as the major impacts of the spread of the present global pandemic on the labour market (CBC News, 2020; Jackson et al., 2020; Miller, 2020; *The Guardian*, 2020). Such a challenging context has not only made graduate employability become a pressing issue for universities, graduates, and the society but also required an agile approach to understanding the new demands of the labour market in order to support the development of graduate employability and career prospects or graduates' upskilling or reskilling in response to the changing context. The constantly shifting, complex, and increasingly constrained labour market, exacerbated by the insecurities because of COVID-19, have created a stronger demand for graduates to build up an employability portfolio or an entire package of knowledge, skills, attributes, and experiences to complement their degrees (Brunner et al., 2018; McMurray et al., 2016; Tran & Bui, 2021; Tran et al., 2014, 2022a, 2022b). English

language competency has been identified as a key component in graduates' whole employability portfolio (Bui et al., 2017; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013).

There have been various debates and perspectives about how to define graduate employability and what the key components of graduate employability are. Employability is generally constructed as a relational and multidimensional notion across a range of definitions (Nilsson, 2016). The most common conceptualization of graduate employability is often tied to discipline-specific knowledge and skills, generic skills, and attributes. In this regard, employability is defined as a combination of technical knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). However, some scholars argue that employability should be conceptualized as an individual ability "to find, create, and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan" (Bennett, 2018, p. 5). Others are critical of employability being viewed as fixed skills employability or as simply a "possession of the generic skills listed by graduate employers" (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 31) given the rapidly changing and dynamic labour market as well as the economic, social, cultural, and political context that influences the labour market.

In response to the identified limitations of aligning graduate employability largely to pre-prescribed skills and knowledge, some scholars point out the need to view employability from the angles of psychology and human behaviors, and conceive it as a mix of career identity, social capital, cultural capital, and human capital (Clarke, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). Authors, such as Tomlinson (2017) and Clarke (2018), argue that to enhance employability and career prospects, it is critical for graduates to possess and continuously develop a combination of capitals, including:

- human capital: technical knowledge and skills, soft skills, accrual work experiences,
- social capital: social network within and beyond a work sector,
- cultural capital: knowledge about how an industry works,
- psychological capital: attributes that make graduates more agile in their career development,
- identity capital: a sense of belonging to an industry, occupational sector, or work role.

English language proficiency, necessary for students and graduates to effectively communicate, engage, and perform in a globalized and multilingual world, has intersected with the kinds of capital listed above (e.g., see Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Fang & Baker, 2018). English language or foreign language proficiency is critical to individual students' study-work-life, future workforce and thus nation states' long-term development.

### 1.3 Graduate Employability and English Language Proficiency

English has become an international language for education, cultural exchange, business, and political affairs for many decades (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017; Pennycook, 2017; Simpson, 2017). This happens as a result of internationalization and globalization processes which require a common international language for information exchange in different aspects involved in the processes. Due to the increased importance of English in our modern society, graduates with English proficiency have an advantage for securing employment, career development, and international mobility, especially for those from non-English speaking countries and for international graduates (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Grasmann, 2011; Stroupe & Kimura, 2015; Yoke et al., 2018). Consequently, in many non-English speaking countries, English has become central in the national language policy, an instruction medium in some HE programs, and taught as a core component of the curricula, from primary to higher education (see for example, Chung & Choi, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2016; Tsui & Tollefson, 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

Apart from the role of English language proficiency in students' and graduates' employability and employment prospects, English language education can value-add how students relate themselves with the world around, and facilitate their studies of other subjects within the curriculum, as a range of updated disciplinary and general knowledge is published in materials written in English (see a case of using English as a medium of instruction in Tran et al., 2019). Students with a good command of English will have better access to learning resources and enrich their knowledge as English is the most common medium of writing for articles from 65 countries and territories around the world (Han & Ho, 2011). van Weijen (2012) also reinforced that approximately 80% of the papers indexed in Scopus were written in English. In addition, successfully acquiring English skills requires a high level of determination, creativity, and collaboration. These attributes would in turn help students and graduates develop useful psychological attributes that can be translated to their employability development and career advancement.

Over the past three decades, non-English speaking countries in Asia have committed significant resources to develop English language competency for its citizens, especially young people. English language education is often prioritized in the government agenda and English delivered as a subject within the curriculum. Nation states like Singapore, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam have regarded English education as an important vehicle to enhance its workforce competitiveness in the region and the world as well as its position in the international economic and political arena (Dekker & Yong, 2005; Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). In China, English language education was seen to be integral to the country's economic, political, and social developments in accordance with the Open door policy (1899) and English was considered to be beneficial for fostering social equality in the nation. The use of English was positioned as a tool to support cultural and political developments of the nation (Adamson, 2004). In Vietnam, the 2005 Education Law explicitly

and officially recognized foreign language learning, including English, in schools, which was a recognition of the role of English in the nation's economic competitiveness and regional and international integration (Vu, 2019). Existing literature also suggests that the growing popularity of English language education in Asia has resulted from the sociolinguistic and sociocultural landscapes which have shaped the accelerating demand for English proficiency (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2008; Matsuda, 2012). The increasingly interconnected world also poses a greater demand for people to master foreign language skills, cultural diversity, and intercultural understandings to facilitate their interactions with speakers of other language and cultural backgrounds.

## 1.4 Approaches to Teaching English to Higher Education Students

Although there has been a concerted effort by the governments across many Asian countries to invest in enhancing the English proficiency of its citizens, a range of problems exist. First, one of the common approaches to teaching and learning English in higher education in Asia has been based on the native-speaker model that aims to train learners to use English as English native speakers (Chomsky, 1965) whilst giving insufficient attention to building on learners' own cultures, values, and identities as a foreign or second language learner. This model is considered as "not appropriate in all circumstances and unattainable by the vast majority of students" (Cook, 2016, p. 6). Second, in countries like South Korea, China, Thailand, and Vietnam, English language education for decades was grammar-based and predominantly centred around developing learners' linguistic knowledge whilst placing less emphasis on their communicative skills (Cha, 2015; Ploywattanawong & Trakulkasemsuk, 2014; Tran, 2007). Third, the examination-driven culture where learners were expected to face excessive focus in tests (Tran et al., 2014) in English language classrooms was also amongst the inhibiting factors to their development of English language proficiency for life and for employability. In short, following the native-speaker model, grammar-based method and examination-oriented approach to teaching and learning English might preclude learners' development of the capability to use language skills practically in real work and life situations (Feng, 2005; Yu et al., 2009).

As far as English language teaching and learning in higher education in Asian countries is concerned, existing literature has also identified a range of other issues impacting its effectiveness, including a lack of learner-centredness, insufficient professional development to support teachers in applying updated pedagogies, and best practices into classroom teaching and most seriously, a shortage of competent English language teachers and teacher trainers (Le, 2019; Ngo, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nhung, 2019). In Oman, for example, limited educational resources, including large class sizes and unavailability of competent teachers have been identified in The National Language Policy as amongst the factors depriving learners from

opportunities to practice and improve their interpersonal communication in situations beyond the classroom settings (see Chapter 2 of this book).

Despite the increasing importance of English in graduate employability and in their future life, like their Asian counterpart, it appears that the aim of English language education in Vietnam is focusing more on developing linguistic understandings, intercultural competence, and relations. English education has not paid enough attention to equipping students with practical language skills for their future education and work (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017; Vu, 2019). In higher education, on top of teacher qualities and other practicality issues, English is often treated secondary compared to discipline-specific subjects, and there is a disconnect between English and other subjects (Hien & Loan, 2018; Hoa, 2016). Consequently, many graduates are not confident to apply for jobs that require English skills (Bui et al., 2018) or cannot use English skills effectively for completing their professional duties (Tran, 2018b). It is common to see that many students and employees enrol in extra English classes offered by private English language centres to improve their English competence so as to enhance their learning, work, and future prospects (Tran, 2015, 2018a).

The literature also indicates that there is a mismatch between the current delivery approach (content and structure of the curriculum, learning materials, teaching–learning methods, and assessment purpose) and students’ learning approach to English language education in Vietnam, and other Asian countries. This requires a change in approaches to English language education to better accommodate the demands of the society and economy for students’ English competency and better position English language education to match its importance in this globalized world. Despite the rhetoric about the importance of English to students’ employability and nation states’ workforce competitiveness, the teaching and learning of English in many Asian countries, including Vietnam, is often approached from the angle of linguistic knowledge, intercultural understandings, and cultural exchange rather than to explicitly prepare students for future work. Even though these sorts of knowledge help to enhance students’ employability, there is a lack of support and guidance to link these to employability earlier in their university program and to articulate these into employability capital.

The literature suggests that English classes can potentially provide great opportunities to develop employability for students (Dudzic & Nguyen, 2015; Fang & Baker, 2018), if strategic policies and appropriate approaches to the delivery of English curricula are designed and implemented. It is critical that new approaches to teaching and learning English take into account the role of English skills in enhancing graduates’ employability. The importance of English language education in assisting with the development of life and employability skills will need to be articulated more explicitly in policies, which are then followed by concrete guidelines, strategies, and resources in order to realize these policies in supporting the development of English proficiency for employability. These steps will help bridge the gaps between policy rhetoric and the reality of teaching and learning English in higher education. It is equally important to place English as a core subject rather than at the periphery of higher education. This will be linked to a greater recognition of the role of English



in university discourses framing graduate attributes, employability, and soft skills development. The implementation of innovative pedagogies to English language teaching and learning, especially through real-life language experiences, task-based and project-based approaches, and digital or hybrid language teaching approaches, need to accord greater awareness and place the goal of developing English for employability at the centre.

## 1.5 English Language Education for Employability in Vietnamese Higher Education

Addressing the mentioned research gaps, this edited book will examine teaching and learning English for employability in Vietnamese higher education. Vietnam is chosen as a case to investigate the nexus between English language education and employability because it is a booming economy with a high demand for English skills and because there are vigorous English language education reforms in the last 20 years. The book is framed within one country to better examine the research issue in-depth within the influence of contextual factors.

In Vietnam, a middle-income country in Southeast Asia, there has been a pressing need for English language proficiency due to rapid socio-economic development and internationalization (Bodewig & Badiani-Magnusson, 2014), the nation's commitment to regional and global integration, and the growing demand for overseas study and labour migration (Tran et al., 2014). Vietnam's open door policy since 1986 has accelerated the demands for English and foreign languages which are regarded by the government as being crucial to support its regional and international integration agenda through boosting its economic and diplomatic relations with the Asian region and the world (Pham, 2014; Truong & Tran, 2014). Despite its long-lasting interaction with Vietnam through the American involvement in the country between 1954 and 1975, English was not positioned as a major foreign language in Vietnam, like Chinese, French, and Russian, until *Đổi Mới* in 1986 (Pham, 2014). Vietnam's becoming a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007 and its participation in regional and international organizations such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (1995), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (1998), and Free Trade Area (AFTA), were crucial milestones in Vietnam's internationalization of the national economy and geopolitical relations. *Đổi Mới* and these progresses have created a dynamic and fast-moving economy, coupled with the availability of a diligent and low-wage labour force, and the nation's political stability, appear to be critical in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam. The country has witnessed a rapid growth of private, joint venture and FDI companies, exports, imports, and international trade since *Đổi Mới*. These developments have generated a pressing demand for English and other foreign languages. In addition, the growth of middle-class families which has resulted in accelerating demands for overseas study and the rise of labour migration which has seen Vietnamese workers migrating to



work to foreign countries through the labour dispatch programme or skilled migration programme have added to the elevating need for English language learning in Vietnam. English has been the most popular foreign language for school education in Vietnam and therefore become central in the national language policy (Vu, 2019).

A good English language command demonstrated through possessing international English language certificates such as IELTS, TOEIC, TOEFL has been a prerequisite for an increasing number of job applications in Vietnam (Hoang, 2010; Lien et al., 2015). In addition, English language proficiency is becoming an increasingly important factor in career advancement, job promotion, and access to high-paid employment opportunities. In particular, English or foreign language proficiency is required to work in joint venture companies and foreign direct investment enterprises or in international trade sector in general. Many employers, not only international enterprises but also local businesses and government organizations, increasingly expect their employees to read materials, keep pace with updated knowledge and new developments in their field, liaise with foreign partners and carry out tasks in which English is an important vehicle. However, despite the growing important role of English, the teaching and learning English is still an add-on component of the mainstream curriculum and the focus of English courses seems to gear towards equipping students with linguistic knowledge to help them pass English tests, instead of a holistic approach to English education that supports them to become competent English language users for their future work, education, and life.

As a response to the need to improve the foreign language capacity of Vietnam's workforce, the Prime Minister issued in 2008 the Decision 1400 QĐ-TTg titled *Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project in the National Education System during the Period of 2008–2020* (Prime Minister, 2008). This important Decision often known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (the NFLP 2020) is one of the most significant innovations in foreign language (primarily English) education in Vietnam. The Government of Vietnam considers the NFLP 2020 a breakthrough to improve the quality of English language education across all education levels in Vietnam, with the approved budget of VND 9,378 billion (or nearly US\$500 million). The ultimate goal of NFLP 2020 was that most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary and vocational schools, colleges, and universities would be able to independently and confidently use a foreign language (primarily English) in their daily communication, study, and work in an integrated multilingual multicultural environment, turning foreign languages into a strength of Vietnamese graduates to serve national industrialization and modernization (Prime Minister, 2008). This acknowledges foreign languages as essential soft skills needed for Vietnamese people's communication, further study and very importantly, for employability.

The English language education reforms so far have introduced some key changes to teaching and learning of English. A new curriculum of English and textbooks was introduced, promoting communicative language teaching (CLT) and learner-centred approaches in all levels of education (MOET, 2006). The reforms have also paid much attention to increasing English language teachers' teaching effectiveness. In response to the need for the increase of both quantity and quality of English language teachers nation-wide, the Project 2020 invested 80% of its budget

(US\$446.43 million) on teacher training (Van Canh, 2020). English language skills assessment and learning outcomes have also been specified by policy documents (The Government of Vietnam, 2014a). University graduates are expected to attain an English proficiency of Level 3 in the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework for Vietnam or get an overall score of 4.5 in the IELTS (The Government of Vietnam, 2014b).

After years of implementation, the reform has achieved significant outcomes: CLT-focused curriculum, textbooks and student-centred pedagogical practices (Doan & Hamid, 2019); an increase in teachers' English language proficiency level competencies and teaching expertise (Ngo, 2019). The reforms have also raised public's awareness of the importance of English skills resulting in the promotion of teaching and learning English country-wide. Last but not least, adopting the benchmarks for English language learning outcomes, as mentioned above, has greatly contributed to the improvement of graduates' English skills, compared to the past (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

However, despite efforts and investment in English language education reforms, it appears that in reality, graduates still face difficulties in using their English skills for work purposes, and employers still complain about their employees' English skills (Luong, 2016; Tran et al., 2017). A couple of studies have attempted to identify causes of failure in equipping graduates with English language skills for their work. Impractical curriculum at schools and their passivity in promoting a life-long career was identified as the root cause (Nhung et al., 2020; Tran, 2018a). Traditional teaching practices were also found to prevent students to develop sufficient English skills for work purposes (Hoang, 2010). Students' attitudes to English language learning are critical. Ton and Pham (2010) revealed that most Vietnamese university students did not set a specific goal of learning English; they learned from the English textbook to pass exams instead of using English for real-life purposes such as communication.

In short, English has become central in the national foreign language policy of Vietnam and numerous initiatives have been launched, aiming to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning and to enhance graduates' employment and career prospects. Unfortunately, it appears that such a goal has not been reached, and there have been several obstacles along the way. Such a context of English language education presents Vietnam as a suitable case to investigate the nexus between English language education and employability. From there, more discussion about how to improve the approach to English language education will be provided so that it can help graduates optimize their employability using English language learning as a springboard.

## 1.6 Outline of the Book

This book comprises 15 chapters, with each chapter designed to be able to stand alone as an independent academic paper and simultaneously work together to construct the book. After this Introductory Chapter, the book will be divided into four parts:

- Part I (Chapters 2 to 4) sets an introductory foundation to the book by reviewing the relevant international literature on the importance of English language education in several countries, its contribution to graduate employability, and its disconnect to the current employability agenda. It also provides the context of English language education in Vietnam as the background for the subsequent chapters.
- Part II (Chapters 5 to 9) describes how English language education contributes to students' development of employability capitals and employment outcomes from students' perspectives. Each chapter will discuss and link the findings to the existing literature in other countries as well as explain the differences where relevant.
- On the premise set by the second part, Part III (Chapters 10 to 15) examines how English language education policy is implemented in Vietnam and identifies areas for improvement so that English language education can better enhance students and graduates' employability.
- Part IV includes one chapter (Chapter 16) where we summarize key issues addressed in the book and discusses the way forward for English language education, using the case of Vietnam to provide practical implication for English language education in countries of similar contexts.

## 1.7 Part I: Background

*Chapter 2* aims to provide a snap shot of the rise of English language education in non-English speaking Asian countries. It begins with the key notion that the twenty-first century is the Asian century with the rise of many big economies across this continent: China, India, Japan, the four Asian tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), and the five recent Asian tiger cubs (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines). The authors argue that in order to sustain their economies, these countries need a skilled workforce who are proficient in foreign languages, especially English—the international language of business. On that premise, the chapter continues to provide a brief review of English language policies and how such policies have been implemented in multiple Asian countries. The chapter points out the key drivers of the development of English language policies, with socio-economic development seem to be the key ones. The authors question the relationship between English language education and employability and the effectiveness of current English language education in preparing the future workforce. They call for further research to address such a literature gap.

*Chapter 3* sketches out the socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* policy in 1986, marking Vietnam's readiness to embrace national economic development, internationalization, and globalization. It reviews Vietnam's national foreign language policy and current practices of English education alongside the employability agenda in Vietnamese higher education. It also highlights both contextual and pedagogical challenges facing Vietnam's English language education. It argues that although English skills are classified as essential soft skills necessary for graduate employability, the current situation of Vietnamese graduates' low English language proficiency revealed a huge gap between what is intended in government policies and what is actually being implemented at the institutional, curriculum, and subject levels across education levels, including higher education. This chapter suggests that Vietnamese English education context provides an appropriate case study to investigate how English education can contribute to graduate employability.

*Chapter 4* provides a theoretical framework underpinning the development of this book. It first describes the current situations of skill demands in different labour markets. It points out that English skills are in high demands and raise the concern about how we can better approach English language teaching/learning so that graduates can become more competitive when entering the labour market. Following that, it reviews graduate employability models to identify an appropriate theoretical framework to underpin the development of this book. Accordingly, Tomlinson's (2017) employability capital model is chosen as it provides a broad perspective about employability, moving beyond the notion of skills. To enhance their employability, students and graduates need to possess a sufficient level of human capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (social networks with others), cultural capital (understanding of the work culture and practices of a particular industry), psychological capital (personal attributes that enhance their ability to move forward in building their careers such as resilience, flexibility, adaptability, etc.), and career identity (sense of attachment to a particular work role or industry; the feeling and ambition of who they want to become or what they want to do). This chapter also explains how the theoretical framework is used in the subsequent part of the book.

## **1.8 Part II: The Development of Graduate Employability Through English Language Education**

*Chapter 5* begins the second part of the book which focuses on how English language education can contribute to students' employability capital. This chapter examines how English education assists with students' development of general knowledge and skills necessary for their future employment in the fields of Hospitality and Tourism and Information Technology graduates. Using data collected from 16 interviews and a survey with 200 students/graduates, the authors show that English education enhances students' access to the latest learning resources in English,

contributing to advancing their professional knowledge and skills. English education also helps develop their communication, work-related and people skills. Based on such evidence, the authors conclude that English education can greatly help develop human capital for students.

*Chapter 6* reports a mixed method case study to fill the missing literature on how different forms of English language education contribute to fostering social relationships and enhancing employability. The authors collected data from 15 interviews and 319 responses to a survey with undergraduates and graduates of Information Technology and Tourism Management in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. The results showed that formal English education was perceived as the most popular form of students' participation, but non-formal and informal English education was reported to better develop social relationships for the participants. Likewise, social relationships established from English learning activities outside the formal system were found to contribute to graduate employability more than that of the formal one. The author proposed that formal English language education should embed more work-related activities in the curriculum to help students develop social relationships for their future employment prospects.

In this globalized and multicultural world, English language and cultural understanding are acknowledged as two primary factors for desirable career outcomes. The study reported in *Chapter 7*, therefore, investigates the development of cultural capital through learning English language and how such cultural capital contributes to English language learners' employability. The study was guided by Tomlinson's (2017) framework of graduate employability and the authors employed semi-structured interviews with 11 participants from eight academic disciplines. The findings revealed that cultural capital could be developed through the diversity of formal, non-formal, and informal forms of English language learning. The findings also indicated that cultural capital crucially develops human, social, psychological, and identity capital, all of which are key components of graduate employability. The authors discuss pedagogical implications for effective development of cultural capital in different forms of English education (formal, informal, and non-formal) in the Vietnamese higher education.

Some personal attributes and soft skills such as self-efficacy, adaptability, resilience, and flexibility are considered psychological capital by Tomlinson (2017). They help graduates adapt and respond proactively to career challenges. *Chapter 8* reports a qualitative study exploring how English education contributes to the development of students' soft skills and personal attributes. The study includes interviews with 30 small groups of students, with three students in each group. The research showed that amongst the thirty-two listed soft skills and attributes, six of them, including oral communication, self-efficacy/confidence, teamwork ability, problem-solving skills, proactiveness, and information management skills, were voted as the most developed via English education. It also showed that different types of classroom tasks and a certain kind of extra-curricular activities—such as the English speaking club—contributed to undergraduates' development of particular soft skills and personal attributes. The authors discussed how to use particular English teaching methods to improve students' psychological capital.

In *Chapter 9*, the authors report a study that explored how English education experience contributes to shaping students' career identity, arguing that in this globalized world, students are increasingly exposed to such educational experiences. Using a narrative research design, the authors interviewed two preservice teachers of English to explore the research issue. The study identified the preservice teachers' levels of investment made towards English language learning, abilities to draw on English language learning experiences to articulate a narrative of career identity, and self-concepts relating to their future role as teachers of English. These findings show that the participants' English language learning experiences spanning over many years essentially contribute to the development of their identity capital which they could use to develop and project themselves as employable graduate teachers. The chapter offers implications for English language teacher educators and future employers.

## **1.9 Part III: English Language Education in Vietnam: Current Practices and Challenges**

*Chapter 10* begins Part III of this book which explores the effectiveness of English language education in Vietnam and challenges that hinder the effectiveness. It reports a study that examines current employees' feedback on their former experiences with the General English courses offered by their former universities. The data includes 159 responses to the survey from graduates currently working in different professional sectors. The analysis revealed that overall the employees found that the English courses equipped them with good English knowledge and skills that could support their communication at work. However, in their views, several aspects of the English courses could be further improved to better prepare students for the world of work: (i) theory-based curriculum, (ii) unauthenticity of teaching activities, learning materials, and assessment tasks, (iii) a lack of ongoing feedback from using formative assessment so that students can improve their weaknesses, and (iv) students' inability to self-regulate their learning. The authors discuss measures to improve such inhibitors so that the General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities can be more effective in preparing their students' English skills for future employment.

In *Chapter 11*, the authors report a case study about teachers' perspectives on (i) the effectiveness of a General English program in a Vietnamese university with regard to enhancing students' employability and (ii) factors influencing the effectiveness of the program. Using a thematic analysis approach to treat 14 semi-structured interviews with English teachers, the authors found that in teachers' perspectives, the General English program helped strengthen students' employability mainly through the development of English receptive skills, soft skills, and intercultural competence. They found that students' motivation and shyness, teachers' English proficiency, teaching quality and commitment, and administration and management issues inhibited the effectiveness of the program. The chapter provides implications to improve

the effectiveness of the General English program, with a focus on enhancing students' employability.

*Chapter 12* moves forward to investigate the effectiveness of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs offered in Vietnamese higher education institutions. Drawing on the framework of graduate employability capital (Tomlinson, 2017) and the learning-for-profession principle of ESP courses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), the study reported in this chapter used graduates' self-reflected experiences to examine the contribution of ESP courses to Vietnamese graduates' employability. The analysis of 16 responses to an open-ended survey and 220 responses to an online survey showed that these ESP courses contributed to the development of specialized English language, knowledge, and generic skills that enhance graduates' employability. The authors also identified limitations of ESP courses in the course designs and teaching practices. This chapter discusses ways to maximize the benefits of these ESP courses for Vietnamese graduates' employability.

*Chapter 13* explores the implementation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in Vietnamese universities. Analysing 10 interviews with teachers and 22 interviews with final-year students of two EMI programs at a well-established university, the authors found that the deployment of EMI in these programs caused various difficulties for both teachers and students. For teachers, the programs required not only high English competence but also new pedagogical skills unfamiliar to many EMI teachers, resulting in lowered teaching quality. For students, the language barriers, coupled with the long-standing question-suppressing teaching culture, and the mismatch between new academic expectations and students' learning habits, cause comprehension uncertainty and learning tensions. These issues appeared to hinder the development of students' employability. However, the authors found that the situation improved from the first to the final year, with students being extensively exposed to English and constantly exercising their personal agency to improve their English and enrich their learning. The main findings are discussed in light of Vietnamese sociocultural conditions as well as institutional arrangements for the EMI programs.

*Chapter 14* takes on board the issue of cultural teaching and learning in English language classes. As languages and cultures are inseparable from each other, cultural content has been considered an integral part of language teaching. On that premise, the study in this chapter explores teacher perceptions and practices of culture in English language teaching at a Vietnamese university. Data for the study were collected from classroom observations and interviews with fourteen teachers of English language in a Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that although the participants were aware of the inextricable relationship between language and culture, their perceptions of culture teaching centred around topical dependence, priority of language over culture in language teaching, inadequate exposure to culture in language courses, and other constraints on culture teaching. Their teaching practices were dictated by traditional approaches to culture teaching, which focused on cultural knowledge about English speaking countries. Based on the participants' perceptions and experiences, the study discusses implications for transforming culture teaching in



English language education in Vietnam and, for developing intercultural competence in relation to employability.

In this increasingly digitalized world, it is insufficient to investigate English language education without taking into account online English language courses. Whilst much has been written about the benefits of online learning, very few studies investigate perceptions of learners learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) towards online learning and their employability. *Chapter 15* reports a study that explored factors influencing foreign language learners' decision to take English online courses, challenges associated with pursuing online learning, and the impact of such learning experiences on their employability. The authors used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 20 Vietnamese online learners of English. The authors found several key factors encouraging participants to select online English courses, including time flexibility, teacher–student interaction, cost-saving, recommendation from friends, teaching and learning materials, and teaching methods. They also identified issues encountered by learners when taking these online English courses in terms of practicality issues and professional teaching competence of online instructors. The findings also indicated positive influences of taking online English courses on various aspects of students' employability.

## **1.10 Part IV: English Language Education for Graduate Employability: What's Next?**

*Chapter 16* summarizes the main findings of the previous empirical chapters to tease out the key messages of the whole book project. We note down the contribution of English language education to the development of students' employability and its influence on their career prospects. We also provide a clearer picture of how English education has been conducted in Vietnamese higher education institutions, amidst the vigorous English teaching and learning reforms in the country. Identifying the limitations of English language education in preparing students for the world of work, we argue that there is a pressing need to consider changing the approach to English language education, focusing more on the actual use of the language at the workplace and moving away from testing students' acquisition of linguistic abilities or introducing a cultural snap-shot of English speaking countries. We present an approach to English language teaching and learning that can better foster the development of students' employability. This framework is an extension of Kumaradivelu's (2003) macro-strategic framework fundamentally used as classroom-based English language teaching/learning. We propose to develop metacognition for students about what, why, and how they should function within English language education so that they can develop English language competence and associated employability capital. We add institutional-level practices and support to enable the use of this framework. The framework also links classroom-based teaching/learning practices with out-of-class English learning activities (extra-curricular activities, self-study online classes,



volunteer activities, and part-time jobs, etc.) to further polish English skills and other types of employability capital developed through English language education in real-life situations and at self-paced development.

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**Part I**  
**English as a Power Tool in a Globalized**  
**World**

# Chapter 2

## The Emergence of English Language Education in Non-english Speaking Asian Countries



Tran Le Huu Nghia and Ngoc Tung Vu

**Abstract** This chapter aims to provide a snap shot of the rise of English language education in non-English speaking Asian countries. It begins with the key notion that the twenty-first century is the Asian century with the rise of many big economies across this continent: China, India, Japan, the four Asian tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), and recent Asian tiger cubs (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines). The authors argue that in order to sustain their economies, these Asian countries need a skilled workforce who are proficient in foreign languages, especially English—the international language of business. On that premise, the chapter continues to provide a brief review of English language policies and how such policies have been implemented in multiple Asian countries. The chapter points out key drivers of the development of English language policies, with socio-economic development seeming to be the key driver. The authors question the relationship between English language education and employability and the effectiveness of current English language education in preparing the future workforce. They call for further research to address such a literature gap.

**Keywords** National language policy · Asian century · English language education · Cultural diversity · Colonization history

### 2.1 Introduction

It is forecast that the twenty-first century will be the Asian century. In 2020, Asia hosted more than half of the world population and occupied an estimation of 50% of the world's middle class (Romie & Reed, 2019). It was estimated that, at market

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exchange value, Asia accounted for 38 per cent of global output in 2020, up from 26 per cent in the early 2000s (Romie & Reed, 2019). Several mega cities of the world have been built in Asia, with the latest technologies located in Tokyo, Beijing, Shanghai, and Dubai. The living standards of several countries, once considering under the poverty line, have caught up with that of many Western countries.

Several emerging Asian economies have evidently made the Asian century possible. The rise of Chinese and Indian economies explains a lot for such a new economic power shift. Impressing the world with its high economic growth rate for decades (Naughton, 2018), China is now seen as a huge economy, ranked second in 2022, with a GDP of 13.4 trillion.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, it accounted for 19 per cent of world output in 2019 (Romie & Reed, 2019). Additionally, India is currently placed seventh in terms of the world's largest economy, with a GDP of 2.72 trillion in 2022.<sup>2</sup> Even before the economic successes of China and India, the emergence of Asian tiger economies—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan (sometimes Japan is also included in this list)—impressed the world with their rapid socio-economic growth rates (Paldam, 2003) due to intensive investments in human capital, outward orientation, and political reforms (Arora & Ratnasiri, 2015; Paldam, 2003). Within about 50 years, they could almost join rich Western countries (Paldam, 2003). Despite the slowdown of the Asian tigers' economies in recent years due to financial crisis (Glick & Spiegel, 2009), the rise of the so-called Asian tiger cub economies has, in fact, further built momentum for the arrival of the Asian century. For example, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are ranked 16th, 25th, 35th, 37th, and 45th biggest economies in 2022 respectively.<sup>3</sup> Take the case of Vietnam as an example, its economic boom was instilled by the introduction of Doi Moi Policy in 1986. Since 1990 to 2020, just before the pandemic, the GDP growth rate has been kept stable, at above 5%, with an exception of the year 1999 at 4.7% due to the then financial crisis (World Bank, 2022). The GDP per capital in 2020 was 2,785 dollars, a huge rise from 94 dollars in 1990 (World Bank, 2022). Foreign investment to this nation has also jumped from 19.9 billion dollars in 2010 to 21.3 billion dollars in 2017 (Tran, 2019).

With such rapid socio-economic growth rates, increased foreign investments to Asian countries and exports from these countries to the world, the need for English language skills in the workforce is in high demands. For example, a survey from World Bank (2014, p. 24) showed that 81% of employers said that a lack of English communication skills was one of the main reasons blocking Malaysian graduates from securing an entry-level employment position. In Vietnam, most job adverts require candidates to possess the good level of English: 65% in 2015 and 67% in 2018 respectively (Doan & Hamid, 2019). In India, most employers are looking for qualified graduates with open mindset, positive attitudes, self-motivation, and fluent English communication abilities, of which they found the last criterion hard to meet (Dash et al., 2020; Sinha et al., 2019). In the case of China, although they prefer to

<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>.



use Chinese as their business language, they cannot resist the demand for English language skills in the country. A survey showed that among 415.95 million Chinese foreign-language learners, 390.16 million had learnt English (Wei & Su, 2012) for better career prospects. As such, in most Asian countries now, English has been taught as a compulsory subject at lower school and tertiary education levels, aiming to equip the graduates with this “weapon” of communication for their future careers, thus ultimately adding to sustainable development of the nations.

In this chapter, we will review the language policies and the initiatives to make English language part of the education in several (traditionally) non-English speaking Asian countries. We will also provide brief comments on the convergence and divergence in such policies and initiatives, pinpointing the weaknesses of the current approach to English language education. Based on that, we will call for re-consideration of the current practices of teaching and learning of English with regard to how it successfully prepares students for the future careers.

## 2.2 English Language Policies in East and Northeast Asian Countries

### 2.2.1 *China*

China—as the fourth largest country in the world—is home to nearly 130 local languages and 56 ethnic groups, among which the Han group accounts for the largest population (91%) and speaks Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin or Putonghua became the official standardized forms of Chinese language in 1956 as a lingua franca of the country, which is consistent with China’s Constitution (1982) (Feng & Adamson, 2019). Following the country’s free-market reforms in 1979, there were high needs for competitive advantages in international relationships, global engagement, and international competitiveness to maintain its fast-growing country in the globe (Charlton, 2019; Cortzazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2005a). This motivated foreign language policies, including English, to prove China’s position in the global market.

In the early 1960s, China promoted English in response to the socio-economic and technological goals along the modernization process (Hu, 2005). This was aimed to give its citizens better access to scientific knowledge in support of national development. In light of a foreign language policy in 2001, English was increasingly used in China to develop a wide range of cultural values and political strengths (Adamson, 2004) and more generally the nation’s sustained shift in modernization (Niu & Wolff, 2003). English started to become a required subject in the early level of Chinese education (Feng, 2005), which would then facilitate the development of English Language Teaching (ELT) in China.

The development of ELT in China was also an outcome of continuous efforts, monitored by the Ministry of Education, regarding the large governmental investment in learning resources (Hu, 2002a) and teacher education (Hu, 2002b). Significantly,

the latest policy was published in 2021, entitled “Guidelines for Further Easing the Burden of Excessive Homework and Off-campus Tutoring for Students at the Stage of Compulsory Education”. Within the education sector, this policy aimed to ensure Chinese students’ healthy development, their access to qualified educational programs, reduced financial burden on their family, and institutionalized law-based governance (China Briefing, 2021).

However, there were inevitable concerns regarding the acceleration of the English language throughout Chinese contexts. Socially, despite the prerequisite English proficiency to facilitate Chinese’ upward social mobility, the expansive role of English language would be more likely to deteriorate a range of existing equality between mainstream and minority groups (Hu, 2005). Educationally, existing evidence suggests that Chinese learners were low in English language proficiency partly due to the heavy emphasis on language forms and grammar (Liu et al., 2021), which subsequently limited them in achieving employability (Feng, 2005; Pan, 2014). Alternatively, the fact that Chinese learners of English were purposefully trained to become native-like speakers of English was not reasonable, thus making them demotivated and feel unable to develop sufficient language competence as expected (Fang & Liu, 2020). Also, teachers do not have adequate opportunities for professional development and they primarily prepare students for the exams (Liu et al., 2021).

### **2.2.2 Japan**

The Japanese linguistic system has been heavily influenced by the national efforts of industrialization and modernization, which likely contributed to its diverse characters embedded in language codes (influenced by Korean and old-comers’ languages in addition to traditional characters and less-popular codes) (Loveday, 1996). The Japanese locals are more apt to recognize themselves living in a mono-cultural country and using Japanese as an only language (Gottlieb, 2005), as a result of their exercise of idealism to recognize the One-State in One-Nation from the late nineteenth century. However, being one of the most developed countries in the world, Japan felt the need to accept the proliferation of multilingualism and multiculturalism for its long-term sustainable development.

Indeed, globalization has motivated the Japanese to keep pace with social, cultural, and technological shifts. While the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has consistently promoted Japanese as a de facto national language of the country in order to maintain national identity, a lack of an international language proficiency served as a challenge to discourage economic progress and social development (Coulmas & Watanabe, 2002). Particularly, low English proficiency problematically prevented many Japanese from well-positioning in their local, national, and global settings. The consequence is that English has undoubtedly started to gain its firm status to serve Japanese’s academic, professional, and occupational purposes (Gottlieb, 2005). As such, English has been put into use for Japanese’

local educational directions and businesses via international partnerships, which has been taken into close condition for the nation's socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic strengths (Gottlieb, 2005; Rose & McKinley, 2017). Specifically, to better meet the shortest plan to promote English to support internationalization of Japan (Gottlieb, 2005; McKenzie, 2008), MEXT has passed and implemented the Called Action Plan. Under this plan, English was selected to assist the Japanese with *a working command of English*, being taught from the primary level to the tertiary education (Hato, 1995; Schneider, 2014). In 2008 when the Called Action Plan ended, despite its failures to develop English language proficiency for the Japanese (Hato, 2005; Schneider, 2014); it was considered as the first step to bring English more openly to the Japanese society.

To pursue better attainments, MEXT's 5-proposal ELT guideline was introduced in 2011 in order to ensure English education for the Japanese as global citizens (MEXT, 2011). Being aware of cultural differences and global competencies is critical, MEXT delivered the new plans in terms of ELT implementations for junior high schools. The plans responded to the in-depth investigation of, and exploration of the plans to develop, students' level, students' motivations, teachers' plans, colleges' entry levels (Honna & Saruhashi, 2019). Unfortunately, the implementation of such a policy cannot be called a success. Its limited achievements were hindered by a number of factors, including the requirements for Japanese learners of English to become native-like proficient English users and the decreased importance on different varieties of English (Honna & Saruhashi, 2019). While over-emphasis on requiring the English native speakers to teach and develop the Japanese learners' English language competence was placed in the classroom contexts, the Japanese learners did not have many opportunities to practice the language communicatively and explore cultural landscapes of English speaking countries (Houghton et al., 2018). Because examination was still important across educational levels, there was no room for cross-cultural communication, in addition to linguistic competence. As a result, it is a long way to achieve the target of internationalization Japan (Honna & Saruhashi, 2019).

### 2.2.3 *Korea*

Similar to Japan, South Korea is often represented as a unified identity—ethnically homogeneous nation—with 5,000 years of age (Kang, 2010). However, the difference is that the socio-economic development of South Korea was in line with the influx of foreign people and immigrants, thereby moving to become a multi-racial country. Also, the country has recently achieved its exponential economic growth, with the yearly GDP rates sustaining 5.45% from 1988 to 2019 and the yearly gross national income increasing from 67 USD in 1950s to 33,790 USD in 2019. These rocketed developments, as a result, allowed the country to play an important role in the global economy (The World Bank, 2021). With its complex population structure, South Korean needs an official language to make its people inclusive; likewise, to sustain socio-economic growth, South Korean needs an official language beneficial for its status in the international arena.

The Korean government highlights that education was inspired by the philosophy of “People-centered Education of the Future”, aiming at “promoting comprehensive growth of students”. While focusing on the “personalized education ... to meet the demands of their different life students” (Ministry of Education, n.d.), there was a measure of any person’s success based on the premise of social status and economic ladder unique to themselves (Isozaki, 2018). It serves as part of the national efforts of bringing up the importance of education, politics, and national identity. The national language of Korean—Korean language—is put at the forefront under the guidance of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. It is the main language for all matters in the country, but to move internationally, it needs more than that.

Therefore, English language education has been given more attention. First introduced in the national curriculum in 1963 (Ra, 2018), English became the official foreign language in 1998 (Yoo, 2005). The government pointed out that the English language may position South Korea competitively and help prepare its citizens to become a competitive workforce in the world (Piller & Cho, 2013). Therefore, English has been promoted more aggressively because a proficient English communicative competence is claimed to reap success in professional careers for the South Korean people (Ra, 2018).

Driven by reforms to orient the sustainable development of from-low-to-high level of education over the years (1948 to present), ELT in South Korea has also gone through a series of pertaining changes in focus. Foremost, it is observed that there has been an increase in the English language proficiency among South Korean learners (Lee, 2018). Their awareness of the importance of English language competence toward their economic status and employability was also enhanced (Shin & Lee, 2019). However, there were still challenges in teaching and learning. For example, an over-emphasis on learners’ improvement of linguistic knowledge prevents learners from successfully developing communicative competence in the earlier period of education (Lee, 2018). This also entails lowering students’ motivation to communicate competently in English language later on (Gearing & Roger, 2019). As a result, despite recent aggressive reforms, many South Korean learners are largely unable to use English in their communication effectively and to act as effective mediators in multicultural and multilingual environments (Lee, 2014).

## 2.3 English Language Policies in Southeast Asian Countries

### 2.3.1 *Singapore*

Bordering Malaysia to the north and neighboring Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Singapore is a rich land with diverse cultures accepted as national identities. Among its 6 million people (estimated in 2021), roughly 74% are Chinese inhabitants, 14% have Malay origins, 9% belong to the Indian group (Department of Statistics, 2011). Of the total population, nearly one in three is a foreigner. At the

present, the two national priorities are: maintaining language diversity to accommodate its diverse population and sustaining its socio-economic growth by recruiting talent foreigners (De Costa et al., 2016).

Singapore is a heterogeneous and highly multilingual population in the Asian region (Bolton & Ng, 2014). To facilitate cooperation, the Singaporean language policy has been revised gradually in order to help the citizens become bilingual speakers (Curdt-Christiansen & Sun, 2016; MOE, 2008). Like other nations in the region, in order to enable the members of local workforce to engage successfully in multicultural contexts and particularly in international job markets, English has been deliberately promoted for use (Galvez, 2019), together with their own mother tongues. Having a rich experience with British cultures in the history positively helps people embrace with the English speaking culture among Singaporeans (Chew, 2005).

It was noted that the adoption of English as the common language in Singapore did not happen without concerns. In early 2000s, “Speak good English movement” was initiated, promoting people to use Singaporean English and achieve good results in terms of improving English language competence among the people. The Singaporean government then has taken a strict measure to stop the public use of Singaporean English (Rubdy, 2001), replacing it by Standard English. The latter promoted the use of English with linguistic properties and structures normally accepted by English native speakers. It was criticized that the excessive emphasis on linguistic knowledge, with less focus on practical use would not help the citizens achieve their communication goals. Likewise, it was also argued that citizens should have chances to use the varieties of English, with certain influences of their mother tongues, to keep their culturally and socially local cultures (Tan & Ng, 2011).

To further promote English varieties in line with the English language policy, some ELT-related research stressed that there are countless benefits and little drawbacks to maintain local varieties of English, in light of English as a medium of instruction (Bolton et al., 2017). For example, some suggested that the various forms of English produced by its speakers in many locations would greatly enhance the sharing and understanding of local cultures in their country. It also agreed that widespread use of local varieties of English could practically help them succeed in their distinctive academic, social, and professional purposes as well as enhance their employment prospects (Rubdy, 2001; Tan & Ng, 2011). Regardless of stakeholders’ viewpoints, English holds an important status in the language policies of Singapore and has helped it a great deal in terms of sustaining its diversity and socio-economic development.

### ***2.3.2 Thailand***

Thailand is located in the center of mainland Southeast Asia as the 20th most populous country. Economically, Thailand has significantly progressed to become an upper-middle-income country. This economic development has also resulted in the growth of several social services in the country, including education and health-care (The World Bank, n.d). English language has been identified as an important

driver that enabled the country to integrate internationally and globally and sustain its development (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

Thailand has a massive system of education (Common Modern Education Curriculum in 1909), which has consistently promoted the importance of enhancing Thai locals' foreign language competence (Spolsky, 2004). In 1932, the national government enacted the policy regarding Thai as the standard language (Spolsky, 2004) to unite people coming from diverse cultural backgrounds under a constitutional monarchy. This policy created positive impacts on cultural values and economic sustainability. Then in the 1960s, English became increasingly popular, which also commenced a period of rapid economic growth in Thailand, boosting its services and construction fields (Bennui & Hashim, 2014). Following Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008, which focused on providing learners' knowledge and skills essential in the constantly changing society, it was encouraging to see that English language teaching and learning have consistently organized across education levels (primary, secondary, higher secondary, and higher education) to enhance "communication, seeking further knowledge and livelihood" (MoE, 2008, p. 10). Thai people's proficiency of English language benefited them in terms of intercultural communication, self-fulfillment, and career prospects (MOE, 2008; Snodin & Young, 2015).

It was also discouraging, however, that Thai learners' English language proficiency was not enough work purposes (ETS, 2013). One of the main problems resulted from the excessive emphasis on native-like pedagogical and instructional approaches, with a focus on taught grammars as learning inputs and tests of learning outcomes, instead of improving Thai learners' intercultural communication and other work-related skills (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021). Thai locals tend to prefer to learn English with native to non-native English teachers, although the latter are more hard-working and better at designing a culturally responsive curriculum (Benker & Medgyes, 2005; Tarrayo et al., 2021). The low level of English language proficiency is also associated with improper interpretation of global benchmarks to measure Thai English learners' proficiency (Savski, 2020) and a lack of communicative skills component in the official curriculum (Ploywattanawong & Trakulkasemsuk, 2014).

### ***2.3.3 The Philippines***

The Philippines is the 13th most populous country and comprises more than 7,000 islands, bounded by the South China seas and shares maritime borders with some other nations such as Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Palau. The Philippines is multilingual and multicultural (Lewis et al., 2016), but communities with no local languages make up more than 50% of the total population. Originally as a large agricultural producer, the country has become the world's 34th largest economy and the 13th largest in Asia (Business Setup, 2021), with an average GDP growth rate of 7.2% over the last 10 years (Business Setup, 2021). These national contexts would urge the country to have a united language for communicating locally and integrating internationally.

Being colonized by the American, Japanese, British, and Spanish cultures, the Philippine people relates with English language as a mean of communication between communities in the country, with Philippine English as one of the English varieties. However, the emergence of English language in the country was not completely a natural process, but it had the intervention of the government. After the 1987 Bilingual Education policy (DECS, 1987), bilingual communities have increased remarkable, especially after the country became a member of ASEAN Economic Community (in 2015) and the United Nation. Then, Philippine Education for All 2015 was established under the supervision of The Department of Education, acting as “channels of learning which can become effective conduits of values orientation, consciousness, and information useful and relevant to a wide range of social goals” (DECS, 1987, p. 19). It is considered crucial that every citizen in the nation should be able to use and communicate in English effectively because this facilitates the country to be more economically developed in the Asian and global markets. English also received much promotion from the government for use in many social sectors such as business, law, education, and international education (McFarland, 2008). Via English language policy, the government also attempted to bring educational opportunities for all the citizens regardless of their socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Dekker & Young, 2005).

However, despite the fact that English is reinforced to help citizens become bilingual language speakers, a range of weaknesses of the reforms were identified. The biggest challenge lies in the wide gaps between teachers’ capabilities and the objectives of the ELT reforms. Although improving teachers’ qualification and experiences were openly discussed according to the policy’s intentions (Cabington, 2015), teachers were not trained sufficiently and there is a lack of access to professional development opportunities (Lear, 2019). Teachers still focused on preparing students for standardized tests instead of paying close attention to improving instructional designs to help their students’ develop communicative competence (Cabington, 2015). English language teachers, therefore, need to upskill, provide better learning experiences, and build better rapport in order to enhance the development of English language proficiency for their students (Rogayan & Reusia, 2021).

## **2.4 English Language Policies in South Asian Countries**

### **2.4.1 India**

Being a colony of the UK from 1858 to 1947, India is home to 1652 languages (Devy, 2014; Pattanayak, 1998), with Hindi as common language of the Union of India and 22 state-wide dominant languages. Within linguistically and culturally diverse settings in the nation, English was chosen as an official language to foster communication across people in communities of the country. Aiming to achieve power as the fastest-growing economy in the world, India has stimulated generations



of Indians to possess high levels of English language proficiency that facilitates internationalization (IBEF, 2022). With an aspiration for multicultural and multilingual engagement in the globalized world, each Indian citizen is expected to be proficient at three languages, including Hindi, English, and their mother tongue (Mohanty, 2019).

Under the colonization of the UK for almost a decade, English became popular in India although it formed an Indian English, a variety of postcolonial Englishes (Bhattacharya, 2017). A range of educational policies (e.g. National Policy on Education in 1968, Education for All, National Education Policy 2020) have been in use to promote the use of English in most aspects of the Indian societies because English is considered as the most useful and practical language for communication (Government of India, 2014, 2020). According to the 2009 National Knowledge Commission and the revised 2015 National Curriculum Framework, English language education was officially delivered to all learners from the early levels as a second language (Mohanty, 2019) and, more importantly, as a medium of instruction for other important subjects (such as Science and Math). In higher education, English is required in all institutions.

Following the announcement of “The Teaching of English” (NCERT, 2006), the promotion of English language in education became clearer, after the Three Language Formula (TLF) policy in language education in 1956 (Hindi, English, and a mother tongue language), and presented a number of positive effects. It can keep pace with the national efforts to consistently retain a handful of Indian identities and embrace diversity in education. Thus, in other words, Indians are fully able to preserve their cultural identities, offering them opportunities for both local mobility and international engagement. However, while English language being increasingly fostered as a tool of connect the Indians culturally and linguistically, cultural identity remains a challenge due to the inconsistency of TLF implementation between communities across the country (Bhattacharya, 2017; Langer & Brown, 2008). Indian learners struggled to maintain their English language competence as it is influenced by their previous linguistic knowledge and experience with the use of a diversity of local languages. Fortunately, recent national policies and widespread implementation of language education strategies have helped Indian learners capable of protecting personal and home cultures while pursuing other languages at schools, at work or, in their life (Groff, 2017).

### ***2.4.2 Bangladesh***

Bangladesh, with a low socio-economic status, is the eighth-most populous country in the world, hosting approximately 160 million people of different ethnic groups and religions. Urdu has been a state language since 1948, replacing Bengali as the predominant language before that. This South Asian nation was committed to a one-nation, one-language ideology as led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). The commitment to this ideology has negatively led to the ignorance of other local languages of minority groups (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). In addition to local



languages, the English language has also enjoyed its prestigious status, both historically under the British colony and socio-economically under the neoliberalism policy (Hamid & Erling, 2016a, 2016b).

In light of the neoliberalism policy, which led to the formation of subsequent policies by the Government (National Education Policy 2000, Draft Education Act 2006, Education Policy 2012), English was proposed as a co-official language besides Urdu in order to allow convenient movement of the locals across the social sectors (Song, 2012). As education has been a focus of national investment, the neoliberalism policy in 1977 acted as an appropriate strategy to privatize education that shifted the important operational activities to the hands of other associations to maintain sustainability (Wright, 2012), including English language education. Particularly, the neo-liberalist strategy allowed non-governmental agencies to have more chances to engage and make decisions in educational activities, thereby beneficially heightening the importance of education in the nation (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). For example, “English in Action” in 2009–2018 was the latest funded program in support of the Bangladeshis’ English language proficiency. It was effective for many educational institutions and external agencies to empower all of the local citizens to have access to English language learning opportunities democratically (Hamid & Erling, 2016a, 2016b; Hamid & Jahan, 2020). Having said that, English language education contributes to achieving equality and justice in education in the country (Hami & Erling, 2016).

Amidst the efforts to improve English language education in both quantity and quality, it was expected that communicative language teaching (CLT) played an imperative method to replace grammar and structure-based methods in the late 1990s (Rahman et al., 2021). In the short term, this is a positive outcome of the neoliberalism policy, which increased the use of more innovative and state-of-the-art techniques with more authentic interactions (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) and built on learners’ academic needs and job-related goals. However, some issues still remained (Anwar, 2005), one of which referred to a risk of losing national identity when the foreign culture was dominant and there was little to no room for the local learners’ cultural background to be integrated into teaching and learning (Sultana, 2021). Besides, due to teachers’ unwillingness and inability to take CLT practices and cultural knowledge into serious consideration (Rahman et al., 2019), instructional teaching and learning can be hindered. Another issue is associated with the strong capacity of non-governmental agencies to be committed to sustainably developing all aspects of English language teaching and learning, including human capital, teacher professional development, facility & technology, and finance.

### **2.4.3 Nepal**

Nepal is home to Mount Everest and known for agricultural production. Nepal is a strongly hierarchical country under the influence of Nepalese histories and ideologies. There are 123 mother tongue languages of 125 ethnic groups (Davis & Phyak, 2017). Following the 1990 Constitution that informed a multilingual, multicultural,

and multiethnic country (Sah, 2020), English has played an important role in many aspects of the national development, including education. More recently, the government's attention has been paid into English language education, including the School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023) and the National Educational Policy (2019). These policies were hoped to “prepare students to use an international language for their future economic development” (MoE, 2016, p. 27).

In response to neoliberalism that emphasized the importance of English as “symbolic value” (Sah & Li, 2018, p. 112), the English language became crucial to support the nation economically, politically, and culturally, in alignment with the ratification of educational privatization (Sah, 2020). The policy was founded in the wake of the Nepalese socio-political transformation into a democratic country (Phyak, 2011). Parallel with the 2015 Constitution that clarified multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural Nepal (Phyak & Ojha, 2019), the nation has progressed its “commitment to create the bases of socialism by adopting democratic norms and values” (Government of Nepal, 2015), part of which was a wide promotion of English language education. Evidently, English was used as a second and foreign language in Nepal, especially in businesses, and English language education was embedded in an early level of formal education (CDC, 2008). Following the integration of English in education and other life aspects, there was potential for social mobility when Nepalese were widely immersed in the language and advance their language competence for study and work overseas (Khati, 2016). English language education was openly used with numerous innovative teaching and learning activities (Ojha, 2018) under the premise that the Ministry of Education recognized the needs of multilingual education for young Nepalese learners (Fillmore, 2020). It means that varieties of English have been fostered in Nepal, rather than British or American English.

Observably, English language education in the country has received great attention and collaborative contributions from many stakeholders, including policy makers, researchers, curriculum designers, and language learners. With employability successes as a pivotal goal, English language education played a significant role in Nepal, one of which was assisted by the nation's policy of privatization (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). The privatization of education has created many life-related opportunities for the learners to be able to develop essential skills pertaining to job (Nikku, 2019). Despite the goals of developing CLT to introduce Nepal and its citizens to the world, the outcomes seemed to be insufficient due to a low number of qualified English teachers to effectively respond to instructional demands and learning preferences (Bhandari, 2020). To explain, English teachers in Nepal are still unfamiliar with learner-centered approaches in support of CLT (Bhandari, 2020). Moreover, learners in Nepal still practiced memorizing the knowledge given by teachers with limited experience about the authentic language use in a variety of real-life settings (Dawadi, 2021), even causing social inequality for minority groups of learners (Sah & Li, 2018).

## 2.5 English Language Policies in West Asian Countries

### 2.5.1 *The United Arab Emirates (UAE)*

As a young country established in 1971, UAE is a seven-emirate country and a house of diverse cultures and religions, with each emirate being ruled separately. In the last decade, under globalization, UAE has experienced a fast transformation of social structures, innovation of facilities, improvements of living standards, and changes of lifestyle to become a critical member in the Middle East (IMF World Economic Outlook Report, 2013). With an approximate total of 100 languages, Arabic is the official language and Urdu is the second most-spoken language, while other languages are still recognized (like Tagalog, Tamil, and Mandarin). As a multicultural country that promotes “the learning of languages” UAE Ministry of Education & Youth, 2000, p. 24), English also came to join this dynamic country in the 1800s. English can be seen as a language of choice as a means to unify the whole UAE, which is made of a diversity of ethnic groups.

English language education in the UAE could be traced back to the 1820 (Hopkins et al., 2018). The country has experienced dramatic changes of English language use at the national level since then. Noticeably, the boom in international trade of oil/gas and the explosive incoming expatriate workers between UAE and other countries have been a great contributor to encouraging the use of English for the purpose of facilitating economic, political, and cultural development (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). However, in education, English is still taught as a foreign language, and it was not as prioritized as Arabic language education. English is taught with a strict adherence to the cultures of English native speakers, believing that doing so will keep the citizens in the right educational direction along with the proliferation of globalization.

Parallel with the UAE’s educational goals to build many generations to be able to “adapt to changes and deal confidently and efficiently in the future”, English language education plays an important role to develop the national professionals’ basic skills (work and communication) and other essential skills (creativity and self-regulated learning) (UAE Ministry of Education & Youth, 2000, p. 9). To facilitate English language teaching and learning, Abu Dhabi Education Council has provided many reforms and initiatives (e.g. New School Model; Building Teacher Capacity; The Partial Immersion Model) to not only develop the teachers’ qualifications and local learners’ English proficiency, but also grow the Emirati cultural understanding and the twenty-first-century skills (Baker, 2017). As a result, there were positive improvements in a wide range of teaching and learning aspects, such as students’ language competence and motivation, as well as teachers’ pedagogical strategies and assessment practices (Desai, 2022). However, there remains a mismatch between the local, regional, and national policies to maintain the privilege of local and international identities (Baker, 2017), which simultaneously caused personal motivation and social equality (Cullinan, 2016).

### 2.5.2 *The Sultanate of Oman*

Located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia, Oman is geographically spreading between the North (Muscat) to the South (Salalah region) regions as the two large centers of population. In addition to the spectrum of geographic advantages, this nation with linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse backgrounds makes itself as a business center of the world, with it being one of the largest oil producers and an emerging tourist destination. The country has placed an enormous emphasis on education as a key driver of building an Omani modern society (Ministry of Education, 2010). Hence, English language education has received much attention as it is a necessary tool for global outreaches.

Under the history origin as a de facto British colony (Al-Busaidi, 1995), the nation has a close attachment to the use of English language. Upon gaining its independence back, the nation initiated to strengthen the role of English to enhance effective communication with international bodies, facilitating the national transition and improving the national impacts on the international arena—the so-called Omanization (Barnawi, 2018). One of the foci of the Omanization is to replace foreign workers by locally-trained Omani nationals (Al-Issa, 2002). The Oman's Ministry of Education is mainly responsible for strategic planning and implementation, fully supports the prominence of English language education nationally, beginning with a policy document called "Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omni English Language School Curriculum" (Al-Issa, 2020). English and Arabic are accepted languages in official documents although Arabic is the official language of the nation. Since then, English has been used widely in business-oriented private and state organizations (Al-Issa, 2020). English has also been taught officially in the curriculum and seen as a vehicle to speed up the national integration into internationalization and globalization (Al-Issa, 2020). While the country experienced a series of educational policies, it is suggested that opportunities to pursue English language education were available for each citizen. Local learners have benefited from the CLT approach as well as technologically-mediated teaching and learning methods, so as to maximize their learning experiences (Al-Farsi, 2002).

However, despite opportunities available, English education in the country has been weakened by some factors. Like other Asian counterparts, a lack of qualified teachers hindered innovative course design and teaching approaches conducive to learners' development of communicative competence (Al-Issa, 2020). The outdated curriculum design (Ministry of Education, 2010) also restricted Oman learners from applying English into authentic contexts outside the classrooms (Al-Issa, 2019). Likewise, English language tests seemed to focus on memorization of grammatical knowledge instead of understanding how to apply it into the communicative events (Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2016), driving learners to focus on linguistic knowledge instead of the practical use of English. As a result, Oman learners are unable to adequately develop their communication skills to enter the multinational workforces and lower their employability (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Barnawi, 2018). The process of Omanization, for that reason, progressed slowly because most Omani employees

cannot communicate with foreigners for collaboration, economic development, and cultural exchange.

## 2.6 English Language Policies in North Asia: Russia

North Asia is also referred to as Siberia and coextensive with the Asian part of Russia. It accounts for 8.8% of the Earth's total land area (13,1 million square kilometers) and is bordered by the three oceans (e.g. Arctic, Eastern European, Central and East Asian, and Pacific Ocean, and North America). Because Russia accounts for the largest part of the Northern Asian region, this section will focus on English language policy and education in Russia only.

Russia regained its independence, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Keennan et al., 2022). Russia is ranked the ninth most-populated country in the world (nearly 146 million in 2022), covering the total land area of nearly 16 million square kilometers (Keennan et al., 2022). There are more than 120 ethnic groups and more than 100 languages used in Russia; thus, this is a multilingual and multicultural nation. Economically, Russia has enjoyed quite a steady GDP growth rate between 2010 and 2022. Russian economy is strong thanks to a wide range of advantages in heavy industry, foreign trade, technology, and services (Keennan et al., 2022). Despite its economic strength and political power, the immersion of foreign language, including English, is necessary to assist the nation in maintaining internship relationships and collaboration.

Russian is unique in terms of geographic locations in both Europe and Northern Asia, so the country is a promising land for international trades and cooperation. Thus, English language became popular in Russia after World War II but unfortunately, it had no official status besides the official language (Kachru, 1990). Still, it is used internationally in support of the nation's contribution to some social aspects, including foreign trade, tourism, education, and science (Ustinova, 2005).

Historically, English language education in Russia in particular and foreign language in general used to be disregarded in the country in caution of potential enemies (also known as spies, potential, and cosmopolitans), and associated with a low level of loyalty and patriotism (Ter-Minasova, 2005). Therefore, English language teaching and learning in Russia was in the midst of countless disadvantages (Ter-Minasova, 2005). However, the Russian government has recently recognized the importance of foreign languages, including English, in the globalized contexts and the national developments (Mammadova, 2021). Policy documents have explicitly stated that English language education should develop the Russian English learners' intercultural competence and fuller understanding of the multilingual/multicultural world (MoE Calafato, 2020; Russia, 2018). The government has found an urgent need to train local learners to use English language effectively in different contexts, to elevate Russian people's employment prospects via English language proficiency, and to enable them to integrate internationally (PIRAO, 2017).

Despite recent investments in English language education, the outcomes have not been reported. Yet, some barriers to successful implementation of the English language education in Russia have been identified. For example, unclear guidelines have been found to prevent the responsible parties (including curriculum developers, school leaders, teachers, and learners) from interpreting the informed needs into English language practices (Calafato, 2021; Davydova, 2019; MoE Russia, 2018). Thus, teachers tended to avoid the multilingual teaching practices as suggested by MoE Russia (2018) and, consequently, employ the monolingual strategies (e.g. grammar translation method) to teach English to students as the future English native-like proficient speakers (Davydova, 2019). Also, Russian teachers of English appear to lack teaching skills and experiences to stimulate the multilingual and multicultural classrooms, making a balance between Russian and English characteristics, so they would need to be trained more extensively (Davydova, 2019).

## 2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have briefly summarized the national policies and processes to make English language as a foreign/second language through the curriculum in multiple Asian countries. In general, the literature review shows that these Asian countries have made a concerted effort in making English a priority in their national language policies and invested in improving the quality of teaching and learning English. Despite variance in the level of influence, it appears that the emergence of English language education was due to political, social, educational, and economic reasons which intersect to some extents.

The majority of the countries reported in this chapter was colonized by the UK, the US, or at least one European country. Some of them were assumed as “not colonized” but were actually under the domination of Western countries for years such as China and Thailand. Such an unwanted political history accidentally created a political-cultural ties with Western heritages. The longitudinal colonial process gradually made the language and cultural norms of the colonizing country part of the culture of the colonized countries. Even after the latter regained the independence, the influence of the language and culture of the ruling country/countries still remain. In addition, many Asian countries above were made of a diversity of ethnic groups who speak different languages. To ensure social cohesion and create a unified country with a single national identity, there should be an official language used and understood by most people, if not all, cross such ethnic groups. Whereas China, Thailand, Japan, and Korea, for instance, prioritize a local language for such a purpose; others—such as India, Bangladesh, Singapore (all were colonized by the UK), and the Philippines (periodically colonized by the US)—adopted English due to some political influence of an English speaking colonizer. Moreover, Asian countries are attempting to invest in their education, following the concept of human capital, despite its limitations (see Tan, 2014). Several of them have experienced rocketing socio-economic growth, partly due to the increased human capital, as showed in the case of the Asian tigers

or tiger cubs (e.g. Paldam, 2003; World bank, 2022). Under neo-liberalism ideologies, educations in several Asian countries have undergone radical reforms to ensure that their citizens can have access to better quality education. At the micro level, such reforms seem to tackle employability issues for individuals to function well in an increasingly globalized and internationalized world and an unpredictable future (Hager & Holland, 2007). At the macro level, such reforms seem to target building a skilled workforce to meet employers' demands, achieve political, socio-cultural, and economic objectives, and to sustain the competitiveness of the economies in the international arena.

As showed above, socio-economic growth seems to be the most powerful driver behind putting English language in the central of the national language policy and implementing English language education reforms. Non-English speaking countries in general and Asian countries in particular have seemingly recognized the important contribution of English language education in building a quality workforce and making their graduates more employable, either locally or internationally. Although the relationship between English language education and employability has been explored in some studies, as to be reported in Chapter 3 of this book, they are not holistic enough. It is because in those studies, employability is usually defined as skills, which is narrow and falsely reflects the complex nature of employability. Likewise, English language has received much attention by policy makers and educators, demonstrating by recent policies and reforms related to English language education. Even students in many Asian countries are concerned about how to obtain English certificate to help them land a well-paid job (Tran, 2018; Wei & Su, 2012). The question is how such reforms have improved the quality of teaching and learning of English in terms of preparing students for their future employment and career prospects. Therefore, it is important to explore the ways in which English language education contributes to students' development of employability, and examine how current English language education practices actually influence graduates' employment and career prospects. Studies in these respects will generate useful insights to inform policy makers, educators, students, and stakeholders involved in English language education in non-English speaking countries of how to better conduct reform activities so that English language policy can be realized its objectives.

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# Chapter 3

## Current English Education in Vietnam: Policy, Practices, and Challenges



Mai Tuyet Ngo and Ly Thi Tran

**Abstract** This chapter sketches out the socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes at the national level in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* policy in 1986, marking Vietnam's readiness to embrace national economic development, internationalization, and globalization. It reviews Vietnam's national foreign language policy and current practices of English education alongside the employability agenda in Vietnamese higher education. It also highlights both contextual and pedagogical challenges facing Vietnam's English language education. It argues that although English skills are classified as essential soft skills necessary for graduates' employability, the current situation of Vietnamese graduates' low English language proficiency levels revealed a huge gap between what is intended ambitiously in Government policies and what is actually being implemented at the institutional, curriculum, and subject levels across education levels, including higher education. This Chapter suggests that Vietnamese English education context provides an appropriate case study to investigate how English education can contribute to graduates' employability.

**Keywords** Vietnamese higher education · Contextual challenges · Pedagogical challenges · Graduates' employability · Government policies

### 3.1 Introduction

Following the international context of English education and graduate employability in Chapter 2, this chapter zooms into depicting socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* policy (1986), one that

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marked Vietnam's readiness to embrace internationalization and globalization. It highlights the role of English and other foreign languages in facilitating the internationalization and globalization in the country in the last three decades. It also reviews the national foreign language policy with its priorities, focus, and future move. This chapter also reviews current practices of English education alongside the employability agenda in Vietnamese higher education. It argues that although English skills are classified as essential soft skills necessary for graduates' employability, English education in Vietnamese higher education is treated as an adjunct component of the curricula. Therefore, students have to enroll in private English classes or engage in informal learning activities (e.g. study groups, online forums, etc.) to develop English skills. The chapter argues that Vietnamese English education context provides an appropriate case study to investigate how English education can contribute to graduates' employability. Socio-economic, cultural, political issues in the country are also interesting factors that should be examined when exploring the relationship between English education and graduate employability in the country.

## 3.2 Đổi Mới Policy and Its Impacts

The most fundamental reform to Vietnam's socio-economic and cultural circumstances since the reunification of the country in 1975 is the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy introduced in 1986. This reform policy paved the way for Vietnam's transition from a subsidized, centralized economy to a multiple-sectored market-oriented economy under the state control and socialist governance (London, 2011; Ngo et al., 2006; Truong et al., 2010; World Bank, 2008). *Đổi Mới* is concerned about reducing existing barriers to economic development whilst implementing strategic policies to liberalize the domestic market, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), boost the private sector, and reducing subsidies to state-owned enterprises (Hong, 2012). *Đổi Mới* can be regarded as a strategic vehicle of the Vietnamese government in their long-standing agenda towards the modernization and reconstruction of the nation after the Vietnam War and a land invasion from China in the Northern border in 1979.

*Đổi Mới* had a profound impact on Vietnam's economy, politics, society, and livelihood. As a vital strategic policy encompassing both open door and economic reform, *Đổi Mới* shifted Vietnam from an isolated and poor country, on the brink of economic and diplomatic crisis, to a revived one with growing prosperity and international standing. Vietnam's remarkable rapid and sustained economic growth in the late 1980s throughout to 2000s as a result of *Đổi Mới* made the country known as 'Economic Miracle' (Vanham, 2018; Weinglass, 2018) or a 'Transition Tiger' (Arkadie & Mallon, 2003), and the second fastest growing country in Asia Pacific, only after China (Truong et al., 2010). Between 1991 and 1995, Vietnam's annual gross domestic growth (GDP) rates were over 8 per cent, which was followed by an average annual GDP increase rate by 7% in the decade that followed (Abbott & Tarp, 2012; Truong et al., 2010). Observers have suggested that one of the most



remarkable achievements of Vietnam under the impacts of *Đổi Mới* is its sustaining high economic growth rate over 10 years and 20 years since the launch of *Đổi Mới*, even amidst the backdrop of the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis when other Asian economies were in dire straits (Hong, 2012; Truong et al., 2010).

Vietnam has embraced the opportunity for a rapid growth of private, joint venture and foreign direct investment enterprises, exports, imports, and international trade. The opportunities and favourable environments created by *Đổi Mới* policy, associated with the availability of a diligent (and low-wage) labour force, political stability, and dynamic economy, are amongst the factors that facilitate FDI in Vietnam. The open door strategy embedded in *Đổi Mới* embraces Vietnam's commitment to broaden and deepen diplomatic and economic relations with many countries other than its traditional partners and to participate in various regional and international organizations. In particular, Vietnam became a member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and of the World Trade Organization in 2007, which boosted a remarkable growth in registered foreign direct investment (FDI), reaching US\$71.7 billion in 2008 (Mori et al., 2010; Vuong, 2014). This figure was more than three times the level in 2007, US\$21.3 billion (Mori et al., 2010).

Vietnam's dramatic economic growth, rising prosperity, and increased living standards since the introduction of *Đổi Mới* in 1986 have brought in both positive and negative impacts on the country. The transition to a socialist-oriented market economy has been accompanied with numerous social problems such as drugs, prostitution, gambling, and the commercialism of what have been regarded as traditional values such as education and the student–teacher relationship. In addition, modernization, including Westernization and globalization has led to changing family structure and family relationships. It has generated changing lifestyles, including individualism, and the enrichment of cultural sources and social traditions through syncretization of ideas from other nations. It has also seen the erosion of some traditional values. In the process of preserving Vietnamese cultural identity and re-constructing the national image amid contemporary globalization, various attempts have been made by the government to revitalize past practices. These include restoring communal rituals of solidarity that are in harmony with the discourse of *Đổi Mới*, and cultural sites such as communal halls, temples, and pagodas that are regarded as symbols of national culture and identity. The promotion of Buddhism in recent years has been a flexible political and cultural response of the Government to Westernization, and to the demand for national security. Within the education setting, market forces and globalization have led to the trends towards marketization, privatization, commercialization, massification, hyper-competition, and increased inequality (Mok, 2007).

In short, Vietnam's transition to market economy, enabled by *Đổi Mới*, coupled with the country's efforts to integrate into the global economy and its political and social stability, has accelerated the growth of private, joint venture and foreign direct investment enterprises, and international trade (Truong & Tran, 2014). These developments have turned Vietnam into one of Asia's fastest-growing and dynamic economies, supported by a growing role in East Asia and the world. Rapid economic development led to a marked decrease in Vietnam's poverty rate from 70 per cent in

the mid-1980s to 37 percent in 1998 and 19 percent in 2007 (Hong, 2012). However, a number of side effects of Đổi Mới and global integration related to social issues, lifestyles and national culture and identity have also arisen that need sustaining efforts from different government levels and communities to tackle.

### 3.3 Đổi Mới and English Language Status

*Đổi Mới* opened up not only Vietnam's economy but also its country as the whole to the Asian region and the world. The country's reunification in 1975 marked Vietnam being imposed with the embargo from the United States. This embargo, resulted in Vietnam's isolation from the outside world and coupled with the war against China's land invasion until the early 1908s, led to the low status of foreign languages in Vietnam prior to *Đổi Mới*. In particular, from 1975 to 1986, the number of learners of Chinese, French, and English was relatively small (Nguyen, 2017). Yet, *Đổi Mới* as an open door policy facilitated Vietnam's political and diplomatic integration into globalization flows and the world, and generated the demands for learning English and other foreign languages.

*Đổi Mới* paved the way for the acceleration of Vietnam's international engagement and integration into the global economy and the enhanced impact of global cultural, educational, and scientific flows in Vietnam (Tran et al., 2014). Such an international integration and global flow have provided both the motives and the conditions for learning English and other foreign languages. At the same time, it is English and other foreign languages that have facilitated and fostered Vietnam's international engagement, global connectedness, and global learning. Therefore, the relationship between international integration and the role of English and other foreign languages is reciprocal. In addition, foreign language education assists with the development of foreign language proficiency needed for Vietnamese students and graduates to effectively communicate, engage, and perform in an increasingly globalized and multilingual world exposed to them as a result of rising globalization, regionalization, and internationalization in the country.

The demands for English and other foreign languages in Vietnam have dramatically grown since the country's open door policy in an attempt to strengthen its economic and political relations with the Asian region and world (Pham, 2014; Truong & Tran, 2014). Scholars argue that it was only after *Đổi Mới* that English was recognized as a foreign language in Vietnam, like Chinese, French, and Russian, and was accorded sufficient attention from both the government and people (Pham, 2014). There has been an urgent and ever-rising demand for English and intercultural communication since Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization in 2007, which is often seen as 'a key to regional and global participation' (Le, 2000, 2007). *Đổi Mới* also turned the green light for Vietnam's participation in regional and international organizations such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (1995), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (1998), Free Trade Area (AFTA), and the conclusion of the US-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (2001), which in

turn accelerated the country's integration into the global economy and international standing and generated the demand for English. The proficiency in English and other foreign languages is in great demand by a growing workforce wishing to join or operating in these joint venture companies and foreign direct investment enterprises or in international trade sector in general. And English has now become the most popular foreign language to be studied at all school levels in Vietnam.

The economic growth as a result of *Đổi Mới* has boosted the number of middle-class families in Vietnam, which in turn has fuelled the demand for overseas study amongst Vietnamese students. Vietnam is currently the country with the fastest rate of middle-class growth in ASEAN (Austrade, 2019). The number of Vietnamese students pursuing education in English speaking countries has rapidly increased over the past three decades. The latest statistics from UNESCO shows that in 2017, Vietnam had 94,662 students studying overseas (UNESCO, 2020), of whom the majority study in English speaking countries. Furthermore, recent years have seen a growth in labour migration from Vietnam to foreign countries under the labour dispatch program. In addition, there has been a massive growth of Vietnamese migrant workers abroad. The demands for overseas study and work facilitated by the country's economic growth and global and regional integration have created an additional demand for English language learning in Vietnam.

In accordance to *Đổi Mới* policy, education is re-oriented to serve the market-oriented economy, as crystalized in the official report 'Vietnam's Education in the Transition Period' (Tran et al., 2014). The core mission of Vietnamese higher education has been to enhance human capital for the nation's social and economic development in response to the emerging and changing demands of the socialist-oriented market economy and the country's international integration. As part of the nation's commitment to joining the global economy and strengthening regional and international integration, the national government has accorded more attention to internationalization. Internationalization of HE is used as a strategic vehicle to boost the human capital and enhance the education sector's ability to catch up with regional and international developments (Tran et al., 2014). The Strategy for Education Development for Vietnam 2011–2020 introduced in 2012 positioned the expansion and enhancement of international cooperation in education as a key component for the reform of Vietnamese education (Prime Minister, 2012). This policy, coupled with subsequent resolutions, has accelerated universities' transnational partnerships, programs, and models with foreign countries such as the USA, Australia, Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Japan, and Malaysia. Joint, twinning and franchising programs have rapidly increased, with 133 such programs in 2007 (MOET, 2007, cited in Nguyen, 2011) and 542 such programs established since 2011 (MOET, 2018, 2019). These partnerships have enabled both an increased number of Vietnamese students to access transnational education programs and a growing demand for learning English (Nghia et al., 2019; Tran & Marginson, 2018).

Vietnam's achievements in GDP growth and foreign direct investment brought about by *Đổi Mới* have had profound impacts on the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2017; Vu, 2019). Not until the early 2000s did English foreground the foreign language education landscape in Vietnam

(Le, 2019) and the status of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become known in Vietnam since then. According to Braj Kachru's (1992) model of World Englishes which is the most influential model of the spread of English, the Vietnamese national context is categorized as an EFL context. In the light of Kachru's three Concentric Circles Model of English language comprising *the Inner Circle* (e.g. the UK, the US), *the Outer Circle* (i.e. mainly the Commonwealth countries), and *the Expanding Circle* (i.e. much of the rest of the World), Vietnam is situated in the Expanding Circles where English as a Foreign Language plays no historical or governmental role but where it is used as a medium of international communication or English as a lingua franca (ELF).

### 3.4 **Đổi Mới and English Language Education Policy in Vietnam: Priorities & Focus**

Since *Đổi Mới*, English language skills are in pressing needs, due to rapid socio-economic development and internationalization (Bodewig, 2014; Bodewig & Badiani-Magnusson, 2014); thus English as a primary foreign language has gained its privilege and become central in the national language policy in Vietnam (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Vu, 2019). Being particularly tied up with *Đổi Mới*, Vietnam's language education policies aiming at transformations have been developed in Vietnam over the past three decades. The Education Law (2005) and the Law of Higher Education adopted in 2012 (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012), revised in 2018, both highlight an official pragmatic shift in foreign language education to English, whilst confirming Vietnamese as the official instructional language used in schools and all other educational institutions, affirming the Government's strong desire to construct a linguistic identity amongst the Vietnamese people. In Article 7 of the 2005 Education Law, foreign language education was mentioned for the first time in Vietnam and opened the possibility of using a foreign language as the language of instruction, depending on educational goals and the specific requirements of the curriculum. Although foreign languages such as Russian, French, Chinese, and English had previously been taught in Vietnam from the founding of its tertiary sector, its official recognition of foreign language study in schools in the 2005 Education Law revealed a greater awareness of the nation's integration into the world economy and a deeper concern for economic competitiveness and labour productivity (Vu, 2019). Given the history of foreign language teaching in Vietnam, this official acknowledgement represented a shift in the perception of foreign language (primarily English) instruction as an integral part of the nation-building project. In the process of reforming the tertiary sector, the Law of Higher Education later approved by the Vietnamese National Assembly in 2012 was introduced as a response to the growing need to promote national unity and strengthen the economy. Whilst Article 10 of the Law of Higher Education (2012) continued to reaffirm the status of the Vietnamese language, basing on the Prime Minister's provision, it officially allows HEIs to make decisions on using foreign languages in their education programs (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012).

### 3.5 The National Foreign Language Project (The NFLP 2020)

As a response to the need to improve the foreign language capacity of Vietnam's workforce, the Prime Minister issued in 2008 the Decision 1400 QĐ-TTg titled *Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project in the National Education System during the Period of 2008–2020* (Prime Minister, 2008). This important Decision often known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (the NFLP 2020) is one of the most significant innovations in foreign language (primarily English) education in Vietnam. The Government of Vietnam considers the NFLP 2020 a breakthrough to improve the quality of English language education across all education levels in Vietnam, with the approved budget of VND 9,378 billion (or nearly US\$500 million). To direct the organization of implementation of the NFLP 2020, the Central Steering Committee was set up and composed of representatives of leaderships of concerned ministries and agencies, with the Minister of Education and Training being its head.

The ultimate goal of NFLP 2020, as set in the Decision No. 1400, was that most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary and vocational schools, colleges, and universities would be able to independently and confidently use a foreign language (primarily English) in their daily communication, study, and work in an integrated multilingual multicultural environment by 2020, turning foreign languages into 'a strength of Vietnamese to serve national industrialization and modernization' (Prime Minister, 2008). This acknowledges foreign languages as essential *soft* skills needed for Vietnamese people's communication, further study and very importantly, for employability. It is widely recognized that foreign languages, including English can be acquired through learning and used as a medium of communication and of instruction; thus they are soft skills, which 'are defined broadly as non-disciplinary skills that may be achieved through learning and be applied in study, work, and life contexts' (Tran, 2019, p. xv).

For implementing a nation-wide 10-year foreign language teaching program (from Grade 3 to Grade 12), two fundamental targets of the NFLP 2020 are (i) 'to prescribe that English and some other foreign languages be the foreign language subject at education institutions [starting from primary school levels] of the national education system' and (ii) 'to formulate and promulgate a uniform and detailed framework of 6 levels of foreign language proficiency compatible with universal foreign language levels promulgated by the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA)' (Prime Minister, 2008). To meet these dual targets, MOET has thus decided to use the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) as 'an instrument of its policy to mandate proficiency levels for different groups of learners and teachers' (Le & Banard, 2019, p. 184), making significant shifts in the perception of the language to be taught, assessed, and learnt. However, the decision to use the Western CEFR standard in a non-Western EFL context of Vietnam was under criticism for being 'abrupt and hasty without adequately considering its contextual constraints' (Le & Banard, 2019, p. 184).

The NFLP 2020 has attracted considerable public attention and feedback in its first nine years (2008–2016) of implementation. The review conducted in MOET in 2016 on the project's outcomes concluded that the targets for language proficiency set under the NFLP 2020 were too ambitious and unrealistic (MOET, 2016; Ngo, 2014). The Minister of Education and Training also officially admitted to the National Assembly in 2016 that the NFLP 2020 with an investment of more than VND 4.2 trillion (or nearly half of the approved budget) for the first period of 2008–2016 failed and its set targets could not be met by 2020, urging the need for comprehensively reviewing the objectives and targets (giaoduc.net.vn, 2016).

Following the first implementation phase of the NFLP 2020, in December 2017, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 2080 titled *Approving, Revising, and Amending the National Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project in the National Education System for the Period 2017–2025* (Prime Minister, 2017). This new Decision known as the amended NFLP 2020 considered the extended timeframe for meeting the various benchmarks set in the initial NFLP 2020 from 2020 to 2025 for each specific task at each school and tertiary level. The newly amended NFLP 2020 calls for all academic levels to continue with the new foreign language curriculum and improve students' English language proficiency to adapt to studying and working requirements towards English language universalization or 'English for Everyone' (Wedell, 2008) by 2025. Again, English language skill continues to be acknowledged in Decision No. 2080 as essential soft skills for graduates' employability.

One of the key directions, as set in this new Decision No. 2080, is to make a breakthrough on the quality of foreign language education for all education levels and at all proficiency levels, encouraging to introduce foreign language education to schools earlier from kindergartens and to all social activities, promoting the teaching of foreign languages to be integrated in teaching other subjects and teaching other specialized disciplinary subjects such as Maths and Science in foreign languages. The key new objectives include 100 per cent of school students shall study 10-year foreign language curriculums, applied from Grade 3 to Grade 12; 50 per cent of vocational training providers shall teach foreign language curriculums in accordance with competency/skill requirements; 100 per cent of foreign language majors of universities must apply output criteria for students upon graduation whilst 80 per cent of other majors must also apply the criteria; 100 per cent of student majoring in foreign language pedagogy must follow professional criteria and fulfill requirements of foreign language teachers' capacity (Prime Minister, 2017).

Alongside the employability agenda, both Decision No. 1400 (i.e. the initial NFLP 2020) and Decision No. 2080 (i.e. the newly amended NFLP 2020) affirmed the Vietnamese Government's strong views that English is a core soft skill crucial for a modern and globally connected economy. They both demonstrated the Government's determination for the broadening adoption of English and English language education reforms, contributing to increasing public awareness of the importance of English competence in the current globalized era, as well as improving the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam. Both decisions expressed the Government's legitimate aspirations for young Vietnamese workforces that are able to communicate

confidently and competently in a foreign language (primarily English) and ready for the employment market.

Towards achieving the goal of English for employability, both Decisions issued by the Prime Minister adopted the ‘phased’ approach (Bui & Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2016) to ensure a smooth introduction of universalization of English language to the primary school curriculum through to the higher education curriculum in the nationwide implementation of English language education policy. The initial NFLP2020, as stipulated in Decision No. 1400, is planned to be implemented in three phases of namely the 2008–2010 period, the 2011–2015 period, and the 2016–2020 period, each of which has its own priorities and focus (Prime Minister, 2008). Whereas the amended NFLP 2020 is planned to be implemented in two phases of the 2017–2020 period and the 2020–2025 period (Prime Minister, 2017) towards achieving the same goal of English language universalization.

In terms of priorities and focus, the initial Decision No. 1400 and the subsequently amended Decision No. 2080 have some similarities and differences. Though both Decisions acknowledged the important roles of foreign language education, of foreign language teachers, and the need for developing foreign language teachers’ competences for improved foreign language education, the subsequently amended Decision No. 2080 has given priorities to four new additional tasks (i) developing foreign language curriculum; (ii) innovative assessments; (iii) information technological application; and very importantly, (iv) to enhancing effectiveness in management, monitoring, supervising, and evaluating the implementation of the NFLP 2020 as a cluster of strategic solutions to reforming foreign language education policies (Prime Minister, 2008, 2017). Though such new important priorities could potentially contribute to innovating the foreign language education in Vietnam and better preparing Vietnamese graduates for their future employability, there have been no specific guidelines on how to address the contextual constraints confronting Vietnamese teachers and learners of English and how to successfully implement those new priorities in practice; thus both Decisions appear to be long ‘wish’ lists of many general ambitious tasks to be implemented for a nation-wide ‘English for everyone’ foreign language program.

Both decisions entailed various issues concerning the inadequacy of the top-down approach towards English language education policies in Vietnam. Vietnam’s approach was top-down because the Decisions were issued by the Prime Minister and the organization of implementation was assigned to MOET who is responsible for overseeing the national education system, including formal English teaching and learning at school and university levels. Scholars argued that such centralized reform policies developed at the macro level have failed to consider the contexts at the grassroots levels and the important consultation and feedback from the community (i.e. teachers, students, parents, and administrators) and have consequently not been translated well to practice at institutional and classroom levels (Nguyen, 2011). Such a top-down approach to English language education policy planning has resulted in a misalignment amongst decisions made by policy makers (i.e. the Government issuing the Decisions), actions taken by policy implementers (i.e. MOET), and what English



language classroom teachers and students actually need for improving their English language proficiency levels and academic performance.

In addition, there is an issue of inadequate evaluation of the country's physical and human resources, whereby policy goals are hard to reach within the intended time frame by 2020 (Nguyen, 2011) and even within the extended one by 2025 (Le, 2019). Apart from that issue, there is no available evidence as to whether or not the development of goals, objectives, tasks, and recommended solutions presented in both decisions were supported by any empirical national research and/or international comparative research on English language education policies, with reference to other similar EFL contexts' successes and failures. Seriously, they both lacked a strategic focus on how English language education could contribute to Vietnamese graduates' employability, making it a long hard way for Vietnam to implement English as a soft skill for its graduates' employability, as desired. Whether or not the new targets set in the amended Decision No. 2080 will be achieved by 2025 is not guaranteed and awaits investigation.

### **3.6 Current English Language Education Practices: Realities and Challenges**

In practice, since Đổi Mới, English has been introduced at all levels of education and is widely used for international communication in Vietnam (Bui & Nguyen, 2019; Le, 2016). Like China, South Korea, and Japan in the region, English language has been viewed as 'one of the key strands of today's Vietnamese education, alongside mathematics and information technology' (Le, 2019, p. 9). English is now being taught and learnt at kindergartens, primary and high schools, colleges and universities, and thousands of local and international ELT centres throughout Vietnam (Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). At primary levels, since 2011, English has been officially taught as a compulsory primary school subject throughout the country in Grade 3 with many public and private primary schools in the metropolitan cities being at the forefront of the innovative 'English for Everyone' movement (Le, 2019). For private school systems, including International schools, English is commonly used as a medium of instructions (EMI). From Grade 6 to 12 of secondary education, English is a compulsory subject across the Vietnamese public school system. Different English language courses and training programs across education levels have been developed over the past decades, aiming to satisfy the diverse learning needs of Vietnamese learners of English language (Le, 2019; Thinh, 2006).



### 3.6.1 *Contextual and Pedagogical Challenges*

Despite increasing attention and financial investment from both the Government and the individuals, English language teaching and learning across education levels in Vietnam has not yet met people's expectations, due to challenges in the current English language education practices in Vietnam. Both contextual and pedagogical challenges have recently been documented in the emerging body of literature on Vietnam's English education (e.g. Albright, 2019; Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Grassick, 2019; Le & Barnard, 2019; Le et al., 2017; Ngo, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). Examples of contextual challenges are, just to name a few, the big class size, mixed level classes, teachers' heavy teaching workloads, a shortage of class time, the big gap between the ambitious policy goals and the implementation reality, outdated textbooks, the lack of learning facilities and reference materials, traditional teaching and learning for examinations, a lack of environment to practice and use English and learners' low levels of motivation to learn English (e.g. Le, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nhung, 2019; Tran, 2019).

Apart from contextual challenges, English language education in Vietnam has been faced with many pedagogical challenges, such as teachers' and learners' traditional subscription to the native speaker model with a native speaker goal, which is 'not appropriate in all circumstances and unattainable by the vast majority of students' (Cook, 2016, p. 6), a mismatch between modern English language teaching methods and traditional Vietnamese classroom cultures, conventional beliefs about teachers' and learners' roles, their weaknesses in communicative skills, teachers' difficulties in applying advanced teaching methods and best practices to the reality of English language teaching in Vietnamese university contexts, outdated methods of assessments, improper implementation of EMI across all education levels, and most seriously, a shortage of qualified and competent English language teachers and teacher trainers at all education levels and problematizing pre-service and in-service English language teacher education courses (Le, 2019; Ngo, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nhung, 2019).

As a consequence, high school graduates have performed poorly in the compulsory English test of the annual national entrance exam to universities. In 2018, of the 814,779 students taking the English test to enter universities, 78.22% scored less than 5 out of 10 and the average score was 3.91 (up from 3.4 in 2017). In 2019, high school students' poor performance continued to produce disappointing results, of the 789,535 English test takers, 68.74% scored less than 5 out of 10 and the average score was 3.75 (down from 3.91 in 2018). These current low English language proficiency levels amongst school learners in Vietnam do not meet the country's employment market and socio-economic development demands (Le, 2019).

At tertiary levels, English can be taught either as a compulsory subject or as a major across the whole higher education system in Vietnam (e.g. Albright, 2019; Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Hoang, 2009; Le, 2019). In the former category, undergraduate students in non-English major universities study English as a foreign language subject for a few hours weekly with only 14 out of 140 credit hours, accounting for

only 10 percent of the total credit hours of an undergraduate program whilst postgraduate students study English for 7 out of 50 credit hours, making up only 12 percent of the total credit hours of a postgraduate program (Hoang, 2009). With such limited credit hours allocated to teaching and learning English, English language is evidently treated as an adjunct component of the university curricula. This negatively impacts teachers' and learners' perceptions, motivation to teach and learn English, and ultimately their low English language proficiency levels, although English is claimed to take a primary position amongst foreign languages being taught and learnt in Vietnamese universities and English skills are acknowledged as essential soft skills for their graduates' employability.

In the latter category, students study English for their Bachelor, Master, or doctoral degrees majoring in English to become qualified English language teachers or lecturers, translators and/or interpreter, and/or researchers in applied linguistics or in English language methodology. There used to be only four public universities in 2009 in Vietnam offering undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English (i.e. Hanoi University and The University of Languages and International Studies in the North, Da Nang University and Hue University in the Center of Vietnam), compared to the current number of hundreds of public and private universities where students can choose to do their majors in English nationwide. For promotion of English language education at tertiary levels, the Vietnamese Government has encouraged pivotal universities to implement the so-called 'advanced programs' in which English is required to be the medium of instructions (EMI).

Despite an exponential growth of EMI programs in Vietnam's higher education, the majority of university lecturers still lack formal training in pedagogical techniques for EMI teaching (Nhung, 2019). Also, the current practice of EMI is not fully informed by empirical evidence, due to a lack of research in this area (Nguyen et al., 2016; Vu & Burns, 2014). The effectiveness of EMI programs in universities in Vietnam is thus open for empirical investigation and interpretation. In addition, tertiary students' motivation to learn English varies from student to student; some are motivated to learn English as a tool for more attractive and lucrative employment opportunities after graduation whilst others learn English for further studies in English speaking countries or simply for the sake of passing exams. The general tendency is to learn English for international communication and better paid employment (Hoang, 2009).

Those students, especially in urban areas, who are self-motivated to study English for better employability and associate English language proficiency with better future life, could not rely on their formal learning of English in their HEIs, due to limited credit hours allocated to English language teaching and learning, and have thus enrolled into private English classes or engaged in informal learning activities such as study groups, online forums to develop their own English skills whilst formally studying English in class in their universities simply to meet the course requirements. This has resulted in a boom of private English Language Teaching (ELT) centres since 2010s, especially in big cities in Vietnam (Saigon Giai phong Online, 2019). According to the statistics of Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Education and

Training, by January 2019, Ho Chi Minh City alone has 1250 ELT centres (of which 98% are locally invested ones and only 2% are foreign invested), compared to 370 centres in 2010.

In response to a boom of ELT centres nationwide, including those who do not have establishment licenses (Saigon Giaiphong online, 2019), MOET recently issued the Circular 21/2018/TT/BGDĐT dated 24th August 2018 on establishment and operations of foreign languages training centres, including the ELT centres (MOET, 2018). The Circular defines English training centres into three main types of ownership, public, private, and foreign invested. These centres are part of the national education system and deliver continuing education functions. Whilst MOET is responsible for national policy and regulatory aspects, the province and city Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) oversee the establishment licensing and operation of the ELT centres. It is worth noticing that the Circular was issued quite late after thousands of ELT centres were already established and in operation nationwide for long; there is a lack of quality assurance mechanism and research on the quality and effectiveness of these centres. Many ELT centres have employed even untrained or inadequately trained non-native and native English teachers to attract fee-paying students from affluent families to make huge profits from the increasingly high market demands for English language learning (Le, 2019), making it hard for MOET and DOETs to monitor, control, and manage the education quality of those booming ELT centres.

As a consequence, current university and workforce English proficiency levels in Vietnam have remained low despite a high demand for skilled workers to sustain its high economic growth rate. According to Education First (EF), an international education company specialized in language training and providing the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills acquired by secondary and tertiary students, Vietnam ranked 66th out of 112 countries and territories in 2021 global English Proficiency Index (EPI). In 2018, Vietnam's EPI ranked 41st amongst that of 88 countries and territories. Vietnam is in the twelfth position out of the 24 countries in Asia in 2021 (EF, 2022). According to EPI rankings, Vietnam's proficiency level ranked low with its score of only 52 out of 100 in 2019 (down from its moderate level in the preceding year of 2018) across the Asian region and worldwide. Unsurprisingly, many university graduates in Vietnam are complained by recruiters for not having sufficient mastery of English language competences to be employed in private and foreign companies and neither do working professionals to be fully productive in their current roles nor to evolve into new ones (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

This current situation of graduates' low English language proficiency levels in Vietnam revealed a huge gap between what is intended (ambitiously) in Government policies and what is actually happening in English classrooms (Le, 2019). Such a huge gap is evidence of unsuccessful implementation of English language education policies in Vietnam and its failure to meet the employability agenda, urging the need for strategic initiatives to implement English as a soft skill in Vietnam so as to catch up with other countries in the ASEAN region.

### 3.7 English as a Soft Skill Implementation Initiatives in Vietnam' HE: Ways Forward

Looking ahead, English will continue to maintain its primary role as the key foreign language to be taught and learnt across education levels, including HE in Vietnam and English skills will continue to be the core soft skill to be implemented in Vietnamese HEIs for graduates' employability (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). Given the current situation, there is an urgent need for Vietnam to take more strategic actions to improve its current low English proficiency levels amongst students at all school and university levels and keep them high to enhance its graduates' employability and the country's competitive position in the international economic and political arena (Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

To contribute to graduates' employability, English language skill development should be an integral component of soft skill implementation initiatives in HE in Vietnam. The implementation of such initiatives 'depends on contextual factors' (Tran, 2019, p. xv) and involves various '*tasks*' at different levels devoted to English as a soft skill implementation. In this regard, Tran (2019) developed a comprehensive four level conceptual framework for soft skill implementation in HE which is applicable for English skill implementation initiatives in Vietnam's HE system. Tran (2019)'s four level conceptual framework comprises implementation tasks at the national level (i.e. the general context of soft skills implementation), the institutional level (i.e. all mechanisms and strategies for executing the soft skills policy), the curriculum level (i.e. setting soft skills learning objectives, teaching, and assessing these skills), and the extra-curricular level (i.e. the use of non-curricular activities for developing soft skills). Reviewing common practices for soft skill implementation in the literature, Tran (2019, p. 36) identified a comprehensive list of specific tasks to be implemented at each of the four levels, many of which are relevant for English skill implementation initiatives in Vietnam's HE, and discussed hereinafter.

At the *national* level, Vietnamese policy makers should be mindful of the socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of the country and associated challenges described above whilst making systematic efforts for quality assurance, accreditation, and learning-outcome assessment of English language programs across the national education and higher education system, including ELT centres nationwide. Such systematic efforts could also help depict the realities of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, based on which more realistic goals and tasks will be set in any amended Decisions to be issued by the Government in the years to come. It is also imperative that the Government consults policy implementers at multiple levels for their insights, including MOET at the macro levels, institutional leaders at the meso levels, and very importantly, English language teachers, learners, and administrators (including those in ELT centres) at the micro levels who are crucial for the successful implementation of English as a soft skill initiative in Vietnam and in any contexts.

At the same time, the Government's future Decisions must be well informed and supported by the contemporary research on English language education before

policies are formulated and implemented (Le, 2019). Though it might be ‘too late to “look before leap” by undertaking exploratory research to consider the feasibility of what is proposed’ (Le & Banard, 2019, p. 192), for any future amended decisions to be made, the Government should refer to the relevant research conducted in Vietnam, relating to English language education innovations, namely curricular, assessment, teacher development, teaching and learning innovations. In this vein, Le & Banard (2019) suggested:

One way to do this is for MOET to set up an archive of abstracts of all relevant research carried out in Vietnam relating to such innovations and make a continuously updated register of these details available to potential and actual researchers. Some of these might well be commissioned by MOET to undertake specific projects; university departments and staff might also follow up on the implications of studies conducted in areas of interest. (p. 192)

At the *institutional* level, for successful implementation of Government’s Decision, it is advisable that MOET should strategically develop more specific policies, guidelines, incentives, and drivers for ‘English as a soft skill’ implementation by carefully looking inside, critically analysing the causes and effects of the multiple factors confronting English language teachers and learners, comprehensively reviewing and evaluating what has and has not yet been achieved, including its past decision to use the Western CEFR standards, so as to maximize strengths, minimize problems, and to learn from failures. This should be done before looking outside to draw practical lessons from successes of other selective Asian countries whose contexts are almost similar and whose English proficiency levels are moderate (but currently higher than Vietnam’s in EF rankings) (e.g. India and China) and very high (e.g. Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia) (EF, 2022).

At the same time, it is important for each HEI in Vietnam to strategically align the implementation of English as a core soft skill with its own vision, mission, and purposes which are to get its graduates ready for employment with good quality work performance. In addition, each HEI needs to analyse the context in which it operates and its own institutional capacity for appropriately contextualizing the implementation, devising and deploying implementation strategies effectively, and engaging stakeholders in English as a soft skill implementation initiative (Tran, 2019). HEIs’ leaders need to be aware of the shortcomings of the centralized leadership in selecting outcomes and curriculum models; rather they should coordinate the implementation of English language skill development whilst empowering and engaging TESOL researchers and practitioners who have the relevant expertise for innovating the teaching and learning of English language.

Institutional leadership should be strong enough, with implementation actions and strategies, to promote and support the engagement of not only English language teachers but also disciplinary lecturers through a strategic move to EMI programs. To avoid teacher disengagement, Tran (2019, p. 229) warned us all that ‘a lack of clarity in the soft skills policy [in this case, the English language education policies] and implementation strategy, a shortage of teacher capacity, and an absence of incentives and management tools all contributed to teachers disengagement with the implementation.’ It is worth noting that disengaged teachers and lecturers of English

whose salaries are low may choose to practically invest their time and energy into moonlighting and working elsewhere in booming ELT centres to earn their living.

At the *curriculum* level, HEIs in Vietnam should make full use of their curriculum autonomy granted by the 2012 Higher Education Law (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012) to modify their curricula balancing disciplinary and non-disciplinary (i.e. English skill) subjects, to set English skill learning objectives, and to teach and assess English language skills as one of the main subjects, not an adjunct one throughout their curricula. Universities should be proactive in treating English language skills development as an integral component by allocating more reasonable number of credit hours to English language teaching and learning in the curricula from students' first year of study until their final year of graduation.

Also, for successful curriculum implementation, pedagogical priorities should be given to a student-centred approach to English language teaching and learning, including a consideration of students' entry levels of English language proficiency, their learning needs analyses, students' experiential learning activities, and student-centred principles of English language teaching and learning (Brown, 2014). University leaders and English language departments need to implement strategies for recruiting and developing competent English language teachers and lecturers (Le & Ngo, 2015) who are knowledgeable about key Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, different approaches and models of learning English as a second language, different teaching styles, techniques, and principles of English language teaching and learning, and their implications for English language teaching and learning and thus are willing to adopt flexibly into own classroom practices (Brown, 2014; Cook, 2016; Ngo, 2022). Teachers should be supported with the most favourable working conditions and empowered to make research-informed decisions that pedagogically fit for their teaching contexts towards achieving the expected learning outcomes meeting the employability demands for work readiness skills relevant to the employment markets. Conscious efforts should also be made to address contextual constraints such as large size classes, English language teachers' teaching workloads, shortage of classroom time allocated to English language teaching, and lack of incentives and support for doing action classroom research and professional development.

At the *extra-curricular* level, apart from curriculum-based activities, Tran (2019) suggested extra-curricular activities such as social-engagement activities, employment orientation and consultation, skills classes, and political education, many of which are applicable for English as a soft skill implementation in Vietnam's HE. The use of English language-oriented extra-curricular activities (ECAs), for example, dramatization, video or movie watching, quizzes, English speaking or reading clubs, speaking or writing contests, and debates should be promoted because of their potentials for helping address students' low motivation to learn English whilst providing them with real-life like practice and more opportunities to use the English language beyond the classroom (Yildiz, 2016). ECAs should be sponsored, structurally organized, and supervised by educators and English language teachers outside classrooms (Park, 2015). Though the planned development and integration of non-curricular activities in second language curriculum are highly recommended and well documented in the international literature (e.g. Joseph et al., 2005; Kuimova & Gaberling,

2014; Park, 2015; Tosun & Yildiz, 2015; Tumanov, 1983; Yildiz, 2016), they are not seriously researched and implemented in English language teaching and learning practices in Vietnamese HE and thus need more special attention.

### 3.8 Conclusion

English is no doubt a tool to connect Vietnam with the World and links foreign investors with the young local labour market. In its regional and international integration, it is important to be reminded of what the former Singapore Prime Minister advised the Vietnamese Government in his visit to Vietnam in 2007 that ‘the key to avoid falling behind the World is English’ (Dan Tri, 2015). In order not to fall behind and to sustain its high economic growth rate achieved since the launch of *Đổi Mới*, Vietnam needs to continue its efforts more strategically to innovate its English language education that assists with the development of higher English language proficiency needed for Vietnamese graduates to effectively communicate, engage, and perform in an increasingly globalized and multilingual world as a result of rising globalization, regionalization, and internationalization in the country. At the heart of those efforts must be a more strategic focus on English as soft skills for employability. The future of teaching and learning English as a soft skill in Vietnam will be shaped by a more *holistic* approach to innovating English language education, with due attention drawn to effective implementation tasks at the national, institutional, curriculum, and subject levels.

This chapter has attempted to sketch out the socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes at the national level in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* policy in 1986 marking Vietnam’s readiness to embrace national economic development, internationalization, and globalization. At the institutional levels, HEIs’ core mission has long been to enhance human capital for the nation’s social and economic development in response to the emerging and changing demands of *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), the socialist-oriented market economy, and the country’s international integration. *Đổi Mới* has brought marked changes to all aspects of Vietnamese life, including its national foreign language (primarily English) education policy with the ultimate goal of English language universalization, including English as a soft skill implementation. Given the mismatch between the Government’s Decisions for English as a soft skill for employability and what is actually being implemented at the institutional, curriculum, and subject levels across education levels, including HE, this chapter argues that Vietnamese English education context provides an appropriate case study to investigate how English education can contribute to graduates’ employability.



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# Chapter 4

## English Language Skills and Employability: A Theoretical Framework



Tran Le Huu Nghia , Nguyen Phuong Anh, and Le Trung Kien 

**Abstract** This chapter aims to identify a suitable theoretical framework underpinning the development of this book. It first describes the current situations of skills need in different labour markets. It points out that English skills are in high demands and raises the concern about how we can better approach English language teaching/learning so that graduates can become more competitive when entering the labour market. Following that, it reviews different perspectives and models of employability to identify a theoretical framework appropriate for the development of this book. (Tomlinson, Forms of Graduate Capital and Their Relationship to Graduate Employability 59:338–352, 2017) Employability capital model is chosen as it provides a broad perspective about employability, moving beyond the notion of skills and introduces new dimensions of graduate employability. Accordingly, to enhance their employability, students/graduates need to possess a sufficient level of human capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (social networks with others), cultural capital (understanding of the work culture and practices of a particular industry), psychological capital (personal attributes that enhance their ability to move forward in building their careers such as resilience, flexibility, adaptability, etc.), and career identity (sense of attachment to a particular work role or industry; the feeling and ambition of who they want to become or what they want to do). Overall, (Tomlinson, Forms of Graduate Capital and Their Relationship to Graduate Employability 59:338–352, 2017) employability capital model acts as a spine that connects all chapters presented in this book to make the whole book complete, logical, and consistent.

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## 4.1 Introduction

In the last decades, employability has emerged as a buzzword. It has been discussed in different contexts and by different stakeholders, aiming to boost graduates' employment rate and meet employers' demands. For example, the Canadian government's Labour Force Development Board (1994) defines the concept of employability as the ability of an individual to gain employment given the connection of personal competencies and the labour market conditions. Scholarly, Hillage and Pollard (1998) consider employability as an individual's capacity to be employed, maintain employment, seek alternative jobs and promotions. They believe that the possessed skills, knowledge, and attitudes should meet employers' expectations and the working context. From industry perspectives, the Confederation of British Industry (1999) views employability as an individual's characteristics that are required by employers and customers to meet the workforce requirements. In general, the main difference in these employability perspectives appears to revolve around whether the focus is upon individuals' competencies to enhance their employment, or upon the external factors such as employers and the labour market influencing a person when getting his job.

Amongst a plethora of definitions of employability, Yorke's (2004) perspective seemed to receive much support from audiences. He refers to the term employability as a 'set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes—which makes graduates more likely to gain employability and be successful in their chosen occupations' (Yorke, 2004, p. 8). Further developing on Yorke's (2004) definition, Oliver (2015, p. 63) proposes that employability is not only about acquisition but also about how students and graduates can 'discern, acquire, adapt, and continually enhance their skills, understands and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaning paid and unpaid work that can benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. One of the latest frameworks of employability that has received applauses from other academics belongs to Tomlinson (2017) who proposes that human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital can benefit graduates in the competitive labour market. This framework, instead of seeing employability in terms of skills, views it in a holistic perspective, shifting the focus on developing employability skills for students to developing a variety of assets or capital that enable graduates to access job information, succeed in a job interview, adapt to the new work environment, and thrive in their chosen careers. As such, there has been a revolution in employability concepts through time.

With the internationalization and globalization process, the English language has become a dominant international language used by millions of people. English language education has become central in the national language policy of many countries, as reported in Chap. 2, because it fosters individuals' success in their careers in the local labour market and integrates into the global one. Several studies have suggested the relationship between English language education and some types of employability skills or capital (e.g., Aclan et al., 2016; Kostikova et al., 2021;

Dash et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2017; Ye, 2020; Gao et al., 2015). However, such relationships are still not well-defined, and the contribution of English language education to the development of some employability skills or capital is missing. As such, this research gap needs to be addressed to help policymakers, curriculum designers, teachers and students approach English language education in a way that best prepares graduates for the world of work that is intensively internationalized and globalized.

In this chapter, we will present a theoretical framework to be used for this book. We will start by reviewing the literature to show what employers need from graduates, then report evidence of English language education as a contributor to graduates' employment and careers prospects. Whilst we discuss how English language education facilitates the development of employability capital, we argue that this is a missing link in the research areas of graduate employability and English language education, thus calling for further research to address such a literature gap. We also save a large portion of this chapter to review prominent models of graduate employability, showing a revolution of perspectives towards the graduate employability concept. We finally identify the graduate employability model, explaining its relevance and how it will be used in this book project.

## 4.2 Skills Employers Need in Different Occupational Sectors and Countries

Studies about the employers' expectations of graduates' employability skills have been increasing in the last decades. Scholars have pointed out that hard skills, also known as technical skills, appear not to sufficiently equip graduates with the capabilities to cope with the challenges of the current business world. Instead, soft skills have become more important in enhancing graduates' quests for lifelong personal development, increasing employability, and achieving academic success in different fields (Doan & Hamid, 2019; Dolce et al., 2020; Ting et al., 2017). Below are the skills employers from different industries look for.

In Accounting, British employers perceive that the deficiencies in problem-solving, time management, teamwork, and communication skills (Arquero Montanoet et al., 2001) prevented accounting graduates from successfully landing a job. Italian employers favoured graduates with the ability to work in a team and to communicate well (Dolce et al., 2020). According to the Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand (CAANZ) and CPA Australia (2018), to succeed as a professional accountant, applicants need to master functional skills, personal skills, communicative skills, intellectual skills, interpersonal skills, and business management skills. In Ghana, most employers ranked analytical and critical thinking skills as the most important skills, followed by communication and computer skills, as their desired skills for Accounting graduates (Awayiga et al., 2010). Also, collected data from 65 internal auditors in South Africa revealed that graduates were expected

to perform high levels of soft skills such as adaptability, self-management, teamwork and communication (Plant et al., 2019). Employers in Malaysia expected accounting graduates to gain teamwork, communication, and leadership skills before entering the job market (Ghani et al., 2018).

In Information Technology, US employers ranked soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, interpersonal, analytical skills higher than technical skills for entry-level positions (Jones et al., 2018). Also, in the Philippines, the data gathered from Bringula et al.'s (2016) study revealed that graduates needed to master technical, critical thinking, and communication skills to get hired. In India, employers required IT graduates to advance their technical skills and then focus on developing their communication, interpersonal, and teamwork skills (Pillar & Amin, 2020). North Florida-based employers in the IT industry specified that they needed both technical and general competencies from graduates. Top wanted technical competencies were infrastructure design, information technology architecture, operations support, configuration management, and data management, amongst others; top wanted general competencies were interpersonal skills, self-management, professional learning, oral communication, and customer service, to name a few (Hollister et al., 2017).

In Business fields, Bangladeshi employers ranked communication skills (both verbal and written) as the most desired soft skills, followed by interpersonal skills, the ability to work under pressure, teamwork, analytical ability, and self-motivated attributes (Nusrat & Sultana, 2019). Meanwhile, Greek employers perceived soft skills such as interpersonal, teamwork, communication skills and technical skills were crucial for business graduates to get a job (Tsirkas et al., 2020). Indian employers required Business graduates to possess teamwork, verbal and non-verbal communication, analytical and management skills (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021). A study conducted in the USA by Robles (2012) showed that Business employers valued both technical and soft skills, especially the latter. Accordingly, the top ten most desired soft skill attributes were integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork skills, and work ethics.

In the tourism and retailing industry, US employers require employees to routinely communicate with customers to fulfil the transactional experience; therefore, communication, teamwork, leadership, self-management, and interpersonal skills are highlighted as the most desired skills in this industry (Nedry, 2016). Similarly, in Wesley et al.'s (2017) study showed that communication skill was ranked as the most important skill graduates should possess at an entry-level position in the retailing and tourism industry. It was followed by other soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, self-management, professionalism, and experience. Adeyinka-Ojo (2018) conducted a critical literature review related to rural hospitality and tourism to identify the skills valued by employers. The study found skills deficit in the industry; it also identified skills sought after by employers, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, planning and organization, lifelong learning, technology, global mindset, awareness of health and safety issues, amongst others.



Although there are some differences in the skills employers need in different sectors and countries, it appears that communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, technical skills, and management skills are commonly highlighted in the aforementioned studies. Especially, communication skills seemed to be the most wanted soft skills that graduates should possess since these skills enable employees to connect with their team, negotiate with their customers, and therefore, bring huge benefits to their company.

### **4.3 English Proficiency and Career Prospects in Non-English Speaking Countries**

Many studies around the globe have stated that globalization leads to a higher demand on graduates' ability to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds, nationalities, languages, and cultures to build relationships and adapt to external contexts (Dash et al., 2020; Hoang, 2019; Ting et al., 2017). Therefore, having efficient international language communication skills has become one of the most important elements in individuals' career prospects.

Although there are millions of people using English currently, many English users do not come from an English speaking country. Kachru (2001) states that the world's English users are divided into three main groups: L1 (English as a First Language), ESL (English as a Second Language), and EFL (English as a Foreign Language). These groups are also described as Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circle respectively. Although English is widely used, most of its users do not come from the Inner circle. The learners from the other circles use English for different purposes such as school and job requirements, overseas learning and work (Hopkyns et al., 2018). In this section, the importance of English skills for graduates' job application and job promotion in different occupational sectors in various non-native English speaking countries will be presented.

#### **4.3.1 Job Application**

In European countries, possessing a high level of English skills is an advantage for any job application. According to Grasmann and Grasmann's (2011) study, 38% of undergraduates, 30% of masters' students, and 30% of doctoral students in Latvia came to an agreement that foreign language skills such as English and Russian contributed to successful job application in the EU labour market. Latvian recruiters need someone who can overcome the language barriers during business negotiations, meetings, and presentations. Similarly, 23 representatives of 23 companies in the Czech Republic which include Information Technology, Finance, Engineering, and Automotive answered in the interview that they expected the job applicants to



have excellent oral and written communication in English (Kralova & Dolezelova, 2021). They expected graduates to be confident in giving effective presentations and negotiations during the company business trips. The applicants were required to show their ability to make spontaneous and informal spoken interactions such as small talks or idioms in English at the workplace. Unfortunately, 73.9% of these employers claimed that graduates were not able to use sufficient English vocabulary in business contexts.

In many Asian countries, English communication skills are highlighted as the passport to secure a job. In Vietnam, employers look for potential applicants who can communicate well in global trading communication (Hoang, 2019; Tran, 2018). For example, Doan and Hamid (2019) collected two samples of job advertisements in 2015 and 2018 on a credit job-seeking website, showing that there is a huge demand for English skills for employment in Vietnam: 65% and 67% of the job adverts mentioning English as one of the job requirements in 2015 and 2018 respectively. Similarly, according to a survey from World Bank (2014, p. 24), 81% of employers said that a lack of English communication skills was one of the stumbling blocks for Malaysian graduates obtaining employment at an entry level. In Thailand, graduates need to show their ability to communicate in English effectively with clients from different language backgrounds during the interviews before getting a job (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). In India, most employers crave to hire graduates who are qualified, innovative, positive, self-motivated to work and learn, open to new challenges, and especially fluent in English communication (Dash et al., 2020; Sheikh, 2017; Sinha et al., 2019). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), besides technical skills, most employers demand their employees to be good at English communication skills (Fox et al., 2006; Hopkyns et al., 2018; Patent, 2017). This rising demand was attributed to the rapid increase of foreign professionals coming to the UAE to work (Hopkyns et al., 2018) and the desire to make their oil industry to be more successful in the international markets (Patent, 2017).

In Africa, the demand for English skills is similar to that in other continents. In South Africa, although a majority of the population can speak English, employers still prefer applicants with excellent English communication skills. For example, Nudelman (2020) showed that graduates who could not use advanced English language skills struggled with finding a good job. It is because South African employers believed that with good English, graduates could work well in a team and proactively extend ideas in the workplace (Akyeampong, 2014). Similarly, more than half the job opportunities in Morocco, one of the North African countries, require applicants to have adequate English language skills (Soussi, 2021).

### ***4.3.2 Job Promotion and Career Advancement***

Most employers commonly select and offer a promotion to employees with an efficient level of English since these people can perform more tasks that required advanced English (Dash et al., 2020; Ting et al., 2017). For example, ten Malaysian

employers in Ting et al.'s (2017) study stated that they would hire employees who can communicate with clients and colleagues effectively, but they would only promote those employees with high English proficiency. They explained that English proficiency was necessary for globally-oriented meetings, business emails, or technical presentations with external clients. Likewise, most employers in India (Dash et al., 2020) crave to hire, train, and promote qualified innovative, and self-motivated people to work and learn, open to new challenges with a positive mindset and especially proper communication skills. Similarly, in the Philippines, graduates first need to pass eighteen units of English to gain a bachelor's degree in Law to become lawyers or judges, and they will keep using English as the dominant language for every written and courtroom task as an unseparated part of their career development (Martin, 2018). Also, to secure a job promotion, these lawyers should be capable of using advanced English language (Martin, 2018).

A good level of English may also pursue employees with overseas career advancement opportunities. Residing in a new country can be a big challenge for any expatriates since they may deal with language barriers, cultural shock, and job expectations. However, many studies have revealed that the level of English skills can significantly affect their adaptability and employability. According to Othman et al. (2021), expatriates who master English language skills can easily establish friendships and tolerate Malaysian culture. Li et al. (2020) had a survey of 92 males and 147 females from a company in China to investigate the influence of English language proficiency on employees' willingness to work abroad. The results showed that the employees with high proficiency levels were more willing to enter the global business environment as well as accept expatriation. Similarly, Hamze (2020)'s study on 54 expatriates who worked in Iraq revealed that to build individual relationships with their managers, they had to communicate well in English.

In summary, the English language has become the dominant communication tool in businesses and multi-companies around the entire globe. Employers consider this transferable skill as a strong foundation for any employees to improve their personal and professional development. Without English proficiency, it is difficult for graduates to secure employment opportunities and advance in their careers, especially in non-English speaking countries.

#### **4.4 Graduate Employability Model**

As mentioned above, employability has increasingly drawn much attention to career educators and other stakeholders, despite existing agreement and disagreement about the nature of employability and the role of higher education institutions (HE) in developing employability for students. Different types of employability frameworks, therefore, have been created and modified around such debates. In this section, we will

review prominent employability models to provide an overview of the current landscape of graduate employability. To be more specific, we will present five employability models created by Yorke and Knight (2006), Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Clarke (2018), and Tomlinson (2017).

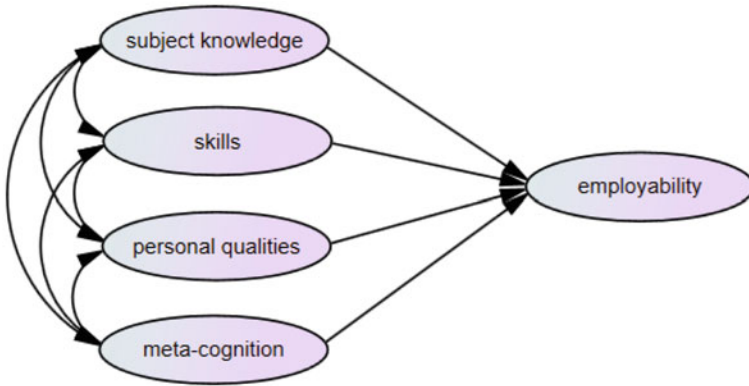
#### ***4.4.1 USEM Model of Employability***

Yorke and Knight (2006) develop a graduate employability framework named USEM (Fig. 4.1), which takes the first letter in the main components of employability. Understanding includes knowledge of the subject matter as well as how an organization works. Skills are viewed in terms of ‘skilful practice’ in academic, work and life domains. Such skilful practices implicitly underpin graduates’ self-perceptions and reactions to certain situations. Efficacy beliefs, one representative of personal qualities, reflect the learner’s notion of the self, their self-belief, and the possibility for personal improvement and development. Efficacy beliefs are a focal point referring to learners’ ability to ‘make a difference- not every time but in a probabilistic way’ (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 4). Instead of being ‘static’, students are expected to act contextually and flexibly, thus allowing them to be resilient to changes and challenges of the future workplace. Finally, metacognition is about sub-factors of ‘learning how to learn’; of ‘reflection in, on, and for practice’; and ‘a capacity for self-regulation’ (Knight & York, 2006, p. 5).

The four constructs contributing to employability are interconnected. For example, graduates’ efficacy beliefs or self-confidence in order to stand out from others are supposed to be strengthened by their subject expertise and a variety of important skills or abilities they possess upon graduation (Turner, 2014). In this respect, metacognition also plays a pivotal role in building up graduates’ efficacy beliefs, showing their entire responsibility for actions of their own volition. All things considered, the model is a useful model to understand what makes graduates employable.

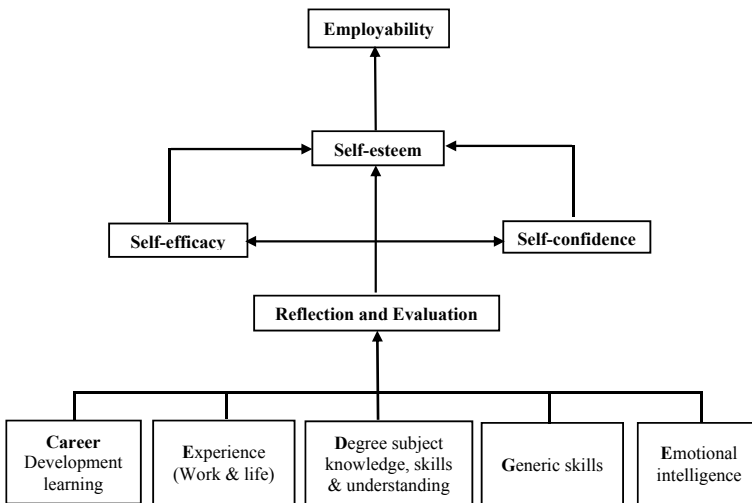
#### ***4.4.2 The CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability***

Another similar yet more rigorous graduate employability model is the CareerEDGE model (Fig. 4.2) conceptualized by Pool and Sewell (2007). The strength of this model is that it shows the role of HE in developing different aspects of employability for students. In particular, with specialist knowledge, qualifications, and generic skills acquired from HE, students can build up their self-efficacy and re-evaluate what they have gained, which is a great help for their future career path. In parallel, when at university, students should be trained for career development, allowing them to thoroughly understand what is truly important and meaningful or what fits their dispositions (Law & Watts, 1977). Studying for career development is also a compass that helps graduates navigate well in the job market (Foster, 2006). This is related



**Fig. 4.1** USEM model

to the term ‘career-building skills’ presented in Clarke’s (2018) and Tomlinson’s (2017) models, which will be clarified later. In addition, embedding work-life experience training into the curriculum beneficially equips students with knowledge and experiences about the functioning of the job market, hence being able to confidently approach and proactively perform their abilities to potential employers or organizations (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Moreover, ‘emotional intelligence’, a feature unelaborated in the USEM, seems to play a central part in connection with other mentioned constructs. Emotional intelligence makes one sympathize with others and well control their sentiment, predisposing to healthy relationships in the workplace (Goleman, 1998). If harnessing ‘emotional intelligence’ efficiently, graduates



**Fig. 4.2** Career edge graduate employability model (Adapted from Pool & Sewell, 2007)

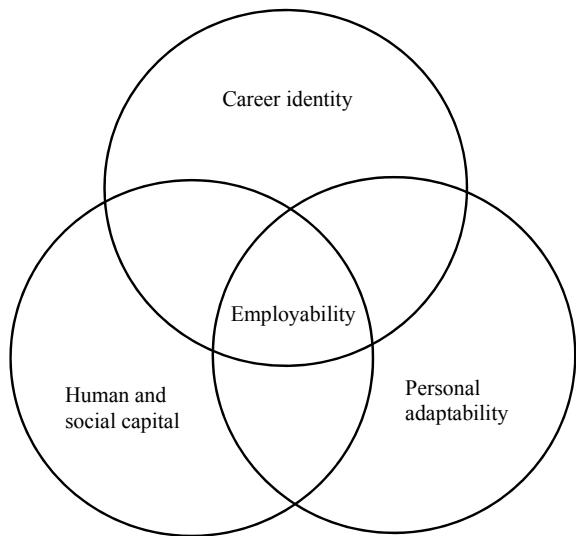
can be able to apply what they have learned in the HE environment into practice, cultivating their self-efficacy in return.

All of the mentioned elements form the foundation for graduate employability. However, it requires students/graduates to reflect upon and evaluate such elements to see if they have attained such elements at the level required by a job position. Together with their self-efficacy and self-confidence, their self-reflection and evaluation will contribute to building their self-esteem, which is viewed by Pool and Sewell (2007) as directly leading to employability.

### 4.4.3 Heuristic Model of Employability

Fugate et al. (2004) take the psycho-social construct into building a heuristic model of employability (Fig. 4.3). In their viewpoint, employability is the intersection between career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. ‘Career identity’ is perceived as ‘who I am’. Together with one’s understanding of ‘hopes, goals, fears, personal traits and values...’, a person can define themselves in order to realize and ‘catch’ career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 20). When one can self-understand, personal adaptability should come into play. Personal adaptability allows an individual to be resilient and sustain challenging and ever-changing work environments because he/she is supposed to proactively and optimistically learn about workplace challenges and opportunities. This aspect seems to be associated with ‘emotional intelligence’, which has been clarified in the CareerEDGE model of employability above (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Fugate and his fellow researchers provide more insights into social capital, i.e., social networks, the one that seems to

**Fig. 4.3** Heuristic model of employability (Adapted from Fugate et al., 2004)



be overlooked in the CareerEdge model (Pool & Sewell, 2007). It is argued that, when combined with human capital, social capital helps strengthen one’s career identity and personal adaptability. This is because one’s possession of subject specialization and generic skills, alongside with close bonds with others, possibly boosts their self-efficacy and self-awareness in the type of job chosen (Clarke, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). As such, the intertwined constructs play an integral part in facilitating graduates’ career outcomes.

### 4.4.4 Graduate Employability Capital Model

Unlike other authors, Tomlinson did not view graduate employability in terms of skills, but capital instead. He conceptualizes graduate employability as ‘largely constitutive of the accumulation and deployment of a variety of interactive forms of capital’, which includes ‘human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological’. (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 339). On that notion, he constructed the graduate employability capital model (Fig. 4.4). Human capital refers to technical and career-building skills which graduates are supposed to effectively harness to empower themselves in the job search process. Social capital is about social networking that helps pave the way for one’ human capital development towards employment outcomes (Clarke,

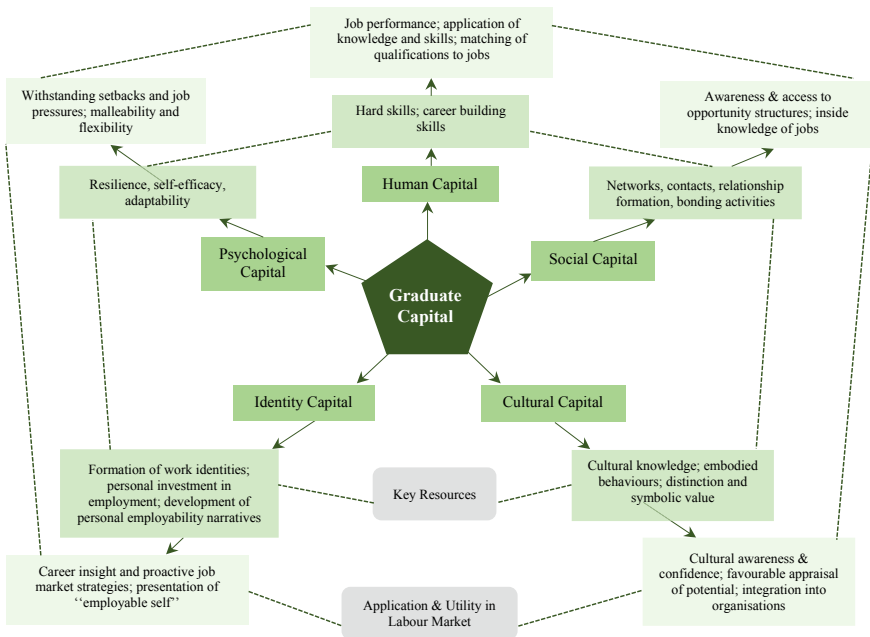


Fig. 4.4 Graduate Capital Model (Adapted from Tomlinson, 2017)

2018; Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). In other words, it supports graduates' human capital for employment outcomes.

The perspective about cultural capital in this model is distinctive from the aforementioned ones. Cultural capital, in Bourdieu's viewpoint, is conceived as culturally gained values of knowledge, innate characters, and sequential agency that graduates/students apply to morph into the given work or educational situations (Bourdieu, 1986). As for the case of graduates, one should further consider the 'added-value' knowledge obtained through diverse socio-cultural milieus and beyond the HE context. Tomlinson exemplifies this aspect by citing Lindberg's (2013) research finding in which medic graduates, through winning awards, attending symposiums and achieving other types of success, can gain employment benefits (Lindberg, 2013). At this point, necessarily, social capital should also be examined since it is intertwined with its cultural counterpart, given that one can obtain information, including but not limited to that of meetings, workshops, and other means to 'market' one's image with potential employers if he/she has bridging experiences (Tomlinson, 2017).

Pertaining to the identity capital, the term is related to the way one defines and reflexes themselves on the basis of their own values not only to make effort for the sake of their future employability but to stay attuned to the desired working field (Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). Here should also come the role of psychological capital, which is viewed as one's capacity to 'adapt and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 347). Tomlinson also argues that for graduates to successfully develop their careers, they need certain psychological attributes and personalities such as adaptability, flexibility, resilience, and optimism—termed psychological capital. It helps graduates to overcome challenges and move forward on the career path they desire to develop.

#### ***4.4.5 Psycho-Social Construct of Employability***

Whilst pointing out important components of employability, the graduate employability models presented above do not articulate clearly the importance of external factors—those associated with the labour market. In her model, Clarke (2018) not only discusses the necessity of human capital, social capital, and personal qualities but also takes into consideration the pivotal interplay between the 'internal factors' and the labour market being 'external factors' for employability success. She contends that even if an individual has good competencies and skills (i.e., human capital), and a wide circle of social networks (i.e., social capital), there is no guarantee that he/she can successfully secure employment. This is because many market factors, especially the uncertainty of the global economy and the ever-changing labour market as today, may disadvantage individuals who have already possessed a high level of human and social capital. Those who lack geographical mobility or are unable to adapt to challenging working environment are unlikely to get employed (Clarke, 2018; McQuaid, 2006). Working settings and related requirements are, therefore, worth due attention.

Another point drawn out from the model is individual attributes and behaviours, which is supported by Fugate and colleagues (2004). ‘Attributes’ here is observed through the angle of socio-psychology. It means that adaptability and flexibility can assist oneself to malleably handle tough circumstances, thus boosting their chances for desired career achievement (Fugate et al., 2004). ‘Behaviours’ is, in this case, related to ‘career self-management’ and ‘career-building skills’. The former is about an individual’s self-realization regarding his attitudes, knowledge, skills, passion, and balance between work and life, which is somewhat similar to the ‘metacognition’ given in the USEM. The latter, however, is focused on the assistance for a person’s navigation and advancement in the workplace (Bridgstock, 2009).

In this model, Clarke also mentioned perceived employability, the self-evaluated employability that graduates have about themselves. This is similar to the ‘reflection and evaluation’ element in CareerEdge graduate employability model (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Such perceived employability may rise and fall depending on graduates’ achievements of types of employability capital, their attributes, behaviours, and the labour market at the time they conduct the self-assessment on their own employability. Perceived employability works together with labour market factors to determine the actual graduate employability (Fig. 4.5).

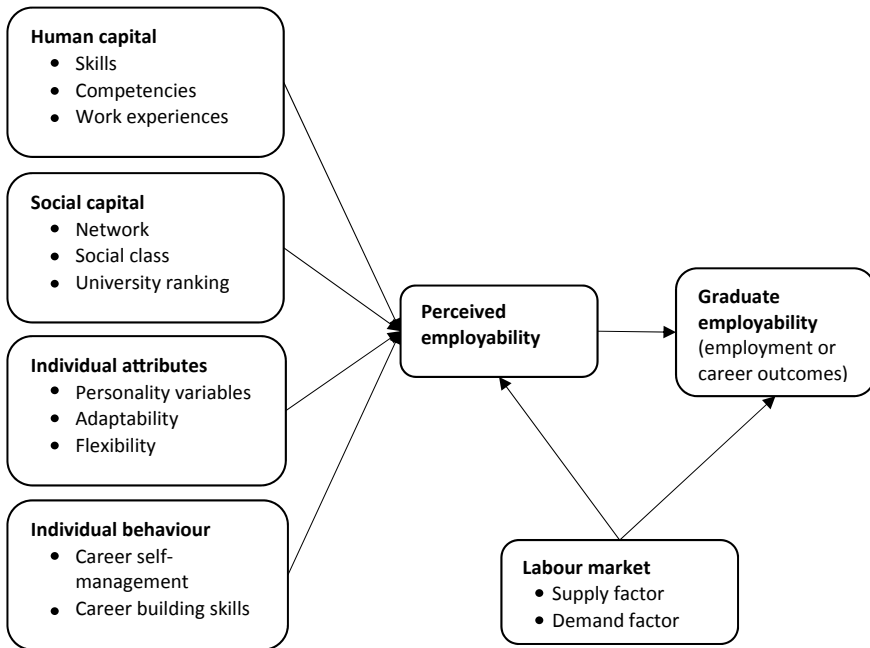


Fig. 4.5 Psycho-social construct of employability (Adapted from Clarke, 2018)



## 4.5 The Relevance of Tomlinson's Employability Capital Model to Our Book Project

The previous sections have presented different models of graduate employability. It is observed that there was a revolution in the perspectives of what graduate employability is and what constitutes it. From early perspectives defining employability as skill sets to more holistic perspectives seeing it as a combination of different capital/resources instead of just skill, to recent perspectives viewing graduate employability in a relative sense as it is influenced by market factors, not solely graduates' factors. In addition, existing research about English language education indicates some relationship between English language learning and employability capital, but they appear to be patchy and are not guided by a graduate employability model. Thus, it is important to systematically conduct studies into the relationships between them using a rigorous graduate employability theoretical framework.

For the purpose of this edited book, we will adopt Tomlinson's (2017) graduate employability capital model as the compass for the direction and development of all empirical studies. This model is chosen because of two reasons. First, the employability capital model is aligned with our perspective on graduate employability and research purposes for this book. We view that employability is more than a list of skills; rather, it is a dynamic combination of different types of resources, or capital in Tomlinson's terms, with the interference of market factors and individual graduates' factors. We acknowledge that Clarke's (2018) psycho-social construct of employability better captures the complexity of employability than Tomlinson's (2017) model. It can explain how employability capital can be translated into employment or career outcomes under negotiation between the graduates, with their self-perceived employability, and labour market. However, in this book, as we do not investigate how employability capital developed via English learning is translated into employment or career outcomes, market factors or perceived employability becomes redundant elements. As such, Tomlinson's (2017) employability capital model is adequate to embrace our perspective towards graduate employability and fits well into the purposes of our book: (i) to explore the contribution of English language education to the development of employability capital and (ii) to examine the effectiveness of English language teaching and learning in preparing students/graduates for the world of work.

Second, it encourages us to examine new aspects of employability: cultural capital, psychological capital, and career identity capital. Dominantly, cultural capital is viewed in relation to individuals' education credentials and related experiences, which act as their advantages to accomplish certain social status (Bourdieu, 1986). However, Tomlinson (2017) introduced a new view on cultural capital, seeing it in relation to graduates' functional ability at the workplace. He defined it as the understanding of the work culture or work practices of an organization, industry, or job sector. He also introduced psychological capital, with self-efficacy, adaptability, flexibility, and resilience being the most important elements. Psychological capital enables graduates to adapt to a new work environment, overcome challenges, and

take opportunities to develop their careers. Such abilities or attributes have been researched, but they appeared not to have been classified under a holistic employability framework, except for adaptability (see Fugate et al., 2004). Tomlinson also brought on board the concept of career identity as another employability capital, although it had been introduced by Fugate et al. (2004) earlier. However, few studies have examined the initial career/professional identity as a resource/capital that enables the development of other employability capital and contributes to graduates' employment and career outcomes. The introduction of these new capital concepts will give us opportunities to conduct our employability-related research innovatively. Putting them into the examination of the contribution of English language education to graduate employability, we may identify new benefits of learning English that previous studies have not identified. From there, important implications may be provided to help modify the current approach to English language education, aiming to make it more practical and applicable for work purposes. It is because learning a language to know, without using it in real life, is the easiest way to waste time, money, and effort invested in the acquisition of the language.

For the aforementioned reasons, we believe that Tomlinson's graduate employability capital model is a comprehensive and rigorous theoretical framework for the development of this book. It may help us bring out new insights in English language education that have not been addressed or overlooked before. The model will serve as an overarching theoretical framework for conceptualizing and shaping the main contents of the book. More specifically, it will be used to guide studies in Part II of this book where authors explore the contribution of English language education to the development of human, social, cultural, psychological, and career identity capital. It will also be used for discussion in studies presented in Part III of this book where authors examined the current practices of English language education in Vietnam and how it has helped or prevented the development of graduate employability capital, using the experiences of several stakeholders: current students, graduates, teachers, and program coordinators. Finally, this theoretical framework also underpins our discussion in Part IV—the last chapter—where we identify English language teaching practices that can facilitate the development of employability capital, instead of just English language skills. It should be noted that in each empirical chapter, the author may adopt some theoretical framework for their analysis, but the central discussion of their work also relies on the type(s) of capital proposed by Tomlinson (2017). Overall, the employability capital model plays the role of a spine that connects all chapters presented in this book to make the whole book complete, logical, and consistent.

## 4.6 Existing Research About English Language Education and Employability Capital

As presented earlier in Tomlinson's (2017) employability capital framework, employability is constituted by human, social, cultural, psychological, and career identity capital. These types of capital are not separate from each other, but they may overlap and mutually influence their development. In this section, we will note how English education may develop such employability capital based on a review of existing studies in this respect.

First, human capital includes but is not limited to knowledge, technical and soft skills, and work experiences that benefit one's employment and career prospects. In this regard, English is the most popular language used for the dissemination of the latest news and scientific knowledge. Having an advanced level of English language competence will enable individuals to access different sources of information beneficial for their study and work (Doan & Hamid, 2019); and thus also improve their technical knowledge and skills. In addition, some studies indirectly suggest a relationship between English education and work performances/experiences. For example, Pham (2018) found that HR managers of multinational companies in Vietnam preferred to hire graduates of overseas institutions mostly because of their English competence. Likewise, Malaysian employers tend to believe that better English signifies better employability. They even use English skills as a criterion to decide employees' salaries and promote them to manager positions (Ting et al., 2017). In contrast, a lack of English was found to prevent Vietnamese employees from contributing their perspectives or actively engaging in the decision-making process (Tran et al., 2017). Furthermore, English education can facilitate the development of some important soft skills, which can be found both in human capital and psychological capital, as defined in Tomlinson (2017). A study carried out by Tevdovska (2015), with the participation of 23 undergraduates from South East European University, found that the participants were able to express themselves appropriately and handle tough circumstances thanks to soft skills trained in English classes. Indeed, several teaching techniques in EFL/ESL classes such as debate, role-play can help students develop soft skills such as critical thinking, analytical, and problem-solving skills (Aclan et al., 2016; Kostikova et al., 2021).

Social capital is 'the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilize graduates' existing human capital and bring them closer to the labour market and its opportunity structures' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 342). Due to globalization, the use of English as a worldwide as an international language has kept increasing, with millions of users. Thus, possessing an adequate English communication skills can help people increase their social network and connect to the rest of the world. Indeed, some studies have found a relationship between English education and social capital development. In India, the study by Dash et al. (2020) revealed that English language skills enhanced employees' ability to communicate more effectively at work, expand their social network, and enhance their employment outcomes. In contrast, international students in Australia were found not to possess an adequate level of English,

making it hard for them to study, network with people and thus negatively affecting their employability (Benzie, 2010).

It is observed that numerous studies have addressed how to train English language teachers in intercultural competence and related pedagogies (e.g., He, 2013; Snow, 2015). However, it appears that there is a lack of studies that seek to determine the relationship between English language education and students' cultural capital development. It should be noted here that the cultural competence developed for teacher is understood in a common, broad sense: the values and norms attached to a group of people or territory. However, in this book, cultural capital is defined in relation to employment prospects. It is viewed as 'the formation of culturally valued knowledge, dispositions, and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 333). A limited number of studies have indicated a relationship between English education and cultural capital (Othman et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2017). They generally point out that individuals with good English skills can tolerate and value different cultures and adapt to a new environment when studying or working overseas. For example, a study in Malaysia found that expatriates could establish friendships with the host community, understand the culture, and increase their self-confidence if they could master English communication skills (Othman et al., 2021). Such a paucity of research on this topic suggests the need to explore the relationship between these two variables.

Some studies have attempted to investigate the relationship between psychological attributes and soft skills in English language learning—foremost resilience, and adaptability—to students' achievement of the language. For example, Kim and Kim (2017) explored factors constituting second language learners' resilience, and how these factors are related to L2 learning. They found five resilience factors: perceived happiness, empathy, sociability, persistence, and self-regulation. Likewise, Ye (2020) attempted to identify how the psychological adaptability of college students affects their English performance. The researcher found four problems associated with students' psychological adaptability to English learning: unclear purpose, fuzzy objectives, unreasonable strategy, and unsuitable test method. It was also found that Arts students can adapt to English learning more easily than their counterparts in science, engineering, and agriculture. Although these studies did not examine how English language learning can develop resilience and adaptability, they did indicate that there is a relationship between English language education and such psychological capital, which needs to be further explored.

Career identity is related to one's 'career experiences and aspirations' (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 19), or 'provides a frame through which they may be able to channel their experiences and profile' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 345). It defines who graduates will be or become, and may include goals, hopes, fears, personal traits, values, and beliefs. Regarding the development of career identity in English education, Yihon et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative study, with the participation of 2,278 undergraduates from 30 universities, to examine the change in Chinese college students' self-identity associated with their learning of English. They found that English learning influenced learners' identities, especially their self-confidence, one prominent dimension of self-identity. Combining psychological and social perspectives, Gao et al. (2015)

carried out a 4-year longitudinal study to investigate English learning and self-identity development of about 1,000 students from 5 Beijing-based universities. Through a complex design of the study with both qualitative and quantitative data, the research group found several positive relationships between different dimensions of identity. The researchers concluded that L2 identity development in EFL settings in the context of globalization deserves broader research attention.

In short, a limited number of existing studies suggest that there are relationships between English language education and the development of employability capital. However, how the former contributes to the development of the latter is still under-investigated. Likewise, such studies are fragmented because they used different perspectives and theoretical frameworks, or no theoretical framework at all to investigate the relationships. It is, thus, urgent to explore this research topic using a strong theoretical foundation—such as Tomlinson’s graduate employability capital model—to generate more nuanced insights to help policymakers, curriculum designers, educators, and students to approach their English language education more effectively, contributing to graduates’ employment and career prospects.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Employers around the world are demanding skilled graduates who can hit the ground running. Researchers have attempted to identify lists of skills wanted by employers and develop these skills for students to make them more employable upon graduation. However, these lists of skills may not be of great use as skills needed in the market keep changing. As such, it needs new perspectives about what constitutes employability, instead of skills lists. In the same manner, English skills have become an international language and are highly demanded by employers in almost all job sectors, especially in non-English speaking countries whose economies are emerging. Possessing an excellent command of this language not only enhances graduates’ employment prospects but also affords them several opportunities for job promotion and advancement. So far, English language education is often framed within the concept of developing linguistic abilities for students or introducing prominent cultural features of English speaking countries, despite new efforts to shift the focus to developing English skills for students/graduates to use in real-life situations. As mentioned, framing English language education within the notion of skills development may not be beneficial for students’ employability. Learning English may benefit students/graduates more than just English skills. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of studies about the contribution of English language education to the development of employability capital. Therefore, in this chapter, after we have reviewed different graduate employability models, we adopted Tomlinson’s (2017) employability capital model to be used for the development of this book. This framework is used to conceptualize the structure of the book and string all chapters to make it a logical, well-knit, and complete research-based book.

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**Part II**  
**The Development of Graduate**  
**Employability Through English Language**  
**Education**

# Chapter 5

## English Language Education and University Students' Development of Human Capital



Hoang Yen Phuong and Phuong Quyen Vo

**Abstract** Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills acquired by students or graduates, which are a foundation of their employability and employment outcomes. This chapter will examine how English language education contributes to students' development of overall knowledge and skills necessary for their future employment and life. Two case studies with students and graduates of Hospitality and Tourism and students of Information Technology will illustrate the ways in which English language education impacts on the development of their discipline-specific skills. Data were collected from 16 student interviews and a survey with 200 students and graduates of the two disciplines. The results show that English language education enhances students' access to learning resources written in English, on top of those written or presented in Vietnamese, which in turn contributes to advancing their professional knowledge and skills. English language education also provides them with the opportunity to strengthen communication skills, work-related and people skills which are perceived to benefit their current work effectiveness for graduates and future employability. All of these suggest that English language education can greatly help develop students' human capital.

**Keywords** Human capital · Employability · English language education · Graduates · Case studies

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## 5.1 Introduction

English has become an international means of communication (Crystal, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Rings & Rasinger, 2020; Tamtam et al., 2012). In Vietnam, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been part of the education system for over forty years. Gradually, it becomes the most popular foreign language taught at all public schools in the country, with millions of learners from primary schools to universities (Phuong, 2017). Numerous efforts have been made, at a high cost, to improve English language teaching and learning in Vietnam. In 2008, the Vietnam National Foreign Language Project (VNFLP), code-named “Project 2020”, was launched with a budget of 10 trillion VND (USD 446.43 million) aiming to “thoroughly renovate the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the national education system [by] 2020”.

In spite of those efforts, the most recent data of 2021 reveal that English proficiency in Vietnam has dropped to “low” with a score of 486 on the English Proficiency Index (EPI) and ranked 66th out of 112 countries (EF English Proficiency Index, 2021). In Asia, Vietnam is ranked 12th out of 24 countries and territories in 2021, a slight drop from 10th out of 25 in 2019. EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) attempts to rank countries by the equity of English language skills among those adults who took the EF test, a standardized test of the English language designed for non-native English speakers and available for free over the internet. The real situation of using English in the country raises even more concerns over the pedagogical and practical approaches to English language teaching and learning. Many Vietnamese students cannot speak an English sentence properly and thus do not meet the expected English requirements of universities and employers (Ha Anh, 2018).

The gap between the Vietnamese government’s efforts to improve students’ English and students’ English proficiency posits a question of whether and in what ways English is really helpful to students. To date, few studies have been conducted to investigate the benefits that English learning has brought to Vietnamese students, especially in helping them to develop their human capital. Meanwhile, human capital is claimed to allow an economy to grow because the more human capital increases in areas such as science, education, and management, the more development can be found in innovation, social well-being, equality, productivity, and so on (Kenton, 2022). Thus, the current study was conducted to respond to the following research question:

To what extent does English language education contribute to developing Vietnamese students’ human capital?

## 5.2 Literature Review

### 5.2.1 *English Language Education in Vietnam*

Although English has been taught in Vietnamese schools since the late nineteenth century (during the French colonization), it only became popular once the economic reforms of the late 1980s took effect (Lap, 2005). The open-door policy in Vietnam enhanced diplomatic relations and business communication with foreign countries and in turn attracted English-speaking foreigners to the country. In the context of developing international business partnerships, the importance of English language use increased. Canh (2007) stated that “for the first time in the country’s many-thousand-years-long history, English emerged as the most important foreign language, [...] chosen by most students” (p. 172).

Foreign language education is compulsory at secondary and high schools, and the first two years of tertiary institutions, as regulated by Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam. English, French, and Chinese are the three most popular foreign languages offered to students. Among them, English has been the most popular one and many universities in the country have set up an English learning outcome for their students, ranging from A2 for 3-year college programs to B1 for 4-year university programs (Duong Tam & Manh Hung, 2019). Therefore, students have to learn hard to reach the expected English learning outcomes. A survey with 600 students from 3 large universities in Vietnam revealed that 89% of students chose to learn English in various places outside their schools such as in commercial English language centers, private classes, or online because they think formal English language education offered by the university cannot equip them with the language skills and knowledge they need for the standardized tests (Phuong Mai, 2018).

Despite English’s emergence as the top foreign language, there has been a consensus among researchers, educators, and teachers in Vietnam that current EFL learning outcomes are far from satisfaction (Canh, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2019; Ngo, 2019; Sung & Spolsky, 2015). Compared to their Asian peers, Vietnamese EFL students generally have lower language proficiency (Albright, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Phan Nghia, 2019). Therefore, it is difficult for them to communicate in English, let alone pursue a program of study involving English as the medium of instruction (EMI). This places Vietnamese EFL students at a competitive disadvantage in the international labor force (Doan & Hamid, 2021; Hoang, 2010; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020).

In order to satisfy a range of learning needs, different English courses and training programs have been developed in recent years, and nearly a thousand foreign language centers and schools have been established throughout Vietnam (Hoang, 2010). However, the quality of English language education at all levels in Vietnam is still low and does not meet the country’s ambitious socio-economic development demands (Vu & Burns, 2014). Despite the increasingly important role of English in Vietnam, most of its usage thus far has been confined to the classroom (Crystal, 2012; Huong & Hiep, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Rings & Rasinger, 2020). Vietnamese

learners of EFL quite naturally have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom unless they are in special jobs or situations where they have opportunities to communicate with English speakers (Bui & Intaraprasert, 2013; Canh, 2007; Hoang, 2010; Nhan & Lai, 2012, 2013; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020).

### 5.2.2 *Human Capital*

Tomlinson (2017) defines human capital as the knowledge and skills which are acquired by graduates and become a foundation of their labor market outcomes. Human capital imparts technical and embedded knowledge so that graduates can employ later in higher-end professional labor. According to Takeshita (2016), human capital can be the result of formal education, experience, and practical learning that take place on the job and in non-formal education. Among many human capital factors, education and experience have been found to be the strongest predictors of career progression (Bhopal, 2020; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Burke & Hughes, 2018; Judge et al., 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Odden, 2011; Speer, 2017; Tharenou et al., 1994). In fact, human capital theory views participation in education and training as an investment which yields both social and private returns (Ashton & Green, 1996). The social returns manifest in a highly skilled, flexible workforce as reflected in levels of national economic output (OECD, 2007) while the private returns are reflected in increasing individual earnings and better career opportunities and wider labor market scope (Tomlinson, 2008).

Fugate et al. (2004) consider social and human capital as an important dimension as compared to the other two ones namely personal adaptability and career identity in their construct of employability. In their definition, human capital refers to a host of factors that influence a person's career advancement variables. These factors include (Wanberg et al., 1996), work experience and training (Becker, 1975), job performance and organization tenure, emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002), and cognitive ability (Tharenou, 1997).

In studying the impact of foreign direct investment and human capital on Vietnam labor productivity from 1986 to 2014, Le et al. (2019) found that the two factors have a positive effect on improving labor productivity in the long term and there is unidirectional Granger causality running from FDI and index of human capital to labor productivity. Similarly, Nguyen (2017) figured out that human capital had a positive impact on the result of business activities in Vietnam. Furthermore, a higher level of firm size as well as a higher level of human capital can increase the performance of the firm. In short, human capital is positively correlated with both individual and business development in the world in general and Vietnam in particular.

### ***5.2.3 English and Its Prospects for Students' Human Capital Development***

As mentioned earlier, human capital contributes to a large extent to graduates' foundation of their labor market outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017). As people nowadays are more commonly experiencing largely self-managed, boundaryless careers comprised of many positions with multiple organizations and even industries (Arthur et al., 2005; Hall, 2004; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), their human capital plays a crucial role in helping them to progress in their career. English creates various opportunities in helping students to accumulate knowledge and develop important skills for their human capital development. First and foremost, English creates better chances to obtain high-quality education (Lien et al., 2015). Most up-to-date learning resources are written in English as Han and Ho (2011) showed that English is the most popular language used in articles from 65 countries/territories. In the same vein, Van Weijen (2012) found that approximately 80% of all published articles indexed in Scopus are written in English. Therefore, students with good English proficiency can read materials and have better chances to expand their knowledge in their field of study.

In addition to its possibility to improve students' accumulation of knowledge, English has become very important in the job market in the world in general and in Vietnam in particular. In fact, English has been used as a common language in the business world and become the common corporate language of communication in many companies and enterprises (Neeley, 2012; Warschauer, 2000). English also makes it easier for people to travel overseas to join an international labor market and build their careers (Jurje & Lavene, 2015). In Vietnam, fluency in English and having English international certificates such as IELTS, TOEIC, and TOEFL are a prerequisite for many jobs and increase the opportunities for graduates to secure a high-paid job (Hoang, 2010; Lien et al., 2015). The main reason for such an English language requirement is that many employees are required to do research, attend meetings, and do other clerical work in which English is an important vehicle. Additionally, given that industry has become increasingly important in Vietnam and attracted the most foreign investment and technical assistance, Vietnam now needs more English-competent engineers to learn modern techniques and more skilled labor with high levels of English proficiency to work in this sector. Tourism is also another growing industry that requires employees with good English proficiency. In the first 9 months of 2019, Vietnam welcomed 12.87 million tourists, and the number of tourists from Canada, Australia, UK, and the United States ranges from 118,624 to 569,113 tourists. Therefore, there is an urgent need for employees in tourism who can communicate well in English.

In short, English language education contributes to human capital in today's world. However, to our knowledge, there has not yet been a study on the ways in which English language education affects Vietnamese students' development of human capital. Therefore, the current study has been conducted to fill such a gap.



## 5.3 The Present Study

### 5.3.1 *Research Approach*

The researchers employed a mixed method approach in the current study with two phases: a qualitative study followed by a quantitative study. The reason for the use of mixed methods in the current study is the single use of each may cause different methodological issues. In particular, quantitative methods have the potential of leaving out rich details of human capital not captured by the scale while qualitative approaches may lack the formal test of hypotheses whether English language education has an impact on students' human capital development. In fact, Creswell and Clark (2017) claim that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone. In this study, the use of a mixed method approach could provide insights into the extent to which English language education contributes to students' human capital development and the complex phenomena of how different groups of students benefit from learning English.

### 5.3.2 *Data Collection Method and Process*

In the first phase, the researchers interviewed 16 participating students and alumni of the two fields, namely Information Technology and Tourism to explore the contribution of English to their human capital development. To recruit participants, the researcher utilized a convenience sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016; Kumar, 2011). Details about the numbered interviewees are described in Table 5.1.

From August 15 to September 30, 2019, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language for each individual participant from 15 to 20 min for each interview to explore the participants' English language education process and the role that English language education plays in helping them develop their human capital. The interview protocol consists of five main research questions aiming to explore the student interviewees' experience of learning English and the extent English has helped them to develop various aspects of human capital. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by the researchers. The translated version was then translated back to Vietnamese by another researcher and compared with the original interviews. Modifications were then made to the English version of the transcription to ensure its accuracy and reliability. All the interviews were later numbered as Interview 1 through Interview 16. The data were then analyzed by content analysis approach which involves quantifying qualitative information by sorting data and comparing different pieces of information to summarize it into useful information (Hancock et al., 2007; Kumar, 2011). The method has been used in the current study because it helps to find out the main themes from the responses through analyzing the contents of interviews (Hancock et al., 2007; Kumar,

**Table 5.1** Details of the participants in the first phase

Numbered interviews	Gender	Age	Major	Status
Interviewee 1	Male	23	IT	Alumni
Interviewee 2	Female	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 3	Male	31	IT	Alumni
Interviewee 4	Male	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 5	Female	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 6	Female	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 7	Female	37	IT	Alumni
Interviewee 8	Female	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 9	Male	24	IT	Student
Interviewee 10	Male	22	IT	Student
Interviewee 11	Female	22	Tourism	Student
Interviewee 12	Male	23	Tourism	Alumni
Interviewee 13	Female	22	Tourism	Student
Interviewee 14	Male	40	Tourism	Alumni
Interviewee 15	Male	21	Tourism	Student
Interviewee 16	Female	22	Tourism	Student

2011). Following Kumar's (2011) guidelines, the content analysis of the data was conducted: (1) determining the main themes that participants said about the contribution of English language education to human capital development, (2) coding the themes by numbers or keywords, (3) categorizing the participants' answers under the themes, and (4) reporting both the themes and responses in the paper.

In the second phase, the findings from the first phase were used to develop a 27-item questionnaire. The questionnaire included the following parts: (1) demographic information (with 7 items), and (2) different elements of human capital (namely knowledge and skills) that students have gained from employing their English competence (with 20 items). The participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with the contribution of English to each element of human capital development, in which 1 denoted "Completely disagree" and 5 denoted "Completely Agree". At the end of the questionnaire, the researcher asked one open-ended question "What are other benefits that English has brought to you?", aiming to discover other contributions of English to the participants' human capital development.

In total, contributions of English to human capital development identified and analyzed in the first phase were described in 20 items which could be classified into two following groups:

- Group One: Ten items describing the contributions of English competence to students' knowledge
- Group Two: Ten items depicting the extent English competence contributes to developing students' skills

The convenience sampling technique was taken to recruit participants in this phase, aiming to get approximately 100 responses from the IT student group and 100 responses from the Tourism student group in three weeks. The convenience sampling technique involves using respondents who are "convenient" to the researcher and in this study, all respondents come from the same university with the researchers. In this study, 3 lecturers from the IT faculty and 2 lecturers from the Tourism Faculty were asked to voluntarily assist in contacting with their students. The lecturers provided the researchers with the schedules of their classes. Then, the researchers came to the classrooms, explained to the students the aim of the study, and asked if any students were willing to answer the questionnaire on the voluntary basis. At the same time, an online survey was sent to the lecturers so that they could ask their alumni to fill in voluntarily.

After visiting 3 classrooms of each faculty and 2 weeks of collecting only survey responses, the researchers received a total of 214 responses from the 107 IT participants and 107 Tourism participants. Then, the researchers started cleansing the raw data by detecting and removing a total of 14 responses (i.e., 6 incomplete responses from IT Group, and 8 duplicating responses from Tourism Group). Therefore, 100 valid responses for each group were used for the analyses in this study. Details of the student participants from both IT and Tourism student groups were described in Table 5.2.

To begin the data analysis, the researcher entered all of the quantitative data into SPSS (Version 20). Firstly, participants' demographic information was analyzed by descriptive statistical analysis to find out the main features of the sample, including gender, student type, age group, and their self-evaluated English competence. Then, descriptive data were explored to reveal the contributions of English to the participants' human capital development.

## 5.4 Qualitative Results

Interviews with 16 participants reveal that English contributes to developing both their knowledge and skills for their career. In the subsequent part of the chapter, the ways in which English language education affects students' knowledge and skill development will be presented respectively. The most common ideas among the respondents are listed first, and the less common ones come later.

**Table 5.2** Details of the participants in the second phase

		IT	Tourism	Total
Gender	Male	69	25	94
	Female	31	75	106
Status	Students	90	98	188
	Alumni	10	2	12
Age	18–22	85	95	180
	23–30	5	4	9
	>30	10	1	11
Self-evaluated English Competence	Excellent	0	0	0
	Very good	4	4	8
	Good	16	16	32
	Basic	54	52	106
	Low	30	26	56

### 5.4.1 *English and Knowledge Development*

All 16 participants claimed that English helped them to accumulate knowledge, not only at university but also at work. There are different ways English contributes to the knowledge accumulation process of the participants. First and foremost, English helps all participants search for information they need from English sources which are more available to them, as compared to Vietnamese ones. For example, the following participants said:

Thanks to English, I can access the internet to search for the information relating to my working field which Vietnamese sources cannot provide. [Interviewee 1]

English helps me to search for new technology for my work since most materials can only be found in English. [Interviewee 3]

With English, I can search for the most updated knowledge to fulfill the assignments that our teachers gave us. [Interviewee 14]

Thanks to English, seven participants can accumulate in-depth knowledge about specific fields they are interested in. One of the typical answers is.

I think English helps enhance my professional knowledge because the IT field requires us to update knowledge and technology continuously. Only foreign websites provide us with that. [Interviewee 9]

As compared to my friends who have lower English competence, I can find more information about different tourism models around the world. I can also make friends and chat with online friends to know more about the tourist attractions in their own countries. [Interviewee 11]

More importantly, six participants stated that English helps them read specialized books and materials and fully understand what the authors mean, which they rarely

do if they read the translated versions. In addition, five participants stated that they can extend their knowledge to the related fields because they read materials and learn with their English competence. This is especially helpful for the alumni participants since their jobs require them to know other fields beside their major at university.

English helps me to develop my professional knowledge since my major is IT which requires me to update knowledge on a frequent basis. Only websites from foreign countries can provide me with such updated knowledge. [Interviewee 9]

English is a useful tool for me to learn the cultures of foreign countries. This kind of knowledge is important for people working in tourism sector like me. [Interviewee 12]

Last but not least, English is claimed to enlarge the participants' knowledge of different culture.

English helps me to know more about the culture of different countries. I learn from the way they communicate, work and relax. Therefore, I feel less confused when I meet foreigners in my daily life. [Interviewee 3]

I know more about the culture of my online friends from different countries. This type of knowledge is usually hard to find in the textbooks that we've learned at school. [Interviewee 11]

### ***5.4.2 English and Skills Development***

The participants have listed different skills they have developed thanks to learning English. Communication skills were listed by all participants in the study. According to the participants, English helps them communicate with business partners, clients and friends from not only English-speaking countries but also many other countries all over the world since English has become an international language. Two noticing claims below come from the alumni of Tourism.

English helps me to improve my communication skills via making friends with foreigners or following social media influencers of Facebook, You Tube or Zalo. [Interviewee 3]

With English, I can take initiatives at work, get the gists, and understand my boss and colleagues clearly. These are important for communication. [Interviewee 14]

In addition, English helps them develop people skills which enable them to make friends with more people easily. These can be friends from their English classes at school, language centers where they have been learning, or those from their business and services. Moreover, English contributes to help them develop presentation and public speaking skills. Since the nature of learning a foreign language is speaking to and in front of people, English learning and using gradually helps the participants to present ideas and convince audience more effectively.

English helps me to maintain speaking and presentation skills. I can present my ideas better since I am familiar to the structure of an English talk. In such a talk, we avoid "beating around the bush" and we have to present the main ideas right at the beginning. [Interviewee 3]

I think I am more confident making English presentations than Vietnamese ones. I usually watch different English speeches on Youtube or other social media, so I think I am more familiar with the styles and common phrases that those speakers use in their talks. [Interviewee 16]

English also helps the participants to work effectively in their environment where English is used as a means of communication among staff members where their bosses are English-speaking ones.

Good English competence helps me to discuss with others more quickly and effectively. Therefore, I have gained more trust from my boss and colleagues because my projects take less time and fewer errors, which reduces the cost for lacking information or misunderstanding. [Interviewee 7]

I am working at a prestigious tourist company and English has helped me to work with foreign colleagues and clients conveniently. I can have a say whenever we discuss about our business and that's really helpful for my job. [Interviewee 12]

Three participants mentioned that English brings them the confidence to conduct interviews and discussions with their business partners.

English helps me to be more outstanding than other people in job-seeking processes. It brings me the confidence to apply for the jobs I target. [Interviewee 2]

In short, the interviewees mentioned various contributions of English to their knowledge and skills development. On the one hand, English has helped the respondents to search for information, improve their discipline-specific knowledge, extend their knowledge to other related fields as well as provided them with in-depth knowledge that they sought for. On the other hand, English has also helped the respondents to develop communication skills, work-related skills, and people skills. Their answers have become the basis to build up the questionnaire for the quantitative study that followed.

## 5.5 Quantitative Results

### 5.5.1 *English and Knowledge Development*

Descriptive statistical analysis results (see Table 5.3) reveal that the two most important impacts of English on developing participants' knowledge are helping them to search for information relating to the tasks they are doing when the information is not available on Vietnamese websites ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.59$ ); and searching for information from different sources around the world ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $SD = 0.67$ ). The four next important impacts are improving knowledge of the fields that the participants are specialized in ( $M = 4.18$ ;  $SD = 0.49$ ); helping them to read English reports in their fields ( $M = 4.10$ ;  $SD = 0.64$ ); extend their knowledge to other fields ( $M = 4.09$ ;  $SD = 0.52$ ); and better understand what authors mean in their texts as compared to reading translated versions of the same materials ( $M = 4.05$ ;  $SD = 0.73$ ). In addition,

**Table 5.3** Participants' perceptions of the impact of English on their knowledge development

English helps me to ...	M	SD
Search for information that is not available in Vietnamese	4.39	0.59
Search for information on the internet from different sources around the world	4.24	0.67
Improve my specialized knowledge from reading English books and materials	4.18	0.49
Read books and materials of English projects of my field	4.10	0.64
Extend my knowledge of other fields relating to my major	4.09	0.52
Better understand what authors mean as compared to reading translated versions	4.05	0.73
Deepen my knowledge of a research topic I am working on	4.02	0.75
Accumulate in-depth knowledge of the field I am especially interested in	4.00	0.68
Read English materials smoothly and fluently	3.99	0.71
Study new knowledge and technology by myself	3.93	0.72

the other two impacts are helping the participants to deepen their knowledge of a research topic they are working on ( $M = 4.02$ ;  $SD = 0.75$ ); and accumulating in-depth knowledge of the field they are specialized in ( $M = 4.00$ ;  $SD = 0.68$ ). The last two impacts of English on the participants' development of knowledge are helping them to read English materials smoothly and fluently ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ); and studying new knowledge and technology by themselves ( $M = 3.93$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ).

### 5.5.2 English and Skills Development

Regarding skills that English has contributed to building students' skills, the three groups of skills have been revealed in Table 5.4. First, the participants agreed that English helps them develop and refine their communication skills (Item 03, Item 15, and Item 16). More specifically, learning English assists them to develop their communication skills in general ( $M = 4.34$ ;  $SD = 0.56$ ); overcome confusion when communicating with foreigners ( $M = 4.31$ ;  $SD = 0.59$ ); and refine their skills to communicate with not only foreigners but also Vietnamese ( $M = 4.27$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ). The second skill group is work-related. In fact, the participants stated that English helps them improve their skills of working with foreign business partners ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ); improve their interview skills ( $M = 4.21$ ;  $SD = 0.65$ ); gain skills to work for other sectors they are interested in ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ); and engage effectively in their working environment ( $M = 4.12$ ;  $SD = 0.70$ ). The last skill group consists of people skills. The participants agreed that English helps them develop presentation and public speaking skills ( $M = 4.12$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ); make friends easily with many people ( $M = 4.07$ ;  $SD = 0.70$ ); and develop their intercultural competence ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ).

**Table 5.4** Participants' perceptions of the impact of English on their skill development

English helps me to ...	M	SD
Develop different communication skills	4.34	0.56
Learn to overcome confusion when communicating with foreigners	4.31	0.59
Refine skills to communicate with both Vietnamese and foreigners	4.27	0.58
Improve skills of working with foreign business partners	4.24	0.72
Improve my interview skills	4.21	0.65
Gain skills to work for other sectors which I am interested in	4.21	0.64
Work effectively in my working environment	4.12	0.70
Develop presentation and public speaking skills	4.12	0.58
Make friends easily with many people	4.07	0.70
Develop my intercultural competence	4.07	0.64

## 5.6 Discussion

The study reported in this chapter aimed to answer the research question “*To what extent does English language education contribute to developing Vietnamese students' human capital?*” We found that English has a great contribution to enhancing students' English language knowledge and skills as well as their knowledge and skills of related domains. In other words, English language education can contribute to developing students' human capital in general, not just their English language competence.

Human capital is defined as the knowledge and skills which are acquired by graduates and become a foundation of their labor market outcomes ((Bhopal, 2020; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Burke & Hughes, 2018; Judge et al., 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Odden, 2011; Speer, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Findings in the current study reveal that English contributes to the participants' human capital development in two ways. On the one hand, English broadens the students' and alumni's knowledge because there are more materials and up-to-date documents in the English language than in their mother tongue. In fact, the respondents have been provided with not only larger quantity but also better quality (i.e., richness and diversity) of materials. Therefore, English broadens the participants' knowledge about not only their professional field but also other related fields or the fields they are interested in. The participants have accumulated and improved their knowledge via different activities such as searching for information or reading materials that the participants have done with their English competence. In fact, the findings are consistent with what Crystal (2003) and Lien et al. (2015) have claimed about the fact that English creates better chances to obtain high-quality education via updating their knowledge thanks to different sources. The participants in the current study have better access to resources because English is the most popular language used in articles from 65 countries/territories (Han & Ho, 2011) and approximately 80% of all published articles indexed in Scopus are written in English (Van Weijen, 2012).



Second, English helps the participants in the current study develop three main groups of skills namely communication skills, work-related skills, and people skills. Recent literature suggests that communication skills are the most important skills that employers are looking for (Stewart et al., 2016). This study revealed that studying English not only improves students' ability to communicate in English but also in their mother tongues. In addition, English also helps to develop graduates' work-related skills such as skills of working with foreign business partners, interviewing, working for other sectors of interest, and working effectively in one's own working environment. Indeed, having the capacity to learn these skills could be considered necessary to achieve job success (Burke & Hughes, 2018; Molseed et al., 2003; Brooks & Youngson, 2016). Therefore, those who have better English proficiency are likely to gain more success than the others in the current study. Regarding people skills (i.e., presentation and public speaking skills, friend-making skills, and intercultural competence), Borghans et al. (2014) propose that people skills are important determinants of labor-market outcomes, including occupational choice and wages. Thus, employees with good English competence will have more options for the jobs they will do as well as the salaries they want to gain. In short, English has helped the participants in the current study develop their communication skills, work-related skills, and people skills. These are important for students' employability since English has become the common corporate language of communication in many companies and enterprises (Neeley, 2012; Warschauer, 2000); international organizations and companies worldwide (Arthur et al., 2005; Bui & Intaraprasert, 2013; Crystal, 2012; Doan & Hamid, 2021; Hall, 2004; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

The findings from this study suggest that learning English not only contributes to the participants' English language knowledge and skills but also enables them to develop knowledge and skills in other areas. These are important indicators that learning English strengthens the development of their human capital. Therefore, English programs provided in Vietnamese universities should not be restricted within equipping the learners with the knowledge and skills of the English language itself, but should adopt a content and language integrated learning approach (CLIL) where English knowledge and skills are learned together with knowledge and skills of other content areas (Cenoz et al., 2014; Coyle, 2007; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). This approach will motivate learners because they can realize the practical use of learning English, and accordingly, better prepare themselves for their future career and employability. However, it should be noted that the current study is limited to only 200 participants from only one university and the two disciplines of Information Technology and Tourism. Therefore, a survey on a larger scale with more students and alumni of diverse disciplines and from various universities in Vietnam will provide more rigorous data for more statistical analyses. Furthermore, a random sampling technique instead of convenient sampling one should be used. This will result in a better generalizability of the study findings.

## 5.7 Conclusions

The interviews with 16 student respondents and the survey of 200 students/graduates of Tourism and Information Technology reveal the roles of English in helping them improve their professional knowledge and knowledge of related areas as well as develop their communication, work-related and people skills. These contributions vary from helping students search for information, improving their discipline-specific knowledge, providing them with in-depth knowledge of their interest to developing their communication skills, skills of working with foreign business partners, interviewing, working for other sectors of interest, presentation and public speaking skills, networking skills, and intercultural competence. These are important human capitals for students to be better equipped for their future and the world of work. Therefore, English language education in Vietnam should also be invested more in terms of efforts of all the key stakeholders such as school authorities, English teachers, and students. As mentioned earlier, Vietnam has already formulated policy to improve English proficiency for its citizens. However, the policy implementation process needs the careful surveillance of the authorities, the teachers' enthusiasm in helping students learn the language, and students' awareness of the importance of English language for their future employability so that they can invest more time and efforts on their own English language education not only during their university time but also in their life-long learning process.

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# Chapter 6

## English Language Education and Students' Development of Social Capital



Phuong Quyen Vo and Hoang Yen Phuong

**Abstract** Social capital—social relationships and networks—has become a key resource accumulated with other forms of capital to enhance graduate employability. However, the connection between students' employment prospects and social capital is still vague in English language education. Thus, this chapter reports a mixed-method case study to fill the missing literature on how different forms of English language education can contribute to fostering the development of social relationships for students and enhancing their employability beyond graduation. Data were collected from 15 interviews and 319 responses to a survey with undergraduates and graduates of Information Technology and Tourism Management in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. The results showed that the formal English education was perceived as the most popular form of students' participation, but the non-formal and informal English education were identified as the more dominant in terms of developing social relationships for students. Social relationships established from English learning activities outside the formal system were perceived to contribute to graduate employability more than that of the formal one. The study implied that the formal English language education should consider integrated work-related activities into the curriculum to better develop social capital for students.

**Keywords** Social capital · Graduate employability · English language education · Higher education · Case study

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## 6.1 Introduction

In recent years, the unemployment rates among university graduates have been regarded as an increased concern by the higher education systems all over the world. To address this, worldwide higher education institutions have launched various measures to enhance graduate employability (Bennett, 2019; Clarke, 2017; Harvey, 2000; Rosenberg et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2017; World Bank, 2012). One of the most supportive approaches to graduate employability is to boost graduate employability capitals (Clark, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). As a vital component of graduate capitals, the development of social capital has also been considered as an effective contributor to graduate employability. Tomlinson (2017, p. 342) argues that social capital is considered as “the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates’ existing human capital and bring them closer to the labour market and its opportunity structures” and it can “shape and facilitate graduates’ access and awareness of labour market opportunities and then being able to exploit them”. This implies that the larger graduates’ network with influential members is, the more information about prospective occupations they would be able to access and the higher chances they receive to secure their preferred employment (Fugate et al., 2004). Social class and the reputation of university programs are discussed as another enabler for employment outcomes (Clarke, 2017). Social relationships can be deemed as one of the most influential determinants for graduates to successfully secure their good employment opportunities (Tran, 2018a). For the above-mentioned reasons, the development of social capital in higher education with regard to social relationships and networks is likely to boost graduate employability, and then the extent to which these ties of social actors obtained by students may enable their employment prospects.

Studies in different contexts have addressed English language proficiency as an important aspect of employability in terms of the relationships between English language competence, social capital, and career opportunities (Bui et al., 2017, 2018; Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Hamid, 2015; Hamzah et al., 2015; Jayasingha & Suraweera, 2020; Pishghadam et al., 2011; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013). As implied by Roshid and Chowdhury (2013) in the Australian market, employees’ proficiency in English enables them to not only advance their professional enhancement in local and international companies but also improve their technical knowledge and skills. In another context of South Asia, Jayasingha and Suraweera’s (2020) study with the case of students at the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka found that there was a significant relationship between the two independent variables of students’ English proficiency and employability (Pearson correlation coefficient:  $p = 0.940$ ). A study by Bui et al. (2017) in Vietnam revealed that the limitation of students’ performance in English language could hinder their access to employment knowledge. Even though English language has emerged as the top foreign language in Vietnam, learners’ low level of English proficiency has become a topic of both debate and concern (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Bui, et al., 2017, 2018; Canh, 1999; Huy Thinh, 2006; Loc, 2005). One debate related to English learners’ proficiency is their low employment prospects since



limited English language proficiency restricts them from seeking jobs advertised in English (Bui, et al., 2017). Though social capital has been identified as one of the vital contributors to job prospects in terms of social relationships and networks (Bui, et al., 2017; Hamzah et al., 2015), research has paid limited attention to how English language education contributes to the development of students' social capital. Therefore, this chapter reports a two-phased study that investigated students' experience of how formal, non-formal, and informal English language education contributes to establishing their social relationships, from which their employment opportunities can be obtained. Overall, the study provided insights into how informal and non-formal English learning activities allowed students to forge relationships with people, compared with the formal English language education at the universities. The findings further depicted how these social relationships enable students to identify employment opportunities and sometimes a point of reference for their work. Some implications for formal English language education in the context of higher education were discussed to help extend students' social capital for their future employability.

This chapter is set out as follows. This introduction is followed by a literature review on social capital in education, social capital development and graduate employability, and social capital development in English language education. This is then followed by a description of the present study with the study context, research question and approach, and data collection and analysis. Next, the findings and discussion are presented. Finally, the conclusions are drawn together with practical and theoretical implications.

## 6.2 Literature Review

### 6.2.1 *What is Social Capital?*

The concept of social capital in education has been defined in different ways with the common focus on social relations for productive outcomes among individuals and group members. As defined by Bourdieu (1986, p. 248), social capital refers to “the sum of the actual or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—in other words, to membership in a group”. The author emphasizes the importance of social network in terms of the opportunities and advantages which are available to members from group membership, and thus social capital is a vital resource for individuals. Coleman (1990, p. 302) defines social capital as an “aspect of a social structure, and it facilitates certain actions of individuals who are within that structure”. To clarify this, Coleman identifies three forms of social capital: reciprocity, information channels and flow of information, and norms enforced by sanction. Social capital is developed through combined actions of group members, and it is thus a public good because of its focus on the relationships among group members

(ibid.). Putnam (1993, p. 167) defines social capital as “features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”. In this regard, social capital (Putnam, 2000, p. 18) refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. This implies the value of social networks and the effects of social contacts on the productivity of both individuals and groups. These authors clarify general forms and functions of how social capital can be constructed. Sharing this concern, the education system can constitute students’ social capital development through bridging ties and new social networks (Tonkaboni et al., 2013; Zaker Salehi, 2008). Therefore, educational institutions can be deemed as one of the most significant contributors to enhancing social capital for graduates to meet social demands (Tavassoli, 2005).

### ***6.2.2 Social Capital Development and Graduate Employability***

There has been growing recognition of social capital as a vital component of graduate employability capitals (Clarke, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004; Peeters et al., 2017; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). Social capital can be seen as a capital derived from work- and career-related networks and relationships, so it can provide information about and access to job opportunities (Peeters, et al., 2017; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). As mentioned by Clarke (2017) and Fugate et al. (2004), extensive and strong social networks could connect graduates to employment opportunities and strengthen graduates’ job applications. Tomlinson (2017, p. 342) clarifies the relationship between social capital and graduate employability that “the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates’ existing human capital and bring them closer to the labour market and its opportunity structures”. The author then emphasizes the vital role of social capital in shaping, facilitating “graduates’ access and awareness of labour market opportunities”. Particularly, based on the views of social capital by Bourdieu (1986) and Putnam (1993), Tomlinson (2017) mentions that social capital can be seen as the resource that individuals have access to as a result of their membership or connections to particular groups, so their participation in higher education contexts will enable them to develop the necessary “bridging ties” with other key social actors (p. 342). This implies that the graduate employability can also be enhanced through the communication with teachers, alumni, professional talent from the industry, family, and friends (Chen, 2017). Therefore, graduates’ employment opportunities can be obtained not only from classroom instruction or practice process, community activities, as well as communication with family and friends, but also from guidance on the information of employment and occupation planning, enabling graduates to acquire employability.

In order to promote social capital development for graduate employability, various forms have been proposed. One significant way affecting graduate employability

acquisition is learning from social networking (Batistic & Tymon, 2017; Chen, 2017; Kempster & Cope, 2010; Tonkaboni, 2013). In particular, with the help of networking behavior, individuals build relationships to form personal networks as another vital component in bigger social networks such as classes and communities, providing access to career management resources for the employment enhancement (Batistic & Tymon, 2017). As indicated by Tonkaboni (2013), social networks in school environments can further have significant influences on students' exposure to job opportunities, helping them access and share information with schools, local interconnected networks, and external networks. Another way to develop graduate employability is through extracurricular experiences (Chen, 2017; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). As clarified by Roulin and Bangerter (2013) and Tchibozo (2008), university graduates who experience more extracurricular activities can find jobs corresponding to their qualifications and access larger firms and more managerial positions after graduation more easily than their counterparts who do not participate in such activities. Another form of social capital construction is employment engagement. Tomlinson (2017) argues that direct contacts with employers via career fairs or online profile constructing can be considered to make graduates more visible to their potential employers and accessible to their preferred occupations. As a common form of employer engagement, the internships are seen as one of the most effective bridges between universities and employers, from which school leavers' work experience and knowledge can be enriched (Bui et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Online communities are another important contributor to the development of students' social capital (Alm, 2015; Raza et al., 2017; Wagner, 2014). Furthermore, online communities are argued to easily enhance members' social capital development thanks to their fluidity, which provides flexible social structures with continuous changes for group members to maximize their interactions (Faraj et al., 2011). This can facilitate more social relationships between students and their potential employers of large organizations (Steinfeld et al., 2013).

### ***6.2.3 Social Capital Development in English Language Education***

When it comes to the development of social capital in the field of English language education, there has been limited evidence clarifying how various forms of English language education can enhance students' social networks and relationships to support their future employability. Only few aspects of social capital in terms of bridging ties to social actors have been implicitly or explicitly addressed. On the one hand, social capital is discussed to enhance language achievement of students who learn English as a foreign language (Hamzah, et al., 2015; Pishghadam, et al., 2011). As explained by Pishghadam et al. (2011), social capital is matched with students' academic records in language proficiency courses namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. Particularly, social solidarity is seen as a

linker to predicting listening in a foreign language, or students who establish stronger connections with other people in the society are more successful in the listening skill (ibid.). This is similar to what Hamzah et al. (2015) found in terms of a significant effect of social capital outside family toward students' academic achievements. On the other hand, learning English is considered as an important factor contributing to students' network development in terms of bringing students closer to communities for their personal and professional growth (Vu & Do, 2021). Although the relationships between social capital and English language proficiency have been proved, these studies did not indicate how social connections are related to different forms of English language learning and vice versa. The connection between social connections and students' employment possibilities and attributes to social capital was not clearly determined.

Studies also discuss the relationship between English language and students' employment opportunities (Bui, et al., 2017, 2018; Jayasingha & Suraweera, 2020; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013; Vu & Do, 2021). In a study with Bangladeshi participants living in Melbourne, Roshid and Chowdhury (2013) found that English language was important not only for getting a job but also for being promoted in a job. Additionally, in order to gain higher possibilities of secure and better jobs, the authors emphasize the important role of English language in social interactions and social network development as an active determinant in enhancing job prospects among migrant communities. To investigate factors affecting graduate employability, Jayasingha and Suraweera's (2020) case study using the self-administered questionnaire with 120 students at the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka found a positive impact of English proficiency on graduate employability with very high Pearson correlation coefficient ( $p = 0.940$ ). The study further revealed that graduates found challenges with their job seeking and performance due to their difficulties with English language. This study thus implied that university management should consider appropriate English teaching methods to address this concern. A study by Bui et al. (2017) examining the perceptions of 617 university students and 06 lecturers in North Vietnam of English language as an employability skill found that students felt uncertain with seeking jobs with English requirement. This study thus highlighted the important role of universities regarding employers' network development for students' job-related possibilities. In the same context, Vu and Do's (2021) study which investigated 194 students' experience in capital development from their English language learning in Vietnamese higher education highlighted a connection between language learning and social capital. This study indicated learning English as an optimal means for increasing students' job opportunities, but the types of students' networks to promote job opportunities were not clearly revealed. Although these studies did not particularly indicate the vital role of establishing social relationships for students' career prospects, it is recommended that universities should foster a collaborative, sustainable, and supportive relationships with employers in fields related to students' majors as an effective preparation step for students to be employed in their desired careers.

In summary, although the relationships between social capital and English language proficiency have been identified in the literature, no apparent evidence has

been traced in terms of how different forms of English language learning can boost students' social network and relationships and how these social relationships and networks are likely to enhance students' future job possibilities. The study reported in this chapter will address this gap in the scholarly literature.

## 6.3 The Present Study

### 6.3.1 *Context of the Study*

The recognition of English language education in the general education curriculum has been discussed by earlier studies (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Le & Do, 2012; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2012, 2017). It is officially emphasized in the Prime Minister's Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg dated on September 30, 2008, launching a twelve-year project, called "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in National Education System, Period 2008–2020", or referred to as "Project 2020" to respond to Vietnam's aspiration for integration into the global economy. According to this Decision, a foreign language as one of the compulsory subjects in the formal educational system would begin to be introduced at primary schools and be continued up to high schools, colleges, and universities. This Decision indicates that by the year 2020, most Vietnamese graduates from vocational schools, colleges, and universities are expected to achieve the capacity to use a foreign language independently. This goal considers foreign language proficiency as an advantage for the Vietnamese people contributing to the objective of industrialization and modernization for the country. The objective of this project is also to prepare English language skills for Vietnamese young people for national employability as well as regional job opportunities in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) integration (Prime Minister, 2008). Among foreign languages such as Russian, Chinese, and French, English has been mostly chosen as the main foreign language subject (Nguyen, 2012, 2017). This refers English subject as a form of formal language education as it is integrated in "an organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms" (Dib, 1988, p. 300) and learning English is achieved by following "a programme of instruction in an educational institution" with recognized qualifications (OECD, 2005, p. 5).

English language education outside the formal system in Vietnam has also been growing significantly. Various English language centers have been established with different forms of investment (Huong, 2010; Tran, 2018b) in terms of foreign and joint venture language schools, language centers of universities, government agencies, socio-economic organizations, and private enterprises. Learning English in this environment is referred to a non-formal form as it is performed separately from the structured system to address learners' intention of specific goals achievement (La Belle, 1982) without formal qualifications (OECD, 2005). Additionally, the option for learning English on the Internet or social network sites is another common type

to enhance English learners' practice on skills of target language and the enhancement of their social interactions (Giang & Van Tuan, 2018; Phuong & Vo, 2018). This type refers to informal English learning activities which are outside of organized education to help learners' knowledge and skills accumulated from everyday activities (La Belle, 1982) which are referred to unintentional learning without qualifications (OECD, 2005). These non-formal and informal English education forms have contributed to offering different options to meet huge demands of English learners of various types and improving the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam to meet the increasing trends of globalization and international interdependency (Van Van, 2010; Phuong & Vo, 2018). However, the question of which forms of English language education contributing to learners' social relationships development regarding their future access to labor market opportunities has remained under-researched.

At the time of data collection, there are 35 colleges and 17 universities in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam, both public ( $n = 12$ ) and private ( $n = 05$ ) institutions. These universities follow the national curriculum framework structured by the Ministry of Education and Training. Of the indicated foreign languages, English is opted as the most preferred language by most universities and colleges in this region. A study by Phuong (2017) in this context revealed that 81.9% student participants agreed learning English as the most important reason to prepare them for their future jobs. The study also indicated the limitation of receiving English language courses resulted in students' options for learning English independently and joining foreign language centers to gain their proficiency in English language. Apparently, English language proficiency (ELP) is revealed as an important connector to graduates' job opportunities and various forms of English language education have drawn students' attention for their language improvement. However, the issues of how students' participation in different types of English learning is likely to enhance students' ELP for their employment prospects have not been investigated.

The selected university for this study is based on four following reasons. First, it is one of the most important state higher education institution in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam which is considered as the regional center of cultural, scientific, and technical development. Second, it has become a member of ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) with several undergraduate study programs of Science and Technology which are accredited and recognized to meet the AUN-QA. Third, it has been considered as an important implementation partner of the Vietnamese government's Project 2020 to satisfy the qualified human resource and integrate into regional and global labor markets. Finally, no research on how different forms of English language education contributing to social relationships development for employment prospects based on students' experience had been done in the past.

Therefore, the context above suggests that the perceptions of English language learners of how English language education, formal, non-formal, and informal can contribute to establishing their social relationships connected to employability possibilities can serve as an important gap to be explored. Results from this study can contribute to the implications for English language education and its learners' social capital development.

### **6.3.2 Research Question and Approach**

The objective of the current study is to investigate (1) how English learning activities from formal, non-formal, and informal programs allow students to forge relationships with people, compared with the formal English education at the universities, and (2) how these social networks can help them identify employment opportunities and work references. Therefore, two following research questions are addressed:

1. *In what way does English education contribute to establishing students' social relationships and networks?*
2. *In what way do these students' social relationships and networks established from English learning activities contribute to their graduate employability?*

The study used a case study with mixed-method sequential exploratory design, which started from qualitative data collection through interviews, followed by quantitative data gathering through a questionnaire (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Case study was chosen because it allows the researchers to investigate an issue in depth and within its real context (Yin, 2014). Thus, a case study approach was relevant for this study as the development of social capital in English language education is a contemporary phenomenon in a real context of one university in the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam. Mixed method was employed as this approach can “give a richer and more reliable understanding of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 32). To gain insights into students' experience of social capital development from their English language learning, semi-structured interviews were conducted before designing the questionnaire to get English language learners' general views of developing social relationships and networks so as to increase job-related chances.

### **6.3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection involved two phases. In the first phase, we interviewed 15 participants (ten undergraduates and five graduates) to explore their perceptions of two aspects: (1) how English education established their social relationships, and (2) how their graduate employability could be developed based on their relationships established from English language education. These participants were identified and selected using purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) after their approval for voluntary participation. The interviews are the best way to find out what other people think in mind, provide important insights, and identify other sources of evidence (Burns, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews in approximately 15 min were utilized for each participant. The interviews were recorded, and notes were taken at the same time. The findings were analyzed using a content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The interview data were coded and then themed. By the end of this phase, the findings revealed three forms of



English language education with nine items (Table 6.3) that students participated, the perceived social relationships established from the identified forms of English education with 15 items (Table 6.5), and the perceived contributions of existing social relationships to their graduate employability prospects with first eight items (Table 6.6).

Among 15 first-phase participants, 73.34% of them majored in Information Technology and 26.66% of them in Tourism Management. These two fields of study were chosen as for their specific roles at the university being investigated. Information Technology is one of the undergraduate programs which attracts the highest number of students annually and was certified to meet the AUN-QA in this study context. Meanwhile, Tourism Management is considered as one of the undergraduate programs which is central to the human resources development for the tourism of the Mekong region with various networking activities with companies and employers. Most of the participants (66%) were undergraduates whose ages ranged between 18 and 22. The information of these interviewees is detailed in Table 6.1.

In the second phase, a paper-based and online survey were developed. The snowball sampling technique (Merriam, 2009) was used in this phase. Based on the responses of 15 participants in the first phase and the reviewed literature, the questions were constructed. The questionnaire included the following parts:

- (1) demographic information;
- (2) forms of English education that students participated, with which they were asked to indicate English language forms that they had involved;
- (3) the forms of English education activities that established the participants' social relationships and their perceived social relationships based on the English education forms that contributed to their graduate employability, with which they were asked to rate on the 5-point Likert scale (in which 1 = Completely disagree and 5 = Completely agree);
- (4) the possible social relationships that the participants could establish from English language forms, with which they were asked to indicate the social relationships that were appropriate for them; and

**Table 6.1** Details of the interviewees

		Information technology	Tourism management	Total
Gender	Male	5	2	7
	Female	6	2	8
Status	Undergraduates	8	3	10
	Graduates	3	2	5
Age	18–22	8	2	10
	23–30	2	1	3
	>30	1	1	2



(5) the employability prospects developed from English learning activities, with which the participants were asked to choose all options that were correct for their employment enhancement.

In total, 29 items were identified to clarify the way English language education contributes to social capital development:

- 15 items indicating how English language education contributes to establishing students' social relationships
- 14 items indicating how students' social relationships established from English learning activities contribute to their graduate employability

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. Demographical data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. In total, 319 responses were recorded in the second phase. More than a half of participants were male (57%). Regarding their programs of study, 58.62% of them majored in Information Technology, 41.37% of them majored in Tourism Management. Most participants were undergraduates (95.61%). Regarding their age groups, 99.22% were between 18 and 22. In terms of their self-evaluated English proficiency, 53.91% of the participants revealed that they were at the level of basic communication, while 25.07% rated their English at the low proficient level. Only four participants (1.25%) indicated that their English level was excellent. At the time this study was conducted, fourteen participants (4.38%) had completed their programs and begun their current work. Details of the participants were shown in Table 6.2.

The researchers then used frequencies, percentage, and the Likert scale to determine the forms of English education that students participated, the forms of English

**Table 6.2** Details of the survey participants

		Information technology	Tourism management	Total
Gender	Male	121	61	182
	Female	66	71	137
Status	Undergraduates	177	128	305
	Graduates	10	4	14
Age	18–22	174	131	291
	23–30	15	1	16
	>30	11	1	12
Self-evaluated English proficiency	Excellent	4	0	4
	Very good	7	2	9
	Good	43	11	54
	Basic communication	107	65	172
	Low	33	47	80

education and the development of social relationships, and the perceived contributions of existing social relationships to graduate employability. With gathered information and analyzed data, the researchers combined with the interview findings in the first phase as the key information and explanation about the results.

## 6.4 Findings and Discussion

### 6.4.1 *Forms of English Education that Student Participated*

The data revealed three types of English learning education, namely formal education, non-formal education and informal education that students had participated. In terms of English formal education, nine interviewees stated that they firstly involved in learning English delivered in their general education program at the primary, secondary, or high schools. Eleven interviewees mentioned their English learning participation from English courses required in their university programs. A specific explanation is:

I learnt English courses during ten years of general education and English courses in my university program. [Interviewee 13]

The interviewees mentioned different forms of non-formal English education they have undertaken. Fourteen interviewees participated in English language centers at the same time learning English from their school formal programs. The interviewees explained:

I joined evening classes at a language centre of a university and completed with a certificate. [Interview 3]

Together with learning English at the university, I attended a class to get a TOEIC certificate at a language centre. [Interview 5]

In terms of informal English education, eight interviewees revealed that they learned English by participating in English clubs, work-related activities, and social activities. Two examples of their explanations are:

I also involved in an extracurricular English course organised by an English club in Ninh Kieu. [Interviewee 6]

When I joined the trial work period, my company organised some activities for staff practising English and learning how to communicate in English. [Interviewee 9]

Eight of them joined online English learning from the Internet sites especially YouTube. Only one interviewee mentioned Facebook as another e-channel supporting her with learning English from people working in the same field. The interviewees explained:

Beside learning English at the language center, I also spent time learning English on the Internet online websites. [Interviewee 14]

I often learn English on some YouTube clips of teaching English. One program is “I am a native speaker” which helps to correct mistakes for Vietnamese. [Interviewee 8]

Together with learning English in the university program, I also learn English via Facebook groups. [Interview 2]

Descriptive analyses of quantitative data (Table 6.3) showed that the responses to the participation in the formal English education almost doubled that of the non-formal and informal English education. Among nine sub-forms of English language education, learning English from “general education” (93.4%) and “university education” (84.9%) appeared to be the most popular for the survey participants. Other next popular forms outside the formal English education system included learning at “English language centers” (63.3%) and on “Facebook groups” (61.8%). Out of 319, 97 (30.4%) students participated in “English websites”, followed by the same number of 71 (22.3%) students learning English from “online learning programs” and “work-related activities”. However, the participation in “English clubs” (13.2%) and “social activities” (11.0%) was reported as the least popular forms of informal English learning activities.

The findings revealed that learning English from the formal education system was the most popular form compared to the other two forms (non-formal and in-formal English language learning). This resonates with the reality that English language is taught as a compulsory subject in the formal educational system, as mentioned by earlier studies (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Le & Do, 2012; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2012, 2017). The findings also echo those of earlier studies in terms of the popularity of other English learning forms outside the formal education system that most English learners in this context can involve, particularly English language centers (Van Van, 2010; Phuong, 2017; Tran, 2018a, 2018b), or online English learning websites and learning English from social networks on the Internet (Giang & Van Tuan, 2018; Phuong & Vo, 2018).

**Table 6.3** Forms of English education that students participated

Forms	Sub-forms	Frequency	Percentage
Formal English education	General education (Primary, Secondary, High school)	298	93.4
	University education (Basic English, English for major)	271	84.9
Non-formal English education	English language centers	202	63.3
	Online learning programs	71	22.3
Informal English education	Facebook groups	197	61.8
	English websites	97	30.4
	Work-related activities	71	22.3
	English clubs	42	13.2
	Social activities (voluntary programs, summer camping, charity programs)	35	11.0

### ***6.4.2 Forms of English Education and the Development of Social Relationships***

Data collected from the first phase showed that 14 out of 15 interviewed students confirmed that they could establish their social relationships from three forms of English education in terms of relationships with different people that they contacted from English language forms. The most common social relationship is with classmates and teachers and the most perceived social relationship development was developed from non-formal English education. In terms of formal English education, four students mentioned learning English at school could help them make friends with classmates and teachers. Meanwhile, eight interviewees revealed various relationships could be established from English learning outside the formal English programs, including making friends with classmates at the language centers, establishing good relationships with teachers at the language centers, widening relationships with lots of people working in different fields. Regarding informal English learning activities, five interviewees mentioned that their social relationships were developed with foreigners who were English teachers on YouTube or online English learning websites, experts working and studying in the same fields, and people joining English clubs or social activities clubs.

As revealed from the descriptive data analyses of the second phase, different social relationships established from three forms of English education were more clearly identified. Both formal and non-formal English education were perceived as the most popular forms establishing social relationships, especially with people of the same or different programs accounting from 75 to 85% respectively. The second most common type of social relationships was with people of the same hobbies (72.4%), developed from informal English education. The third common social relationship was with working people, developed from non-English education (65.2%) and informal English education (62.7%). Out of 319 participants, 193 (60.5%) reported establishing social relationships with their teachers in formal English education whose counterparts recorded no responses. Despite recorded with fewer responses, both non-formal (41.1%) and informal (39.5%) types of English education were indicated as other forms to develop students' social relationships, particularly with foreign people. Insignificantly, out of 319, only 82 (25.7%) reported their social relationships established with employers from non-formal and informal English education forms. Details of the development of social relationships from different forms of English language education are described in Table 6.4.

Descriptive data analyses also showed students' comparison among three forms of English education in establishing social relationships. The data (Table 6.5) indicated that learning English from non-formal (85.6%) and informal English (80.8%) forms were more agreed than that of the formal one (65.4%) in developing social relationships. Nearly a quarter (24.8%) responded uncertainly to developing social relationships from learning English from formal English program, compared to that from the other two forms.

**Table 6.4** English language education and the development of social relationships

English education forms	Social relationships	Frequency	Percentage
Formal English education	1. Classmates (of the same class, of the same program)	265	68.3
	2. Classmates (of the different program)	218	83.1
	3. Instructors/Teachers	193	60.5
	4. Others	8	2.5
Non-formal English education	1. Students (of other programs)	272	85.3
	2. Working people	208	65.2
	3. Foreign friends	131	41.1
	4. Employers	82	25.7
	5. Others	9	2.8
Informal English education	1. People with the same hobbies	231	72.4
	2. People working in the same field	200	62.7
	3. Foreign friends	126	39.5
	4. Employers	82	25.7
	5. Foreign partners	42	13.7
	6. Others	20	6.3

**Table 6.5** Forms of English education and the development of social relationships

Items	Completely disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Completely agree (%)
Learning English from formal English program enables my social relationship development	1.3	8.5	24.8	53.9	11.5
Learning English from non-formal programs enables my social relationship development	0.6	1.9	11.9	64.3	21.3
Learning English from informal programs enables my social relationship development	0.3	1.3	17.6	58.6	22.2

Out of 319, 164 participants (51.4%) reported that the non-formal English form was the most important contributor to developing their social relationships, compared to 30.4% and 18.2% of responses to that of the formal English programs and informal English education.

The findings of the first phase are consistent with those of the second phase in terms of more social relationships developed from learning English outside the formal

system. For example, three out of 15 interviewees mentioned they had more friends when they learned English at language centers or joined extracurricular activities thanks to their English communication skill. One revealed his social relationships with foreign experts in the field of information technology.

Compared to learning English in university program, learning English at language center boosted my communication to connect with lots of friends and other relationships. [Interviewee 2]

Learning English outside the university could help me establish more relationships with those working in the field of information technology especially foreign experts. [Interviewee 4]

The current study identified the development of social relationships from different forms of English education regarding the relationship establishment with various types of people and the comparison of which English education form established most relationships. The findings are in line with Chen's (2017) clarification of potential social relationships for students' future employment prospects employability established from formal education programs, particularly with teachers, professional experts, and friends who can be a great link to graduates' employment prospects. In terms of the connection between social relationships and informal English education, the findings correspond to the views of previous authors (Batistic & Tymon, 2017; Kempster & Cope, 2010; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Tonkaboni, 2013) in relation to extracurricular experiences as the most useful means of social relationship development for employment engagement. The findings support previous studies in English language education in terms of strengthening social relationships thanks to communicative skills in English mentioned by Hamzah et al. (2015) and Pishghadam et al. (2011). The findings refer social capital as public good (Coleman, 1990) in terms of establishing the relationships among individuals in a social structure. However, the findings provided unclear specific English language learning activities for social relationships development. Additionally, this study provides unique findings that although formal English education could be reported as the most popular form in which students in this context participated, non-formal and informal English education forms were perceived as the most important contributor to establishing social relationships.

#### ***6.4.3 Perceived Contributions of Existing Social Relationships to Graduate Employability***

In the first phase, only three out of 15 interviewed students perceived the contribution of existing social relationships from both non-formal and informal English language learning to graduate prospects in terms of job information exchange or supply, and promotion enhancement.

Learning English from a short course enhanced my relationships with many people whom I can exchange job information and helped my job promotion later. [Interviewee 14]

Learning English with friends outside the class could enhance my relationships...After graduation, these friends would be able to share job information with me. [Interviewee 12]

The qualitative data further showed that eight out of 15 interviewed students perceived there was a connection between learning English and their graduate employability in terms of improving knowledge of related work, passing job interviews, or enlarging foreign customers' networks. However, the contributions of such social relationships to graduate employability from which form of English education was unclearly identified.

As indicated in the data of the second phase (Table 6.6), as many as 62.7% to 72.4% of 319 participants reported that existing social relationships gained from three forms of English education could contribute to their job opportunities. Among three forms of English education, informal English learning activities (72.4%) were more agreed than the other two forms. However, a quarter of 319 participants showed their feeling of uncertainty about the correlation between their job opportunities established from existing social relationships, with more uncertain responses to the formal English education form (26.3%).

Descriptive data analyses of the second phase (Table 6.7) clearly showed the enhancement of employment possibilities from existing social relationships in terms of improving communicative skill, updating job information, improving job experience, and gaining job promotion. Among the 319 participants, 286 (89.6%) reported social relationships developed from learning English could enhance their communicative skill in English. To access updated job information, 219 (68.6%) out of 319 participants reported social relationships established from English education could widen their knowledge of their favorite work and 133 (41.7%) could update recruitment information. To improve job experiences, establishing social relationships from English education enabled students to learn interview experience (59.6%), exchange professional knowledge with experienced working people (48.6%), connect with

**Table 6.6** Perceived contributions of existing social relationships to graduate employability

Items	Completely disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Completely Agree (%)
Social relationships gained from formal English education bring about my job opportunities	1.3	9.7	26.3	46.7	16.0
Social relationships gained from non-formal English education bring about my job opportunities	0.6	4.4	25.0	54.9	15.1
Social relationships gained from informal English education or extracurricular activities bring about my job opportunities	0.3	1.9	25.4	53.3	19.1

**Table 6.7** Employment enhancement possibilities from establishing social relationships

Social relationships from English education can help me...	Frequency	Percentage
Improve communicative skill in English	286	89.6
Widen knowledge of related work of interest	219	68.6
Learn interview experience	190	59.6
Exchange professional knowledge with those who have work experience	155	48.6
Update recruitment information	133	41.7
Obtain other promotion opportunities	130	40.8
Connect with people working in the same field from different countries	124	38.9
Understand potential customers' interests and demands	1	0.3

people in the same field of work (38.9%), as well as understand potential customers' interests and demands (0.3%). Out of 319, 130 (40.8%) reported the chance of obtaining their promotion from their social relationships.

The findings resonate with the studies by Roshid and Chowdhury (2013) and Jayasingha and Suraweera (2020) in terms of linking English communication skill to job prospect enhancement. This also reflects the vital role of teaching and learning English language for communication in the context of Vietnam to respond to opening Vietnamese door for the integration into the global economy (Nguyen, 2012, 2017) and international interdependency (Van Van, 2010). The findings also echo with earlier studies (Clarke, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004; Peeters et al., 2017; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Vu & Do, 2021) that social relationships can enhance future graduates' employability in terms of providing job information or strengthening graduates' job applications. However, the findings are not in line with Tomlinson's (2017) view about the correlation between employer engagement and graduate employability. Enhancing social relationships for future employability with those working in the same area was not highly concerned by the participants of this study.

## 6.5 Conclusion and Implications

The study investigates how English education has contributed to students' social capital development. Findings revealed that although the formal English language education was perceived as the most popular form of students' participation, the non-formal English programs were considered as the most significant contributor to constructing their social relationships, particularly the relationships with friends, teachers, and professional experts. Additionally, social relationships established from both non-formal and in-formal English education forms appeared to contribute to graduate employability than the formal one. Social relationships from these two forms of English language education helped students improve communicative



skills, update job information, improve job experience, and gain job promotion, which are considered as strong bridging ties with employment prospects.

Such findings have two important implications for future research on English language education and social capital development. First, English learning activities outside the formal system are considered as being critical in constructing most students' social relationships for their future employability. Therefore, content of subjects in the curriculum of the formal English education should be updated and adjusted in terms of more real-life practice activities such as work-related activities or virtual learning platforms. These channels enable students to gain more employment opportunities from different social relationships. Second, a framework of social capital development for English language education is highly recommended. This helps to identify clearer social relationships and networks for employability for English learners, and specific English learning activities to promote social capital development for graduate employability.

This case study explores social capital development from English language education from the experiences of students of two disciplines in one university, there are several factors which limit its findings. Future studies should replicate the study across different disciplines and university contexts. That would reveal various social relationships and networks established by English learners of different disciplines and possibilities of employment prospects from such social relationships. Further research should be undertaken to increase the number of graduates. That would produce deeper insights into job-related opportunities from social relationship development in English language education. Future studies are also recommended to examine other stakeholders such as lecturers', program developers', and employers' experiences on social capital development for students through various channels of English learning activities. This would give thorough understanding of building crucial bridges between formal education and graduates' employment opportunities.

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# Chapter 7

## The Development of Cultural Capital Through English Education and Its Contributions to Graduate Employability



Do Na Chi  and Ngoc Tung Vu 

**Abstract** Graduates' employability has been an important goal of education and requires further research to uncover how education can support employability. Particularly in this globalized and multicultural world, English language and cultural understanding are acknowledged as two primary factors for desirable career outcomes. This study, therefore, investigates the development of cultural capital through learning English language and how such cultural capital contributes to English language learners' employability. The study was guided by (Tomlinson, 2017) framework of graduate employability and employed semi-structured interviews with eleven participants from eight academic and professional disciplines. The findings revealed that cultural capital could be developed through the diversity of formal, non-formal, and informal forms of English language learning. The findings also indicated that cultural capital was evidently crucial in a way that it serves to develop human, social, psychological, and identity capital, all of which are components of graduate employability. Pedagogical implications and directions for future research are recommended for effective development of cultural capital in different forms of education (formal, informal, and non-formal) and for further exploration of cultural capital and employability in Vietnamese higher education.

**Keywords** Employability · English language · Cultural capital · Forms of education · Vietnamese higher education

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## 7.1 Introduction

Graduates' employability is one of the key factors that guide the policies and teaching and learning activities at higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Tran, 2019; Vu & Do, 2021; Vu et al., 2022; Vu, 2021a). Employability-related research has been conducted to inform policy-making and curriculum design to achieve that primary goal. To illustrate, studies have emphasized the academic knowledge and skills as critical drivers behind graduates' successful employability (Hofer et al., 2010; Tran, 2019; Yorke & Knight, 2006). Following this, innovative curriculum design and teaching methods have been continuously proposed to provide learners with necessary content knowledge and job-related skills that prepare them for desired professions, such as the emergence of English for Specific Purposes programs and work-integrated learning and assessment (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Belcher, 2006; Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). However, other research has pointed out that the package of content knowledge and job-related skills is insufficient to ensure graduates' employability (Moore & Morton, 2017; Ramadi et al., 2016; Tran, 2018). Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving have contributed significantly to graduates' employment outcomes and career development (Chowdhury & Miah, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Tran, 2019). As a result, many policies have encouraged higher education institutions to embed such soft skills in their curricula to enhance graduates' employability (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Tran, 2017). Yet, it appears that developing soft skills for students largely relies on the organization of non-formal learning, such as extracurricular activities (Barrie et al., 2009; Tran, 2017) or informal learning, such as pastimes via reading or watching movies or shows (OECD, 2005). Thus, for comprehensive support of learners' employability, soft skills must be paid more attention to in addition to academic competence (Pegg et al., 2012; Tran, 2019; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Recently, employability agendas in higher education have moved beyond the skills-based approach (Tran et al., 2020). Tomlinson (2017) expanded our understanding of employability by presenting a framework of graduate employability which consists of five forms of human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological capital. Capital is defined as "key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 339). Successful employability requires:

- relevant knowledge and skills for desired professions (human capital),
- social relationships and networks that are supportive of one's career development (social capital),
- adaptability of graduates to different professional events for effective performances (psychological capital),
- graduates' credibility and the investment that they need to make for employability (identity capital), and

- graduates' cultural understanding and dispositions to integrate themselves into different working environments with distinctive work cultures (cultural capital).

Out of five forms of capital, this framework points out that cultural capital is extremely useful for graduates to navigate and adapt to different work settings, which is meaningful in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. As a matter of fact, graduates in this globalization era are offered tremendous work opportunities in contexts involving multilingual and multicultural peers. It should be noted that the understanding of culture not only considers national or regional boundaries as Large Culture but also Small Culture that advocates one's socio-historical backgrounds and life experiences that form their cultural beliefs, ways of thinking and acting (Holliday, 2010). Therefore, multicultural workplaces involve not only people of national and geographical differences but also those of possible the same nation and region holding different beliefs and ways of behaviors.

Indeed, with the increasing globalization and internationalization, it is vital to equip students with cultural capital, helping them hit the ground running in an unfamiliar work environment. For this reason, English language education not only helps students develop the language skills but also understanding of cultures of English-speaking countries, which will make them stand out as job applicants for a position and competent employees in multilingual-multicultural organizations where English is the medium of communication. Therefore, English language skills are useful for working within a foreign-invested organization as English has been an international language of business. In many developing countries, such as Vietnam, such a task that aims to develop English language competences among current and prospective Vietnamese workers in support of their career prospects has been explicitly carried out. For example, English language education in the country has witnessed tremendous reforms in the past two decades. English language has gained its vital role in Vietnam since Doi Moi (Renovation) in 1986, attempting to escalate the socio-economic status of the country (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). This open-door policy establishes an increasing demand of English language for a variety of social aspects (e.g., economics, education, and foreign trade), which resulted in English being a compulsory subject in Vietnamese education system (Nguyen, 2005). English language teaching and learning has undergone remarkable reforms in the last decades: textbook writing, teachers' professional development, adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches, and establishing thresholds of English competence that students must achieve by graduation (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; MOET, 2008). To make Vietnamese graduates more competitive in the globalized job market, English language policies in Vietnam have shifted their emphasis on language skills to broader aspects of socio-cultural understanding (Albright, 2018; Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Le et al., 2019; Ngo, 2019). Unfortunately, until now there have been very few local and international studies investigating how learning English contributes to students' development of cultural capital (e.g., cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, and cultural dispositions) and how such cultural capital is linked to their employability in Vietnamese context. To help narrow these research gaps, this chapter will report on a qualitative study about the role of English learning, under formal, non-formal, and informal



forms, in developing cultural capital for learners, and how such capital contributes to their employability, as perceived by the learners.

## 7.2 Literature Review

### 7.2.1 *What is Culture?*

Technically, foreign language education is closely associated with teaching and learning the culture in which the language is used (Brown, 2014; Byram, 1997; Hjelm et al., 2019; Kim, 2020; Kramsch, 1998). However, defining what culture means is a challenging task. Although it has been researched in various disciplines, there appears not to achieve a consensus on a shared definition. Speaking about the complexity of culture, Weaver (1993) borrowed a theory of an iceberg to model a state-of-the-art perspective. If we examine culture as what can be seen, heard, and touched, as the upper part of the iceberg, culture is externally embodied. Meanwhile, the lower part of the iceberg is internally shown, which engages in human beings' motivation, beliefs, life-related values, ways of thought, and personal myth. Compared to the upper part which is thought to be objective and easy to change, the submerged part is seen as highly subjective and hard to change (Weaver, 1993).

In a similar vein, it is common to know that culture represents “membership in a discourse community that share[s] a common social space and history, and common imaginings” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 10). Liddicoat (2001) provided a new view on culture, classifying into static and dynamic culture. Static culture is culture to be unchanged and transmitted among generations, also believed to be homogenous among people in any certain settings. Culture in this form involves social structures, norms, and rules and is also known as *culture as high culture*, *culture as area studies*, and *culture as societal norms* (Liddicoat et al., 2003). However, dynamic culture, also known as *culture as practice* (Liddicoat et al., 2003), is socially constructed, depending on who is involved in communities where culture exists with particular regard to people's transforming knowledge, dispositions, and behaviors. When it comes to instruction and acquisition of cultural knowledge, it is acknowledged that the former can be instructed in a form of prioritizing factual transmission (Crawford & McLaren, 2003) or proving culture to be effective in teaching students practices with no effect from contexts. This contributes to students having more tendencies to acquire unnecessary cultural stereotypes and overgeneralizations. In contrast to the static view, the other view is meaningfully considered when learners can learn about cultural knowledge, cultural differences, and intercultural communicative competence, but they are viewed to be continuously changing in a given period of time and space availability (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat, 2005; Vu, 2021b).

## ***7.2.2 How Are Culture and Language Connected?***

It is widely agreed that “language does not function independently from the context in which it is used” (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 8), which is also supported by Atkinson (2002) and Crozet and Liddicoat (1999). This means that language learning can greatly benefit from, and positively be informed by, sufficient acquisition of cultural knowledge. In addition, Le and Chen (2018) advocate the relation between language and culture, stating that language education is “a political, social, and cultural activity” and learning a language needs “reference to the local socio-political and cultural environment” (p. 16). In light of the inseparability of language and culture, it is inadequate for English language learners, either as a second or foreign language, to develop the language skills with just a focus on linguistic knowledge itself. To promote effective communication among individuals from different cultural backgrounds, learners must possess cultural knowledge of the target language to address cultural misunderstanding and overcome challenges in cross-cultural communication. To facilitate this transformation, Kumaravadivelu (2008) highly recommends the inclusion of content knowledge related to culture in language classrooms to help learners “confront some of the taken-for-granted cultural beliefs about the Self and the Other” (p. 189). With that being said, cultural knowledge then can refer to the efforts to motivate students in considering and reflecting critically on multiple perspectives, which necessitates learners’ deep engagement with the contexts and partaking in the process of meaning making. In support of the connection between language and culture, Brown (2014) suggested fundamentals of “teach[ing] a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (p. 74) as part of the key principles of second language teaching and learning.

## ***7.2.3 Cultural Capital and Employability***

The theory of cultural capital, the most cited and originally developed by Bourdieu (1977), presents a mechanism which contributes to the transformation of social status of individuals. It is noted that cultural capital is interchangeable with social and economic capital and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1977), as the other two forms of capital that Bourdieu (1986) identified. Economic capital is contingent on a person’s wealth, and social capital totals his/her network-involved possessions to engage effectively in different settings, ranging from family, friend zones, educational institutions, living communities, and broader societies (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Similarly considered in other forms of capital, cultural capital is largely reliant on societies where it can be acquired or cultures in which dominants of social groups decide the formation of structures, rules, and practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital primarily involves individuals’ education credentials and related experience in enabling their advantages to accomplish certain social status in places where they live. Typically, cultural capital can be understood as cultural resources and assets

to be accumulated in one's life over the length of time. Bourdieu (1986) associated cultural capital with individuals' engagement in enriching knowledge, dispositions and behaviors, cultural belongings, and educationally acknowledged abilities. According to three influencing aspects as follows, cultural capital is examined based on incorporated or embodied, institutionalized, and objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1994, 1996).

Firstly, objectified cultural capital, as can be transferred with economic capital, is represented as people's property and legal ownership in different forms, to name some, such as artworks or scientific instruments. These so-called cultural goods can be transferred to monetary profits to be obtained in combination with personal powers. Secondly, incorporated cultural capital is comprehended as individual knowledge and skills which could be consumed over a long period of time and tends to be passed from past generations within similar social and cultural structures. Because incorporated cultural capital stays "in the form of schemata of perception and action, principles of vision and division, and mental structures" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 5), it involves one's verbal (linguistic expression) and non-verbal (body language) communication. Thus, cultural capital is potential to be developed by individuals' mastery of language, in other words, requiring one's continuous practice, adaptability, and cultural integration. Thirdly, institutionalized cultural capital is acquired through formal education based on either academic credentials or professional experience. With this regard, cultural capital is symbolized as worthwhile resources which can offer this capital's holders values which are legally recognized and constantly conventional.

Aligned with cultural capital which was theoretically developed by Bourdieu (1986, 1994), Tomlinson (2017) supported this form of capital as a fundamental part of graduates' employability. He argued that cultural capital involves "the formation of culturally valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviors that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 343). Consistent with Bourdieu's theory, Tomlinson (2017) added that cultural capital can be developed in two ways, of which graduates are required to acquire not only "added-value knowledge, tastes and achievements" but also "desired embodied behaviors and dispositions" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 344).

Cultural capital is crucial to developing other forms of employability capital. Being able to recognize cultural differences, graduates can develop human capital in which they acquire knowledge and reach out for the skills that they think are important (Tomlinson, 2017). Coupled with human capital which enables them to integrate into new cultural settings more conveniently, graduates can potentially facilitate psychological capital based on their increased sense of adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving. It is also suggested that cultural capital helps enhance "personal confidence and horizon scanning" in graduates (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 344), encourages them to keep reflecting on who they are (identity capital), and subsequently competently engage with diverse exposure to cultural experiences in both academic and professional settings (social capital). Through participation or engagement with diverse social exposure, individuals with cultural capital can broaden their social networks which may provide them with opportunities for desired professions.

Along with cultural capital, Bourdieu (1977) informs *linguistic capital* which facilitates language users to claim their legitimate membership of those target communities (Bourdieu, 1994). Among university/college graduates or future graduates, foreign language competence is highlighted in terms of cultural and social capital, which are most favored by employers. In this regard, however, foreign language competence does not necessarily guarantee individuals to successfully integrate into other fields. Coupled with intercultural communicative competence as a key driver in language teaching and learning (Byram, 1997; Vu, 2021a, 2021b), language users with little exposure to cultural experience through which they can gain adaptability may fail to integrate into new work conditions (Devine, 2009).

To wrap up, cultural capital is important for graduates' employability. However, how it is developed through English language learning and how it contributes to the development of graduates' employability need to be further explored to expand our understanding in these areas.

## 7.3 The Current Study

### 7.3.1 *Aims of the Chapter*

In Bourdieu's (1977) perspective and Tomlinson's (2017) framework of employability, cultural capital is one of the key factors supporting graduates' employability. However, the questions of how cultural capital is built during the process of English language learning and how it contributes to graduates' employability in the Vietnamese context have not yet been answered. This chapter, therefore, addresses the research gaps by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. *In what ways is cultural capital developed through the process of learning English?*
2. *In what ways does such cultural capital contribute to the development of graduates' employability?*

### 7.3.2 *Research Approach and Methods*

The development and contributions of cultural capital are associated with individuals' experiences in particular societies (Bourdieu, 1986; Liddicoat et al., 2003). Therefore, a qualitative research approach is relevant to explore graduates' reflection on cultural capital development through English language learning and its distinctive contributions to their employability in different professional settings under contextual and individual conditions (Creswell, 2009). This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to investigate the acquisition of cultural capital among graduates as learners of English and the effects of cultural capital on graduates'

employability. The use of semi-structured interviews is to gain insights into the pre-determined themes through the two research questions as well as be open to new ideas that are generated through the interview data (Creswell, 2009).

### ***7.3.3 Participants***

The researchers announced the recruitment to people on their contact list with specific information about the study. Purposive quota sampling was employed. The researchers established three categories of basic, intermediate, and advanced EFL learners and a minimum of three cases for each category (Robinson, 2014). This low number of participants could be accepted in qualitative research for an intensive idiographic analysis of each case regarding their individual experiences (Robinson, 2014). Furthermore, participants in the researchers' network were contacted to invite their participation. The researchers also devoted to searching participants of different work settings, educational programs, and years of work experience to yield diversity in the data. After one week, twelve participants responded to the recruitment; however, one participant of the Basic group later decided to withdraw from the research before interviews. A total of eleven participants had completed their undergraduate degree programs in different majors and had been employed for less than two years at the time of the research. In this study, these participants were categorized into three language proficiency levels based on their learning experience, and certified or self-reported achievements in English language learning. Table 7.1 highlights the participants' learning experience and their current employment.

### ***7.3.4 Procedure***

An interview was conducted with each of the participants for a duration of 30 to 45 min. Learning from Tomlinson's (2017) framework for employability, interview questions were proposed about how cultural capital was developed in the graduates' English language learning programs including learning and other extracurricular activities. Because the study aimed at cultural capital and employability, how cultural capital contributed to their job performances was also explored, for which the researchers questioned both the merits and possible demerits that this capital brought into their work and other life aspects. Notably, Tomlinson (2017) provided a network of capital for employability, and the researchers were interested in the possible relationship between cultural capital and other capital for successful employability. Therefore, as stated above, to unpack how cultural capital might be able to emerge as centrally driven by English language learning of the participants and the participants' perspectives on how cultural capital would be able to enhance employability, the interview questions were necessarily central in their experience of English

**Table 7.1** Participants' profiles

Participants	Gender	Major	English level	Current job
Tuan	Male	English language studies	Advanced	Receptionist at a resort
Chi	Female	English language studies	Advanced	Instructor of English
Nhu	Female	English language teaching	Advanced	Instructor of English
Nghi	Female	English language studies	Advanced	Market Researcher
Duong	Male	English language studies	Advanced	MA student/Instructor of English
Sang	Male	External economics	Intermediate	Audit Associate
Nha	Female	Japanese language studies	Intermediate	Salesman
Chan	Male	Information system	Intermediate	Marketing Specialist
Hoa	Female	Hospitality	Intermediate	Hotel waitress
Nga	Female	Human resources	Basic	MBA Students/HR Staff
Huong	Female	Economic planning and investment	Basic	Data Analyst

*Note* All names are pseudonyms

language learning with a focus on their increased cultural knowledge, informed inter-cultural communication, and fundamental work-related skills. Explicitly, the participants were asked questions related to (1) their English language learning experience, (2) how English language supported their study, work, and daily life, (3) how they learned culture in this language learning process, and (4) what changes this cultural understanding had made to their work, study, and daily life. Based on the participants' responses, follow-up questions were provided for clarification. The interviews were recorded for later analysis.

The interview data were analyzed following the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the recordings were listened to, and the researchers took notes of the segments that were related to the themes and guided by the research questions (e.g., the development and contributions of cultural capital). To ensure the reliability of the data, the second researcher coded 25 percent of the data. As the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the segments related to the aforementioned pre-determined themes in the study were chosen to become quotes that illustrated a finding and were translated into English and cross-checked by both researchers to ensure accuracy. After initial codes were identified, the researchers grouped the codes into relevant categories as the first step of coding. The second step of coding referred to identifying sub-categories for the codes. The coded and grouped segments were read through again to identify the sub-themes. The researchers cross-checked and discussed the codes and themes that were generated from their coding. This study was guided by both pre-determined themes (i.e., development and contributions of cultural capital, cultural capital in relation to other forms of capital) which were the

focuses of this study and emerging themes (i.e., forms of learning) as methods of coding.

## 7.4 Findings

This section provides information on how the participants developed their cultural capital and the contributions of cultural capital to their employability. Following the categorization of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the relationship between cultural capital and employability (Tomlinson, 2017), this chapter elaborates on learners' acquisition of cultural knowledge and the incorporation of cultural capital to their social, personal, and professional dimensions, which all consequently affect their employability.

### 7.4.1 *The Development of Cultural Capital Through English Learning*

The interview data showed that the development of cultural capital happened in language learning as the participants studied and worked in intercultural environments where English language was used. In addition, the interviews revealed different ways of learning culture. The forms of learning categorized by OECD (2005) consist of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. According to OECD (2005), formal learning takes place at educational institutions through various programs such as degree-seeking and short training courses in which certificates or qualifications are awarded. Meanwhile, non-formal learning does not result in evaluation or qualifications although they actually happen in certain courses and do not comprise credits as formal learning happens, and informal learning refers to learning from daily or leisure activities that are "often treated as a residual category to describe any kind of learning which does not take place within, or follow from, a formally organised learning programme or event" (Eraut, 2000, p. 114). As guided by Eraut (2000) and OECD (2005), the classification of learning forms contributed to a better understanding of how cultural knowledge was acquired differently among learners. While Vietnamese learners have long acknowledged the development of knowledge through formal learning, informal and non-formal learning are not adequately appreciated. The findings however advocate the contributions of other learning forms to advancing cultural capital, which encourages learners' participation in a wide range of learning forms to develop their cultural capital.

### 7.4.1.1 Formal Learning

Cultural capital can be formed in the context of formal learning, which Bourdieu (1986) labeled as *institutionalized cultural capital*. In this study, all participants had obtained at least an undergraduate degree and attended language courses in which English language was the major, the medium of instruction, or a compulsory subject. Cultural capital was then declared as being rooted in this formal education as *area studies* and as *practice*.

I learned culture through subjects such as Intercultural Communication as part of my English Language major with international volunteer teachers from Norway and the U.S. These teachers introduced their national cultures and widened my cultural understanding. (Chi)

In addition to specific courses and lessons, cultural capital was also built through teamwork when they completed group assignments in a program using English as a medium of instruction. For example, when working on team projects as their course assignments, Sang was able to acquire cultural knowledge with a particular focus on work ethics from exchange students from many Asian and European countries.

From my observation, unlike many of my Vietnamese friends who were not serious about the assignments, I could realize the high level of responsibility, dedication, and management skills of those foreign peers. (Sang)

Other non-English-major students who had few chances to take culture-related subjects in their undergraduate programs made good use of their language courses at English language centers or cultural exchange programs abroad. For example, Nha reported that she had attended a short course abroad from which she could witness how local residents exercised their cultural values through their daily activities.

The comments of the participants in this study revealed that formal learning was a significant source of their static cultural knowledge. Although this formal learning took place at different levels such as specific subjects, lessons, and student–student interactions, it was the most basic and common ground for the participants in this study to acquire cultural knowledge.

### 7.4.1.2 Non-Formal Learning

Defined as education-related activities that do not involve evaluation or qualifications (OECD, 2005), non-formal English learning developed cultural capital primarily through institutional extracurricular activities such as field trips or cultural exchange programs. In this form of learning, *culture as practice* seemed to be highly visible through observing how culture was reflected in daily activities for dynamic cultural knowledge.

When my English was getting better, I joined various cultural exchange programs and activities with the university's international partners from Hong Kong, Australia, and Indonesia. They shared their cultural values and I learned those. (Tuan)



I interacted with many foreign student interns coming to Vietnam to work. I joined as a volunteer of an international student-led organization where I also enhanced my English proficiency and engaged in Western cultures. Both benefited me in terms of my academic work at school and my teammates trusted to let me act as a leader who could manage the work well and achieve certain successes. (Chan)

Getting to know culture from these non-formal learning activities seemed to be more interesting and effective to these participants. From their claims, most cultural knowledge of societal norms gained from formal learning was heavily theoretical, which they did not know how these cultural aspects took place in real life for better comprehension. Meanwhile, taking part in non-formal learning activities, they were able to discuss, exchange, and witness how those cultural values were applied in daily life.

I joined a homestay program with Hong Kong and Australian students when they visited my university in exchange programs. Hosting them helped me know about their cuisine, table manners, dress code, and other behaviors. They had travelled a lot and introduced cultures of other countries to me as well. (Chi)

However, it was noted that this form of learning appeared to be unlikely to happen among less proficient or non-English majoring learners who have few opportunities for these cultural activities.

I remember that when my English was not good, I was not confident to take part in these activities. If I did, I could not understand much of what the others said to me when they introduced their culture, maybe only fifty percent. (Chi)

My English was not good as I did not know how to speak English. Therefore, I did not join any programs or activities to learn about cultures because those activities involved using English. (Nga)

In these activities, the participants played the role of not only translators but also cultural ambassadors to introduce the lifestyle of Vietnamese people and were able to learn cultural diversity from their international peers. Despite the excitement of the activities, language proficiency was indicated as one of the barriers preventing the students from being part of the programs or acquiring cultural knowledge, as reported by Chi and Nga.

#### 7.4.1.3 Informal Learning

Informal learning, defined by OECD (2005), refers to leisure and daily activities rather than academic ones. In this study, apart from the academic environment, informal learning also showed a high level of cultural learning for participants both as *area studies* and as *practice*. Informal learning of culture happened when the participants watched videos from various websites as their leisure activities and were able to learn the language and the culture. For example, the participants made use of their favorite videos from YouTube or Netflix as these videos were fun to watch and could improve their knowledge.

I relied on YouTube and Netflix videos as free sources for my independent language learning. They offered me great materials to improve my listening skills despite lacks of space to speak with someone. However, there were lots of opportunities to explore cultural values of Western countries that I had never known. (Huong)

Other participants realized that they could learn more about cultures as practice in their leisure time through outdoor activities and interactions with foreigners in an interactive style of learning.

I learned more cultural knowledge through making friends with foreign visitors when I was traveling. I enjoyed having conversations with foreigners not only to practice English language but also to know more cultures like their eating habits or lifestyles. (Nhu)

I usually invite my friends from Korea to local restaurants. We liked hanging out, and from our conversations, we knew more about cuisines, festivals, and daily lifestyle. I learned how they handled their everyday problems. (Sang)

Informal learning for cultural knowledge was very diverse and dependent on personal preferences. The participants in this study had expressed different ways of combining learning and enjoying themselves as one of the effective ways to get to know more cultures. Therefore, the preference was given to informal learning, thanks to its obtaining both educational values and amusement.

## ***7.4.2 The Contributions of Cultural Capital to Other Types of Employability Capital***

From the interviews, the participants expressed various benefits that they gained from their vast knowledge of culture in many aspects. In this study, the learning of culture of these participants was undertaken mostly through interactions with cultural agents such as their peers, lecturers, and foreigners that they had met. The higher chance of employability and career success in this study was fostered because cultural capital enabled the development of human, social, psychological, and identity capital, all of which are key factors for successful employability (Tomlinson, 2017).

### **7.4.2.1 The Development of Human Capital**

Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills that are essential to the graduates' careers (Tomlinson, 2017), which was evident as an outcome of cultural capital in this study and indicated through graduates' professional achievements and continuing development. Cultural capital was so essential for fulfillment of the work demands. To illustrate, Chi and Nhu proved their outstanding qualifications through integrating culture into the English lessons. Nhu highlighted that teaching culture made learning English more interesting. This integration was appreciated and resulted in higher payment for her exceptional performances in teaching. For Tuan, he was complimented by his customers for appropriate communicative strategies and was assigned

to serve international guests at the resort where he was working, which in his words was an honor for employees in the Hospitality industry.

I was able to use correct slang and jokes with foreigners and select suitable topics to talk to them. When I served a British couple, I talked about British meals and British TV programs, and they really liked it. The guests at the end of their stay sent me a thank-you note and suggested a tip for my nice work. My boss really appreciated that. This is very good for me as a receptionist. (Tuan)

In addition to making use of the existing cultural knowledge to serve their duties, cultural capital that the participants gained also supported their professional development through continuing acquisition of culture and language. Some examples of this were self-study using materials written in English, which were not available in Vietnamese, and exploration of more cultures; thus, they could acquire new knowledge and skills that others might not have, making them more competitive in the labor markets.

When I encountered Russian customers, I did not know what to say as I did not know what the customers would love to listen to. However, through interactions, I learned that they were more serious in communication and tended to be 'perfectionists' compared with other customers. Now, I know what I should do to satisfy their demands or where to get help to make them pleased. (Tuan)

I think that culture is a big source of motivation in learning language. For example, I am very interested in American culture, so I need to learn English to explore this culture through materials or interactions. Learning English and more culture would be helpful for my future work or study. (Nga)

Cultural capital was useful for the participants' job conduct through applying cultural knowledge and skills into the current work and for their professional development through continuing acquisition of knowledge and skills.

#### **7.4.2.2 The Development of Social Capital**

Social capital development refers to the social networks and relationships that the learners establish and tighten, which connect them to the labor markets (Tomlinson, 2017). Cultural capital in this study enabled the development of social capital of social networks and relationships through the process of developing cultural capital and working. Particularly, the participants were well-respected at their workplaces where they were seen as sources of information and assistance to their colleagues and contributed to the development of the organizations. Their relationships with customers, colleagues, and employers as a result became better, due to their vast knowledge of culture as an important element in their professions.

I have very good relationships with the managers at my center as they trust my ability. Therefore, I am invited to join meetings with them to give my opinions on the teaching activities at the center. (Chi)

My manager and colleagues were very happy with my performances. I was given compliments and felt that other colleagues talked to me more comfortably. I think that they respect me. (Tuan)

An exception that this study offered was the case of Chi as her social capital to some extent was threatened by her advanced cultural capital. Being highly appreciated by the managers, Chi was able to make proposals for work policies at the center, which might not be valued by some of her colleagues and consequently became a disadvantage of advanced cultural capital.

Many of my colleagues now used to be my classmates. When I got promoted and could contribute ideas to the teaching activities and other policies at the center such as wearing uniforms at work or having more communicative activities, I could see that my ideas were not favored by my colleagues. It may be because I am giving them more work or I am playing the role of a supervisor, so they do not like it. (Chi)

This social capital development subsequently led to the advancement in participants' careers when they were assigned important tasks at their workplaces or allowed to take part in policy-making practice at their institutions. All of these were considered remarkable achievements in their professions.

#### 7.4.2.3 The Development of Identity Capital

Identity capital is defined as the learners' investment for their professional prospects and their membership in a social group (Tomlinson, 2017). In this study, cultural capital was a source that enhanced learners' identity capital as the participants' personal values were more empowered. The participants in this study claimed that they increased their motivation in learning as well as made positive changes in their beliefs and lifestyles.

From working with Hong Kong friends, I see that they are so happy when they live for themselves. I realized that I should also love myself more and do what I feel happy with. (Chi)

I realize that Japanese people are so hard-working. They try to work as much as they can to achieve their goals. Sometimes, I think they are overloaded, but they are successful. I have realized this good characteristic and learned from it to be successful like them. (Nhan)

Importantly, cultural capital could develop learners' sense of belonging, meaning that interacting with people from culturally diverse backgrounds could allow the participants to form their tolerance and respect toward diverse cultural values.

I realize one of my foreign friends used a hand to grab the food, not a fork or a spoon. I was shocked at first but later knew that it was normal in her tradition, so it was fine for me. Later, I saw others with the same action, and I was fine with that too. (Nhu)

I think that to work effectively in Hospitality with customers from various cultures. I have to be a good listener and observer, to be flexible and open to change, to be an innovative and creative thinker. (Hoa)

Cultural knowledge played a significant role in shaping the learners' professional interests which were helpful to explore other cultures and transformed them to be culturally sensitive actors in the multicultural world. Being culturally mindful, these actors became proficient in how to properly behave in a multicultural setting with people holding different ways of thinking and acting for successful communication, which was an integral part in their work performances.

#### 7.4.2.4 The Development of Psychological Capital

Psychological capital is resultant to help students overcome employment-related challenges, of which students are expected to enhance their sense of adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving (Tomlinson, 2017). With rich cultural experiences, one of the learners was able to deal with unfamiliar cultural contexts and transfer himself to be more hard-working, engaged, confident, and responsible. For Sang, being able to learn work ethics from his academic experience with exchange students was helpful to develop his enthusiasm at work.

Through working with the exchange students, I learned some crucial skills in terms of being disciplined and responsible. Once agreeing on the assigned tasks, they tend to work responsibly and ensure the timely completion. I considered this skill important for the personal ethics in professional work environments. (Sang)

Also, they observed that being able to overcome a number of challenges in new work settings required them to adapt quickly and simultaneously be resilient at the early stage of employment.

I think that to work effectively in the foreign-owned enterprises related to Hospitality, on-the-job learning is very crucial. I was reminded that academic knowledge cannot give me a full understanding of how to work in the service industry. As a staff member at a multinational hotel, I can learn cultural norms to enhance customer satisfaction and exceptional service because it varies from case to case, like between domestic and international services. (Hoa)

It is basic that engagement in culturally experiential learning is potential to help learners challenge their perpetuating stereotypes on what culture is uniquely existing.

## 7.5 Discussion

This study investigated the development of cultural capital through learning English language and the contributions of cultural capital to learners' employability. The findings revealed that cultural capital could be developed through different forms of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. In addition, the findings supported previous studies indicating that cultural capital resulted in better employability (Tomlinson, 2017) when the participants were able to develop other forms of capital indicated in Tomlinson's (2017) framework of employability. While the essence of cultural capital for successful employability is widely acknowledged in current literature, this study further points out possible breakdowns in one's social capital as a result of advanced cultural capital.

### 7.5.1 *The Development of Cultural Capital Through English Language Learning*

Among the four types of culture classified by Liddicoat et al. (2003), *culture as practice* seems to be the most attractive to the participants in this study. The participants were more interested in how culture was reflected in daily activities and interactions rather than culture as social norms taught as a subject in the curriculum or a theoretical knowledge point in lessons. Their preference for *culture as practice* then decided the favorable mode of learning for culture. This study elaborated on formal, non-formal, and informal education for cultural capital.

While formal learning is potential for learners' static cultural knowledge, non-formal and informal learning are preferable for the acquisition of dynamic cultural knowledge. Despite this difference, Hofer et al. (2010) realize that Vietnamese students focus more on formal learning to develop knowledge and tend to disregard the benefits of non-formal and informal learning. Meanwhile, this study sheds light on the preferences of learning in other less formal forms. Eraut (2000) strongly believes that the majority of human learning takes place in non-formal and probably implicit forms. This may be explained that non-formal and informal learning do not involve evaluation and take place in a more comfortable environment with interesting activities (e.g., outdoor activities), not pouring any intense pressure on students. Thus, they are more motivating and less stressful to learners (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Furthermore, with non-formal and informal learning, learners are able to intensively acquire dynamic cultural knowledge through visualizing how a piece of knowledge functions in a specific context as these two types of learning are normally contextually based, which seems invisible in formal education (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009). To illustrate, the participants could realize the differences in dress codes, table manners, and communicative strategies of their peers in different situations, leading them to a better understanding of how culture guides one's behaviors in a specific situation.

Although cultural capital is developed through language learning, the participants' exposure to cultural knowledge was imbalanced due to their different majors and English language levels. Evidently, those with advanced English language levels and of English-related majors were able to acquire and make use of more educational resources to develop their cultural capital (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009; Gerhards, 2014). The conditions for developing cultural capital could be therefore concluded as language- and discipline-based, which suggested a consideration for supporting learners' language proficiency and creating more opportunities for their acquisition of cultural knowledge across disciplines for better employability. This is consistent with the theorization of *field*, simply defined as different learning environments (Bourdieu, 2011), where there are different learning disciplines or language levels influencing the extent to which cultural capital can be developed.

An interesting point of the study is the continuing development of cultural capital during the post-graduate stage. Learning more cultural aspects occurred in the graduates' workplaces where they were able to enrich their cultural capital based on their

existing cultural knowledge. Workplaces are also considered educational environments with experiential learning where both formal learning in the form of required training and non-formal learning through interactions happen (Choi & Jacobs, 2011). Some participants after joining their professional organizations continued to develop their cultural capital through their professional activities (Park et al., 2016).

### ***7.5.2 Cultural Capital and Employability***

This study aligned with previous research by affirming the essence of cultural capital to graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2017). Particularly, the significance of cultural capital toward employability is demonstrated through how cultural capital supports the development of other forms of capital outlined by Tomlinson (2017) such as human, social, psychological, and identity capital. These aspects together form a strong foundation for graduates' employability, which was very little discussed in current literature and this connection was unpacked with a line of fresher insights into how cultural capital would serve as a powerful aspect to develop students' long-term career and professional prospects.

Cultural capital prepares individuals with tolerance to cultural differences, confidence in interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds, adaptability to different working environments, and flexibility in applying cultural knowledge into different contexts for harmony (Banban, 2018). In multicultural settings, cultural negotiation is essential for acceptable behaviors such as appropriate communicative strategies with different interlocutors (Giles & Ogay, 2007) and the allowance of cultural diversity within one professional organization (Banban, 2018). This interesting line of research proves Bourdieu's (1986) clarifying the inclusion of incorporated cultural capital into language use in a way that learners can seek to enhance and perform communication skills over time, coupled with improved attitudinal dimensions. These forms of development co-exist in the graduate participants, contributing to their professional development and successful work performances.

This study pointed out the contributions of cultural capital to employability in terms of continuing professional development which has been underrated in the literature. This resonates with the view of Lareau and Weininger (2003) arguing for a broader sense of cultural capital as individuals' "ability to comply with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (p. 597). The study emphasized graduates' continuing professional development during employment as a compliance with the increasing job demands in their fields (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016). Specifically, cultural capital motivated graduates' further development of linguistic and cultural competencies that could be helpful for their work and their competitiveness in multicultural working environments.

Furthermore, this study emphasized another positive point resulting from cultural capital, which is the enhanced social capital. One of the key factors for successful employability is social relationships, which should be maintained for strong social capital (Bassegy et al., 2019). This kind of relationship is described as a support

to one's career because team harmony and collaboration cannot be neglected in workplaces (Xia et al., 2020). While previous research does not discuss how cultural capital strengthens social capital, this study proposes that cultural capital enabled better relationships between the participants and their customers, colleagues, and managers through their successful job completion. In turn, their employability was advanced through better reputation and promotions to higher positions in line with the development of social capital.

However, social relationships as a form of social capital may also be negatively affected by cultural capital. Within one professional community, conflicts and inequality may occur when some are seen as 'core' employees and threaten others' career prospects who are categorized as 'social exclusion' (Brown, 1995). In a social space or community, there are certain symbolic powers that create social hierarchy or divisions in which those possessing the symbolic powers are labeled 'mainstream' with a higher status, and others are devalued (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 1991; Dembski & Salet, 2010; McCollum, 1999). It is evident that in multicultural environments, there are targeted 'mainstream' groups of customers and services that require English language proficiency and cultural capital. As a result, conflicts and inequality appear when those with symbolic powers of cultural capital and English language skills are successful in work fulfillment and gain higher positions.

Also being contributors to employability in terms of adaptability to various cultural environments and challenges as well as development of a sense of belonging to the multicultural world, psychological and identity capital was observed as an effective response to cultural capital. However, it appears that data was insufficient for an in-depth exploration of these two forms of capital. Hence, further studies are needed to unfold this missing evidence.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This study explored how cultural capital is developed in English language learning and its influences on the development of graduates' employability. In the former, graduates appear to develop their cultural capital in various forms of formal, non-formal, and informal learning of English language through formal courses, extracurricular and cultural exchange activities, and leisure activities. In the latter, cultural capital seems to be a driver of the development of other necessary capital for employability such as human, social, psychological, and identity capital. Therefore, English language programs should pay more attention to developing students' cultural competence, on top of the language skills. It is noted that this qualitative study involves a small number of participants. As this study focuses on English language graduates, future research with more participants of other academic programs and work settings may be necessary to generalize the relationship between cultural capital and employability. Furthermore, the participants in this study are in their early years of employment; hence, future research on participants with more work experiences and in different job areas can be useful to explore how cultural capital impacts their career development in the long run.



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# Chapter 8

## The Contribution of English Language Education to Students' Development of Soft Skills and Personal Attributes



Le Trung Kien and Tran Le Huu Nghia

**Abstract** Personal attributes and soft skills are significant forms of capital which enable graduates to adapt and respond proactively to employability challenges. They include but are not limited to communication, teamwork, adaptability, resilience and flexibility. English language education provides students with various conditions that encourage them to exercise their resilience, adaptability and flexibility in order to effectively acquire the language. However, this topic has not been systematically examined in the literature. This chapter will report a qualitative study that explores how English language education contributes to the development of students' soft skills and personal attributes. The study included 30 focus groups with 90 students. The research showed that six out of the thirty-two soft skills and attributes listed in the UNESCO Framework for Transversal Competencies, including oral communication, confidence, teamwork ability, problem-solving skills, proactiveness and information management skills, were rated by the participants as the most popular that could be developed through English language education. It also found that different types of classroom tasks and English-speaking club as an extra-curricular activity contributed to undergraduates' development of particular soft skills and personal attributes. This chapter will also discuss English teaching methods that can improve students' soft skills and personal attributes.

**Keywords** English language education · Soft skills · Personal attributes · Employability skills · Psychological capital

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## 8.1 Introduction

Since its participation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Vietnam has witnessed major economic developments, attracting significantly increased investment from international enterprises (Nha & Tu, 2015). In response to the economic demands, Vietnam's education has continuously undertaken reforms to improve the quality of teaching and learning and accordingly to boost the capacity of the workforce (Huong, 2014). In particular, Vietnam's Higher Education (HE), in accordance with the Education Law 2012, has focused on bettering the key areas, including autonomy, governance, curricula and quality assurance of teaching and learning (Hung, 2019; Huong, 2014). These reforms aim to better equip graduates with skills, knowledge and attributes in response to the social and economic demands of the country. Unfortunately, employers have kept lamenting about a lack of soft skills in graduates as the main reason behind an increase in graduate unemployment (Duong, 2019). Therefore, developing soft skills and personal attributes has become an emphasis in the curriculum, teaching and learning in Vietnamese higher education over the past two decades.

In Vietnam, English is considered a competency and skill that can significantly impact graduates' employability, employment outcomes and career development. Almost all job advertisements require applicants to include evidence of their English proficiency. Therefore, English language education has been one of the focal aspects in recent teaching and learning reforms in the country. In order to boost students' English proficiency, since late 2010, Vietnamese Minister of Education and Training (MOET) has proposed and implemented three new English language curricula for schools (Project 2020) (Hoang, 2018). Particularly, MOET's Vietnam Education Publishing House cooperated with Macmillan Education and Pearson Education to develop textbooks based on the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) for primary schools, and lower and upper secondary schools. Students will experience the contents through four macro skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The ultimate goal of the approach is to assist students in understanding and using the English language effectively in real life. To achieve it, adopting a learner-centred approach where students are considered active participants in teaching and learning has been a priority area (Hoang, 2018).

English language education not only helps develop English competence for learners but also positively contributes to the development of soft skills and/or personal attributes. Students' soft skills such as teamwork and collaborative ability, communication and problem-solving skills can be honed through different activities in English classrooms (Aclan et al., 2016; Kostikova et al., 2021). For instance, through a pre-debate task for an English lesson, students can support each other to collect data and brainstorm ideas. Additionally, in order to triumph a debate, it is necessary for students to effectively argue and practise reasoning. As a result, their problem-solving and communication skills can be enhanced simultaneously (Aclan et al., 2016). A study carried out in Ukraine revealed that students' soft skills and attributes, such as problem-solving skills and team management, could be



strengthened through educational games. Problem-solving skills, for example, were developed since the students were required to pose questions in a team game, using vocabulary and grammatical structures in the learning materials. After that, further analysis and discussion about the answers would be made by the lecturer and students (Kostikova et al., 2021).

However, there is a lack of research that explores how learning English contributes to the development of students' soft skills and personal attributes. This chapter responds to this critical gap in the literature by reporting a qualitative study that analyses in what ways students' experience in learning English helps develop their soft skills and personal attributes. First, the literature about the importance of soft skills and attributes to graduate employability will be reviewed. Second, the research design of the study will be presented. Third, the key findings will be presented. Finally, how pedagogies for teaching and learning English can be applied to benefit students' soft skills and attributes will be discussed in detail.

## 8.2 Soft Skills and Personal Attributes as Significant Components of Psychological Capital

According to Tomlinson (2017), "psychological capital" is conceived as one's capacity to "adapt and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges" (p. 347). In this regard, possessing the psychological capital helps an individual to be resilient and adapt to a working environment. Moreover, research has shown that there is a direct positive relationship between psychological capital and soft skills and personal attributes. For instance, the finding from a quantitative study conducted by Juan and Guadalupe (2020) revealed that psychological capital greatly influenced employability skills such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills in a positive way. A finding from another study taking place in Greece also confirmed that job seekers with psychological capital were more persistent and determined in searching for employment (Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2018). In other words, it can be claimed that soft skills and personal attributes are crucial parts of psychological capital, which likely have a positive impact on graduates' career outcomes.

The term "soft skills" has been paid due attention to by scholars and has different definitions (Jolly, 2012; Kechagias, 2011; Truong & Laura, 2015). For example, "soft skills" is referred to as "an array of personal skills such as the capacity to communicate, and problem-solve, possess leadership qualities, and the ability to work well in a team, be amicable, and a good listener" (Truong & Laura, 2015, p. 759). Likewise, according to Jolly (2012), soft skills encompass various types of skills, namely "communicative skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, life-long learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics moral and professional, and leadership skills" (p. 54). Kechagias (2011) considers soft skills as "intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, which are vital for "personal development, social participation, and workplace success",



including skills, such as “communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc....” (p. 33). These definitions share the common ground in which they focus on inter- and intra-personal skills.

“Personal attributes” has also received a lot of concern. From a psychological lens, McCrae and Costa (1997) suggested the Big five model of personality, which includes: Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Openness and Experience. Flint-Taylor and colleagues (2014) categorise personal attributes into intellectual ability, which refers to complex predictor of adaptability during adversity (Masten & Wright, 2010), and personality, which is defined as “individual’s master psychological system that oversees and organises mental subsystems, such as motives, thoughts and self-control” (Mayer & Faber, 2010, p. 94), which is somewhat consistent with McCrae and Costa’s. Scholars generally agree that “personal attributes”, alongside “soft skills”, are collectively manifested as “generic skills” or “graduates’ attributes”, including but not limited to oral and written communication, analytical skills, ICT skills, and collaborative and teamwork skills (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018).

All the aforementioned “soft skills” and “personal attributes” appeared to be interrelated and referred to as employability skills in the UNESCO Framework for Transversal Competencies. In particular, this framework lists out rigorous and essential components that are supposed to facilitate graduates’ transition to the labour market. The framework is also embedded into various educational systems throughout the Asia–Pacific zone (Suarta et al., 2017). This conceptual framework underpins the study reported in this chapter as it is suitable to the aims and nature of the research (Table 8.1).

**Table 8.1** Employability skills for graduates (adapted from the UNESCO framework for transversal competencies)

Employability skills	Specific skills & attributes
Critical and inventive thinking skills	Creativity (1), entrepreneurship (2), resourcefulness (3), application skills (4), reflective thinking (5), decision-making (6)
Inter-personal skills	Communication skills (7), organisation skills (8), teamwork (9), empathy (10)
Intra-personal skills	Self-discipline (11), self-confidence (12), flexibility & adaptability (13), determination (14), self-motivation (15), integrity (16), risk-taking (17), self-esteem (18), proactiveness (19), life-long learning (20)
Global citizenship	Openness (21), tolerance (22), responsibility (23), diversity respect (24), ethical understanding (25), intercultural understanding (26), problem-solving skills (27), democratic participation (28), national identity (29)
Media and information literacy	Ability to locate and access ICT information (30), information management (31), analytical & evaluative skills (32)

### ***8.2.1 The Importance of Soft Skills and Personal Attributes for Employability***

Soft skills and personal attributes have been seen to play a crucial role in graduate employability. For instance, Tang's (2019) research indicated that soft skills such as communication, team-working and problem-solving skills, to name a few, were of necessity for graduates to be recruited. This was because they were highly valued by businesses and employers. Likewise, another study conducted by Kumar and Kumar (2016) revealed that soft skills training had a positive impact on graduate employability, which suggested that students should value and purposefully learn to obtain the skills for the sake of their future career. In the same vein, in the context of Canada, communication skills were ranked among the most influential skills in job-hunting (Bhaskar, 2015). Through a systemic review of the literature between 2005 and 2016, Shukla and Kumar (2017) came up with a list of nine essential soft skills required at the workplace: communication skills, leadership skills, team-building skills, strategic thinking skills, critical thinking skills, analytical and problem-solving, inter-personal skills, imagination or creativity, and presentation skills.

Regarding personal attributes, Paul and Philip (2014) carried out a study to investigate which types of personalities are most necessary at enterprises, utilising the model of personality (Big five) proposed by McCrae and Costa (1997). The finding showed that "Conscientiousness" and "Agreeableness" were crucial for job-hunting success (Paul & Philip, 2014). Moreover, in a literature review article about the twenty-first-century labour market demands, Suarta and colleagues (2017) revealed that employers expressed much appreciation to candidates possessing certain employability skills, including not only communication, problem-solving, decision-making and teamwork skills as soft skills, but also a wide range of personal attributes, such as self-confidence, independence, flexibility and adaptability and life-long learning (Suarta et al., 2017).

To summarise, the research literature suggests that possessing soft skills and personal attributes can help enhance graduate employability. This is partly because they are highly respected by employers and businesses.

### ***8.2.2 English Language Education and the Development of Soft Skills and Personal Attributes***

English language education is considered as one of the effective ways that help to enhance one's soft skills and personal attributes, which can directly affect graduate employability in the global competitive labour market. Studies have shown that there is a close correlation between an individual's English competence and his/her soft skills and personal attributes. For example, Kong's (2018) research suggested "training of communicative English" as one of the employment strategies. In particular, he argued that being provided with opportunities to practise communicating in

English in class, students' oral expression could also be improved alongside their English-speaking skills. As a result, upon graduation, they were able to adapt quickly to unfamiliar circumstances, especially those that require long-term communication skills (Kong, 2018).

Likewise, in the context of Singapore, realizing the importance of English language, the Ministry of Education (MOE) encouraged education institutions, especially higher education (HE) ones to embed English courses into the curriculum. This was driven by the belief that English learning could lay a firm foundation in developing graduates' soft skills/attributes, referred to as "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills", including three groups: the first group being civic literacy, global awareness and cross-cultural skills, the second encompassing critical and inventive thinking and the third consisting of communication, collaboration and information skills (Hanington & Renandya, 2017). According to these authors, in response to the policy, the three most-established government-funded autonomous universities, namely National University of Singapore (NUS), National Technology University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU) applied the "dual approach" to help students both obtain academic qualifications and equip them with workplace communication skills for the sake of their career development. For instance, at NUS, a project-based English course mainly for science and engineer undergraduates required students of different genders and cultures to work together and evaluate their peers' work online, given that it could help enhance their cross-cultural skills (the 1<sup>st</sup> group), communication, critical thinking skills (the 2<sup>nd</sup>) and collaboration and information skills (the 3<sup>rd</sup>) (Hanington & Renandya, 2017).

In China, although it has not been applied yet, the project-based teaching method was recommended in vocational colleges. Siyang (2018) argued that, with this mode, students could use English to communicate with each other and participate in their tasks independently, actively and creatively in an imagined workplace. As such, it would more likely allow them to connect with the real working environment later (Siyang, 2018). Similarly, Aclan and colleagues (2016) reported that EFL/ESL students' different types of soft skills could be significantly expanded through the three-stage debates (pre-debate, actual debate and post-debate). The stages stressed on the development of various soft skills and attributes, ranging from critical and inventive thinking skills, global citizenship to inter- and intra-personal skills, and information literacy (Aclan et al., 2016).

In a study conducted by Tevdovska (2015) aiming at boosting students' soft skills in an ELT (English language teaching) environment, some methods were suggested: (1) task-based and problem-solving activities, (2) group-work involving discussion and debates, (3) delivering oral and poster presentations, (4) role-plays and dialogues and (5) writing. As for the first two methods, the activities were supposed to provide students with exposure to practical situations, such as ones regarding ethics, which require them to critically analyse the problems and come up with appropriate ethical solutions. Moreover, students had to involve themselves in group discussion about specific topics at the workplace, enabling them to build team spirit. Within the last three approaches, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> aimed to improve students speaking skills through supporting them to convey their ideas effectively and confidently in formal

settings (staff meeting, interview session, to name a few), the goal of the 5th was to enhance students' writing skills through curricula vitae, cover letters and emails, etc., using suitable formats and structures (Tevdovska, 2015).

These studies highlighted that communication skills, teamwork ability, problem-solving and critical thinking skills and information literacy are the main areas of focus in advancing students' soft skills and attributes in ELT contexts. A possible explanation to this can be, in order to successfully secure and retain a job in the labour market with more intense competition than ever before, graduates are expected to effectively search for accurate information from various sources, communicate, collaborate and provide suitable solutions to challenges. However, little research regarding how English language education affects soft skills and personal attributes has been scrutinised. The present research was therefore carried out.

### 8.3 The Current Study

The current study aims to investigate in what ways English language education can help develop students' soft skills and personal attributes. The research question is:

How does learning English contribute to students' development of soft skills and personal attributes?

This study was conducted as qualitative research in which the thematic analysis was used in order to explore significant information from the interviews. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis refers to the procedure of coding and finding out the common patterns or themes, which allows the researcher(s) to obtain valuable insights from the raw data. Focus group interviews are opted for because they can create social interaction among participants within similar age ranges or socio-features. Hence, they can comfortably share more in-depth feelings or opinions on a certain topic than those on one-to-one interviews (Thomas et al., 1995).

The convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques were utilised (Ackoff, 1953; Breweton & Millward, 2001). As for the first technique, since the participants (group 01 to group 23) were instructed by and got familiar with one of the researchers, it was supposed that they could freely share what they thought about the proposed question. With respect to the snowball sampling technique, the researcher asked his networks to introduce potential participants from a different HE institution. In other words, the two techniques are beneficial in the way that they enable the researchers to get access to the available participants for interviews. They also help save time and cost (Ackoff, 1953; Breweton & Millward, 2001).

However, pertaining to the participants from groups 01 to 23, mitigating the matter of power relationship is necessary here as they were taught by one researcher (Peel et al., 2006). In particular, a consent form for interviews was sent to the students for their signatures. The form served as a guarantee that no harm or impacts would be caused to the participants' learning results for what they provided, and they were

not under any pressure to participate in the research. As such, the participants would more likely feel comfortable to participate and share information.

The selected interviewees were first- and second-year students from three different majors, namely, General Medicine, Information Technology and Land Management. While the participants from the first two majors were taught by the researcher at Nam Can Tho University (DNC), the remaining came from Can Tho University (CTU) and took part in the interviews through the snowball recruitment channel. DNC is a private educational organisation while CTU is a public one, both of which are in the central area of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The information about the participants is summarised in Table 8.2.

The researcher informed the participants of the purpose of the study, their identity protection and data confidentiality, and gave them a consent form to sign. After that, they were divided into 30 small groups, with 03 students in each. Using the 32 factors listed in the adapted UNESCO Framework for Transversal Competencies as the interview guide, the researcher asked the participants to vote for two soft skills and/or personal attributes among the predetermined ones that can be developed the most through English language education and provide detailed explanations. Each interview session took place approximately from 15 to 20 min.

All interview data were recorded and transcribed. Then, the researcher read through them carefully several times before proceeding with thematic analysis. In particular, through what was shared, he coded core information before turning to identifying repeated themes regarding (1) the specific soft skills and/or personal attributes that can be developed thanks to English language education, and (2) the particular ways in which English language education can contribute to the development of those soft skills and personal attributes. Concerning the second theme, only the extracts with more rigorous data would be given as evidence in the finding section.

**Table 8.2** Summary of participants' information

Groups	Institutions	Majors	Courses	Year	Number of students
01 to 13	DNC	General Medicine	Basic English 3	2 <sup>nd</sup>	39
14 to 23	DNC	Information Technology	Basic English 2	1 <sup>st</sup>	30
24 to 30	CTU	Land Management	Basic English 3	2 <sup>nd</sup>	21
<b>Sum</b>					<b>90</b>

## 8.4 Findings

### 8.4.1 *Soft Skills and Personal Attributes Developed Through Learning English*

The finding from the interviews with 30 small groups of students indicated that among the listed factors, six types of soft skills and personal attributes, including good oral communication (1), confidence (2), teamwork ability (3), problem-solving skills (4), proactiveness (5) and information management (6) stood out as the most popular that could be developed thanks to English language education. For scoring calculation, it is stipulated that among the two skills/attributes voted, the first-mentioned one will get two points and that the second mentioned will get one point. The statistical data are summarised in Table 8.3.

As can be seen from the table, firstly, “oral communication” was selected as the most valuable among the six skills/attributes chosen, which were mentioned fourteen times with the point of 23. The participants believed that English courses at university provided them with abundant chances to learn and practise their English oral communication. This can be exemplified in the following extracts:

Through speaking-practice activities, we can better our oral communication [...]. Hence, we agree that it is one of the top skills that can be enhanced through learning English at university. (G3, General Medicine)

English language education can facilitate our oral communication because having chances of talking to foreign lecturers makes us feel confident in our English-speaking ability. (G15, Information Technology)

The finding is consistent with the research conducted by Kong (2018) given that students' enhancement of oral expressions is attributed to “Training of Communicative English” as a strategy in English classes. Similarly, according to Permata (2017), 97.8 and 89.1% of the selected first-year students said that learning English can better

**Table 8.3** The most popular soft skills and attributes developed through English language education

Skills/Attributes	Mentioned time(s)	Scoring calculation		Total voting point(s)
		1 <sup>st</sup> (× 2pts)	2 <sup>nd</sup> (× 1pt)	
1. Oral communication	14	9	5	23
2. Confidence	11	7	4	16
3. Teamwork	12	5	7	17
4. Problem-solving	8	3	5	11
5. Proactiveness	7	3	4	10
6. Information management	5	3	2	8

their speaking ability and public speaking skills, respectively; and the percentages of their third-year counterparts voting for those skills were 95.7 and 85.7%.

Next, “confidence” was chosen by eleven clusters of students, with 18 points recorded. The participants confirmed that thanks to participating in varied types of tasks, such as self-presentations, group-projects and the English-speaking club at university, their confidence level was increased. Group Thirteen claimed that group work, pair work or individual talks could serve this.

At school, we often experience communication occasions like group-work, pair-work, or individual presentations. Then, the teachers point out our strengths and weaknesses after our practice. As a result, through time, we feel more confident. (G13, General Medicine)

Group Sixteen stated that taking part in the English-speaking club made them more self-confident.

Thanks to joining the English-speaking club at our university, we know more novel vocabulary and better our pronunciation. We can role-play and make conversations, too. [...] Hence, our confidence can be boosted, at least in terms of English-speaking competence. (G16, Information Technology)

A similar result is also evident in previous research by Tevdovska (2015) which showed that students’ confidence could be enhanced through different activities, such as oral presentation, poster presentations, role-plays and dialogues.

Thirdly, in terms of “teamwork ability”, this type of skill received twelve-mentioned times and its voting point was 17. The groups of interviewees stated that English learning can help improve their team-building skills. Group Eleven’s extract can be given as a typical example:

There are occasions in which we have to work together to find information and exchange ideas in our English class, which can develop our team spirit. (G11, General Medicine)

Sharing the same point of view are groups Twenty-one and Twenty-seven, as in the following reports:

One of the most important skills that can be trained in our courses of English is ‘teamwork’. In fact, we are provided exercises and have to interact smoothly with each other if we want to finish them optimally. (G21, Information Technology)

We are assigned into groups to complete tasks [...]. Therefore, we are able to cooperate with each other to solve the tasks more easily and more effectively. (G27, Land Management)

Raising team spirit was already confirmed by Hanington and Renandya’s (2017) research which revealed that project-based English courses would expand undergraduates’ teamwork ability because they had to cooperate to successfully solve tasks. This finding is reflected in the current study, too.

Fourthly, as for the “problem-solving” factor with the voting point of 11, eight groups of participants referred to it as a type of skill which could be strengthened by virtue of English courses. This skill enhancement is shown in the following statements:

We agree that our problem-solving skills can be improved through challenging reading and speaking activities that require us to debate. (G9, General Medicine)

In order to solve difficult exercises effectively, we are usually grouped to work [...]. As such, our problem-solving skills can be sharpened. (G23, Information Technology)

This finding aligns with that of Aclan and colleagues (2016). This study reported that problem-solving skills improvement could be strongly connected with debate-related tasks assigned in English courses. In addition, English assignments that require students to cooperate were also proven to help them solve problems more easily (Permata, 2017), which is also supported in the current research.

Fifthly, seven clusters of participants agreed with a 10-voting point on “proactiveness” as a factor that can be improved through English learning. Group Eighteen said:

Our English teachers sometimes challenge us with tricky questions for bonus marks. The rule is we have to plan and take them on individually [...]. As a result, we think this can boost our proactiveness. (G18, Information Technology)

Similarly, group Twenty-nine stated:

Doing extra-tasks in class, especially grammar or reading ones, requires us to proactively search for new vocabulary or grammatical structures by ourselves. (G29, Land Management)

In the literature review, “proactiveness” is one of the key personal attributes which contributes to graduates’ employability (Tomlinson, 2017). In the present study, “proactiveness” development can be consolidated by English courses at university. Accordingly, English language education can be considered as a “bridge” easing students’ pathway to employability.

Finally, five groups stated that their “information management” could be strengthened when they attended English classes, with the voting point of 8. For example, both groups Fifteen and Twenty-five stated:

English learning helps provide us with a lot of vocabulary, which is instrumental to effectively finding, sorting, comparing and contrasting information online in the era of technology 4.0. (G15, Information Technology)

When working in groups, there are times we have to discuss and practice finding information in English and Vietnamese on the internet [...]. As such, it can improve our information management. (G25, Land Management)

This is echoed by a study conducted by Aclan and colleagues (2016) who confirmed that students’ information management skills could be lifted by means of the preparation stage of the debate in EFL/ESL contexts. The scholars found that, during the pre-debate phase, participants had to look for and manage information related to the discussed topic(s) from different channels (Aclan et al., 2016). Hence, it can be supposed that students are able to learn to manage information well if they attend English courses with specific tasks targeting the development of this skill.



### 8.4.2 *The Ways English Language Education Contributes to the Development of Soft Skills and Personal Attributes*

In this study, English language education was revealed to positively affect students' development of specific soft skills and personal attributes through two ways, namely in-class and extra-curricular activities. In particular, all participants believed that varied types of tasks assigned to them in the English classroom facilitated their progress of soft skills and personal attributes, and five groups opted for English-speaking club participation as a means of improving their oral communication skills. The detailed information is summarised in Table 8.4.

With regards to in-class activities, role-plays and dialogues were regarded to improve oral communication skills and confidence. Two typical groups reported:

In speaking-skill classes, we are often asked to role-play in different situations such as showing directions, buying and selling things at the supermarket or ordering meals in restaurants. [...] We think this helps us boost our confidence in English oral communication. (G7, General Medicine)

During the practice time, we are required to converse using short model conversations in our textbook. Although it can be rigid, we have chances to practice and sharpen our English-speaking skills, leading to our confidence improvement at the same time. (G24, Land Management)

Moreover, self-presentation is believed to positively contribute to students' confidence, as shown in the following extracts:

In the self-presentation activity, our teachers require us to come in front of the class and try to introduce ourselves non-stop in about one or two minutes. Thanks to this, we assume that we can communicate in English more fluently and confidently. (G10, General Medicine)

We think that our confidence level can be increased to some extent whenever we present ourselves in English in front of our teachers and classmates. This is because the classroom is a safe environment for us to freely practise our speaking skills without any fear of making mistakes and to get constructive feedback from the teachers. (G22, Information Technology)

**Table 8.4** Summary of soft skills/attributes developed through participating in certain learning activities

Types of contributors	Soft skills/attributes developed
In-class activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role-plays</li> <li>• Dialogues</li> <li>• Self-presentations</li> <li>• Interaction with foreign lecturers</li> <li>• Extra-exercises</li> <li>• Pair work and group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral communication, confidence</li> <li>• Oral communication, confidence</li> <li>• Oral communication, confidence</li> <li>• Oral communication, confidence</li> <li>• Proactiveness, information management</li> <li>• Oral communication, teamwork, problem-solving skills, confidence</li> </ul>
Extra-curricular activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English-speaking club participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral communication, confidence</li> </ul>

In addition, students' oral delivery and confidence could be developed through communicating with foreign lecturers. Groups Three and Twenty-one said:

Sometimes in class, we feel very eager because we can meet, practice speaking English with foreign teachers and receive constructive feedback from them for our oral communication improvement. (G3, General Medicine)

There are certain periods in which we have chances to interact with foreign lecturers, which helps us get familiar with their voice and intonations and feel more confident in communication. (G21, Information Technology)

Pair-work and group-work tasks were found to build up students' problem-solving skills, teamwork ability and confidence. Their enhancement in these skills and confidence are shown in the following statements:

We agree that our problem-solving skills can be improved through challenging reading activities. We remember, at that time, it took us quite a lot of time for the three of us to answer a multiple question about the main idea summary compiled by our teacher. After time-consuming analyses and arguments, we finally came up with the correct answer. (G9, General Medicine)

In order to do difficult exercises effectively, we are usually grouped to work. Everyone has to think proactively and try to analyse them to find feasible solutions. As such, our problem-solving skills can be sharpened. (G23, Information Technology)

Besides, extra-tasks play a pivotal role in improving undergraduates' proactiveness. Typically, group Eighteen commented that their teachers' challenging questions could serve that:

Our English teachers sometimes challenge us with tricky questions for bonus marks. The rule is we have to plan and take them on individually. They give us no hints, so we are supposed to be in a dilemma in which we must proactively find the answers or lose the bonus. As a result, we think this can boost our proactiveness. (G18, Information Technology)

A similar point of view is clearly shared by group Thirty's comment. The students strongly supported the necessity of further exercises for their proactiveness enhancement. They reported:

Not only in our study but also in this modern world of work, it is vital for us to show our autonomy to stand out from others and be highly appreciated by teachers or employers. English courses are a good environment where we can strengthen our proactiveness since additional tasks make us take a lead and prove our competence to lecturers while our classmates may find them daunting and challenging. (Group 30, Land Management)

Lastly, additional tasks also require students to search information online effectively and manage to arrange the materials they have found feasibly. Therefore, these are considered as enabling factors for students to improve their information management. For example, groups Twenty and Twenty-five shared:

Sorting and managing to organise varied materials logically is extremely important at the workplace, which can be trained with the help of English language education at university. This is because, with additional exercises, we have to refer to the internet for further information, which is various and controversial. Therefore, we think that this is a valuable opportunity to practice and enhance our information management skills. (G20, Information Technology)

When working in groups, there are times we have to discuss and practice finding information in English and Vietnamese on the internet. Online information is varied; hence, it is a desperate need for us to correctly determine and clarify materials and documents before our group presentations. As such, it can improve our information management. (G25, Land Management)

This research revealed that different types of tasks assigned in English courses, including role-plays, dialogues, self-presentations, interaction with foreign lecturers, pair work and group work, and extra-tasks make different levels of contributions to undergraduates' development of soft skills and personal attributes. All types of aforementioned activities, except for additional tasks, were reported to enhance students' oral communication skills. Another notable point is that pair work and group work were the contributors to students' development of up to three different soft skills and one personal attribute, including "oral communication", "teamwork", "problem-solving skills" and "confidence". In contrast, the remaining activities were supposed to help develop one skill and/or one attribute (see Table 8.4). This finding is consistent with previous research (Aclan et al., 2016; Hanington & Renandya, 2017; Kong, 2018; Tevdovska, 2015). In particular, these studies shared a common point that English-speaking activities in class could help improve students' oral communication and confidence. However, while Kong (2018) generally mentioned English-speaking tasks, the others also included activities that require students' working in pairs or groups, such as project-based tasks (Hanington & Renandya, 2017; Tevdovska, 2015), role-plays or dialogues (Tevdovska, 2015), and the three-stage debates (Aclan et al., 2016). These tasks were confirmed to develop students' soft skills and attributes, such as teamwork, problem-solving skills, proactiveness and information management, which is also supported by this research. Despite the similar findings reported in these studies, communicating with foreign teachers and doing further exercises are two types of activities found in this study but not in the others. They are also supposed to contribute to undergraduates' development of specific soft skills and personal attributes.

In terms of English-speaking club participation, six groups of interviewees in the current study considered taking part in this activity facilitated their enhancement of oral delivery and confidence. The two following extracts are vivid examples:

Whenever we gather at the English-speaking club organised by the English Department, we always have fun because not only we can relax but we are able to speak English freely about different topics, which results in our fluency in English speaking and confidence. (G12, General Medicine)

Since participating in the English-speaking club at our university, we acquire new vocabulary and improve our pronunciation. Possessing good vocabulary, correct pronunciation and having chances to practice speaking with other students who share the same interest in English result in our confidence, at least in English competence. (G16, Information Technology)

This finding echoes a recent study conducted by Nguyen and Ho (2019) which showed that taking part in extra-curricular activities, including English-speaking clubs, helped students improve certain soft skills, including oral communication and confidence. Hence, it can be concluded that participating in English-speaking clubs is supposed to strengthen their speaking skills and confidence.

## 8.5 Discussion

The findings from this study revealed that among the 32 soft skills and/or personal attributes provided for discussion based on the UNESCO Framework for Transversal Competencies, communication skills, confidence, teamwork ability, problem-solving skills, proactiveness and information management were chosen by the participants as the most popular components which could be positively influenced by English language education. Specifically, oral communication skills were ranked first, with fourteen groups of students voting for them and the voting point being the highest, at 23. “Confidence” attribute ranked second, was seen to be developed thanks to English courses with eleven-mentioned times and an 18-voting point registered. Twelve clusters of students stated that learning English at university could significantly contribute to strengthening their teamwork ability, which was in the third position with 17 points. While eight groups assumed that their problem-solving skills could be improved by joining group-work activities in English classes, other seven and five groups believed that English language education could facilitate the development of their proactiveness and information management skills. These three types of skills and attributes were calculated by 11, 10 and 8 points, respectively.

In previous research, possessing these skills was confirmed to lead to increased employability. For example, a study conducted by Suarta and colleagues (2017) revealed that candidates with good communication, flexible problem-solving skills, proactiveness and self-confidence were highly treasured by employers (Suerta et al., 2017). Regarding the context of Vietnam, because of the deep-rooted Confucian culture, many students are likely to strictly follow what the teachers instruct them (Nguyen et al., 2019), causing their lack of confidence, which may negatively affect their employability. Yet this study reveals that English language education can help provide students with the opportunities to develop essential soft skills and personal attributes, including those which are strongly expected by recruiters, such as oral communication, confidence and teamwork skills, to name a few, as found in the current study.

It was also found in the present research that in-class tasks and participation in the English-speaking club as a type of extra-curricular activity made different contributions to students' development of the five aforementioned types of soft skills and personal attributes. Based on this finding, this section will focus on discussing the roles of English pedagogical methods to sharpen students' psychological capital with regards to two aspects, in-class task implementation and extra-curricular activity encouragement.

In terms of in-class task implementation, it is necessary to mention students' learning styles. As discussed above, many Vietnamese students might be quite dependent on their teachers to access lessons due to the Confucius-based culture (Nguyen et al., 2019), which can restrict their employability. Accordingly, one of the solutions is to embed more diverse types of assignments, tasks or projects that encourage students to be more proactive and responsible for their learning, into the curriculum, teaching and learning. A study carried out in the Canadian context suggested that

English textbooks should include inter- and intra-personal skills in tasks that engage students in practising building rapport, shaking hands and asking questions, those that are often expected at the workplace (Bartel, 2018).

However, there are contents that need to be tailored to fit and maintain Asian identities, so Vietnamese lecturers can make some changes not only to serve the aforementioned purpose but also to create more chances for students to be self-reliant, critical and creative in their study. Activities like task-based projects, role-plays or self-presentations have been proven to be useful for this purpose (Aclan et al., 2016; Hanington & Renandya, 2017; Kong, 2018; Siyang, 2018; Tevdovska, 2015). In addition, when designing these activities, teachers may consider to clearly divide English lessons into three steps (pre-, while- and post-), each of which can help activate students' different types of soft skills and personal attributes. For example, in the pre-step, students are supposed to find and determine information to fit what they want to present before class; or while students are making presentations in front of their teachers and classmates, it is critical to encourage them to speak fluently, logically and confidently so as to avoid losing face while building confidence. As a result, information management and oral communication skills can be enhanced (Aclan et al., 2016).

Noticeably, the present study revealed the fact that students' development of soft skills and personal attributes was attributed to their communication with foreign teachers and doing optional exercises aimed at individuals was not found in earlier research. As for communication with foreign teachers, English is considered a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam, so there are still limited opportunities for their practice speaking English (Vo et al., 2018). As such, when the participants in this study were exposed to such opportunities, it is understandable for them, especially those who love English speaking, to feel excited and more engaged in their oral communication skills if guided well. This finding can be linked with a study about psychological factors influencing Japanese high school students' English communication behaviours showing that interacting with English native speakers in classes helped boost students' confidence (Ito, 2017). In the case of further exercises, in essence, they are similar to project-based tasks, except that while the latter focuses on group work, the former aims at individual students. In fact, additional tasks refer to what is called "Autonomy of choice" (AC) (Macaro, 2008), in which these types of exercises are optional and highly require students' commitment and voluntariness. Therefore, it is concluded in this study that those who are more self-motivated and take more responsibility for their own learning are more likely to improve their autonomy and proactiveness.

Regarding the English-speaking club, a type of extra-curricular activity (ECAs), research has shown that such activities are beneficial for students' improvement of soft skills and personal attributes. For example, ECAs such as community services, volunteer programmes or skill-focused clubs can make contributions to students' improvement of soft skills and personal attributes (Tran, 2017). Likewise, a study from Nguyen and Ho (2019) proved the effectiveness of ECAs in sharpening students' certain soft skills and attributes. Hence, English-speaking clubs should be promoted. Through this channel, students from different classes or majors who share the same

interest in English can meet with one another, thereby receiving several advantages. Firstly, interaction between participants is more likely to happen because they are exposed to opportunities to talk and exchange ideas on given topics, which can lead to their increase of confidence and openness to others. Secondly, similar to group-work tasks in class, there are academic games in which students have opportunities to cooperate and debate. Their problem-solving and team-building skills, therefore, can be developed. This was confirmed in a study by Kostikova and colleagues (2021). Thirdly, foreign teachers should be invited to join the clubs so that local students have the opportunity to practise speaking with them, improving their oral communication skills and self-confidence. In short, if English-speaking clubs are widely supported and effectively run, they can be a safe environment for students to strengthen their oral communication skills, teamwork ability, problem-solving skills, confidence level or even their proactiveness, partially thanks to the voluntariness of this activity.

## 8.6 Conclusion

The study has provided insights into how English language education contributes to students' development of soft skills and personal attributes. Firstly, six factors including communication skills, confidence, team-working ability, problem-solving skills, proactiveness and information management skills were found to be improved by virtue of English learning. Secondly, different types of in-class tasks and participation in English-speaking clubs, as an extra-curricular activity, were regarded as instrumental to students' varied levels of development of oral communication, information management skills, confidence and proactiveness. As such, the role of English teaching methods to students' psychological capital is also discussed in this chapter. It is suggested that extra-tasks and projects should be purposefully designed and implemented, and that extra-curricular activities should be promoted in order to build up students' certain soft skills and attributes. Possessing soft skills and personal attributes, including those found in this current study, has been proved to positively affect employability and employment outcomes (Bhaskar, 2015; Kumar & Kumar, 2016; Shukla & Kumar, 2017; Suarta et al., 2017; Tang, 2019). Therefore, English learning at tertiary education will benefit the development of graduates' psychological capital, an important type of employability capital (Tomlinson, 2017) that makes students more work-ready and benefit their career development in the long term.

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# Chapter 9

## The Role of English Language Learning Experiences in the Development of TESOL Preservice Teachers' Identity Capital



Minh Hue Nguyen and Xuan Minh Ngo

**Abstract** In our globalized world, English as a dominant language has become a means for enhancing employability, economic growth, transnational mobility, status, and prestige. In accordance with this, many education systems include English education at all schooling levels. As a result, English language learning has become a major part of many students' educational experiences. However, how this experience contributes to shaping their employability, especially employable identity, remains an open question. Aiming to address this gap, this chapter draws on (Tomlinson, M. Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education+ Training*, 59(4), pp. 338–352, 2017) model of graduate employability as a theoretical framework and uses a qualitative case study design. Based on data collected from narrative frames and individual interviews with two preservice teachers of English, the study identified the preservice teachers' levels of investment made toward English language learning, abilities to draw on English language learning experiences to articulate a narrative of employable identity, and self-concepts relating to future role as teachers of English. These findings show that the participants' English language learning experiences that spanned over many years contribute essentially to the development of their identity capital which they could use to develop and project themselves as employable graduate teachers. The chapter offers implications for English language teacher educators and future employers.

**Keywords** Employability · Identity capital · Narratives · English education · Teacher education

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## 9.1 English Education and English Language Teacher Education in Vietnam

Similar to many countries around the world, English is by far the most popular foreign language in Vietnam (Ngo, 2018a, 2018b; Nguyen et al., 2018) and recent estimates show that over 90% of Vietnamese students study it at all levels of education (Nguyen, 2016b; Tran et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the English proficiency of Vietnamese people as a whole remains rather modest (Le & Phan, 2013; Le, 2020; Ngo, 2018a, 2018b; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019) with a recent international survey (Education First, 2021) ranking the country 66th out of 112 participating nations and territories. The English language teaching (ELT) sector's disappointing performance has been attributed to a number of factors, including limited resources, large class sizes, the negative washback of grammar-based high-stakes tests, and students' low motivation; however, above all, a serious lack of qualified teachers has frequently been cited as the foremost reason (Le & Phan, 2013; Le, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

This shortage of competent teachers is, however, unsurprising given the Vietnamese scholars' critiques of the country's English teacher education system centrally managed by the Ministry of Education and Training (henceforth MOET) (Le, 2014; Ngo, 2021; Nguyen, 2015; Vu, 2017). Under the Ministry's mandatory guidelines, a typical four-year undergraduate curriculum in English teacher education is comprised of three domains, namely foundation (e.g., with courses in politics, Vietnamese language, and culture), specialization (e.g., linguistics), and pedagogy (e.g., teaching methods). As Le (2014) has observed, this model bears a striking similarity with "the applied science model" (p. 204) which places an inordinate emphasis on theories imparted by university lecturers—subject experts with little experience about students' target teaching contexts (i.e., secondary schools). Likewise, in a case study into Vietnamese and Australian teacher education programs, Nguyen (2013) found that both contextual knowledge and pedagogy were seriously neglected in the focal Vietnamese university's curriculum, accounting for less than 10% and 15% of the total credit.

To remedy this theory-laden curriculum, institutions often require their final-year student teachers to take an assessed school-based practicum which may last five weeks (Nguyen, 2015) or six weeks (Le, 2014). However, recent studies have revealed the ineffective partnerships between teacher training institutions and host schools (Nguyen, 2015) and the resultant disconnection between the university courses and the school-based practicum (Le, 2014). Because of this, student teachers, instead of adopting innovative methods introduced in their university courses, often resorted to uncritically following their school mentors' problematic teaching approaches to "survive classroom realities" (Le, 2014, p. 209). To compound matters further, when these under-prepared teachers enter service, their professional development opportunities are severely limited due to the heavy teaching schedule (Vu, 2017) and, if available, often exist in form of training workshops with university lecturers who understand little about English teaching in secondary schools (Le, 2015).

To overhaul English teaching and teacher education in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government launched Project 2020 (The Government of Vietnam, 2008), which was widely regarded as “the most significant and ambitious foreign language reform in modern Vietnam” (Ngo, 2018b, p. 48) and designated 85% of its nine-trillion-dong budget to upgrading teachers’ language proficiency and teaching methods (Le, 2020). To facilitate this ambitious teacher training scheme, the MOET issued Vietnam’s English Teacher Competency Framework in 2014 (henceforth ETCF), which was based on six different international frameworks and multiple sources of academic literature (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Le, 2020; Vu, 2019). The ETCF is comprised of five domains (knowledge of subject, knowledge of teaching, knowledge of learners, attitudes and values, and practice and context of language teaching), each of which is developed into numerous competencies, with each competency then being elaborated into performance indicators (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Vu, 2019). The idea behind the framework is to professionalize the English language teacher in Vietnam, turning them into “professional practitioners with adaptive expertise” instead of “teaching machines” (Vu, 2019, p. 269). While teachers’ performance standards are used in many contexts to guide the preparation of teachers, it has also been argued that there needs to be a broader view on the quality of graduates which take into account the capitals that they accumulate both within and beyond the formal higher education course to become “employable” (Tomlinson, 2017). Despite Vietnam’s ETCF’s seemingly all-inclusive domains, competencies, and performance indicators, the question of “What capitals should an employable teacher of English have?” remains open.

As English language teacher educators, we recognize that teacher identity or teachers’ self-image and self-awareness is central to the professionalization of language teachers (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Pennington & Richards, 2016), and it has been the focus of research in a number of Vietnamese studies (Dang, 2013; Le & Phan, 2013; Nguyen, 2016a, 2016b; Phan, 2007; Phan & Phan, 2006). However, among these studies, none has examined the link between English language learning experiences and English language teachers’ identity capital, a concept proposed by Tomlinson (2017) to refer to a graduate’s “abilities to draw on experiences and articulate a personal narrative” aligning to their future work (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 345), despite the acknowledged impact of schooling experiences on teacher identity in general education (Izadinia, 2013). There has been some interest in the influence of language learning experiences on Vietnamese English language teachers’ practices and beliefs (Ngo, 2018a; Nguyen, 2017a). However, these studies did not examine the direct links between English language learning experiences and teacher identity, and they involved the participation of experienced rather than preservice teachers. Against this backdrop, we are particularly interested in knowing what forms of identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017) Vietnamese preservice teachers of English develop through their English language learning experiences, hence the focus of this chapter.

## 9.2 Language Teacher Identity and Language Learning Experiences

In the broader international field of TESOL, teacher identity has become an established sub-field in its own right. Commenting on the central role of identity, Norton and Toohey (2011) wrote, “over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of interest in identity and language learning, and ‘identity’ now features in most encyclopedias and handbooks of language learning and teaching” (p. 413). Researchers tend to agree that understanding teacher identity is essential in understanding and supporting the development of language teachers (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Pennington & Richards, 2016). In the graduate employability literature, identity has been viewed as a form of capital that a person can draw on in acquiring employment and performing their work (Clarke, 2018; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017).

As previously explained, teacher identity as a concept involves teachers’ self-image and self-awareness as teachers in their community of practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Teacher identity is not a fixed entity but “a fluid, dynamic, multi-dimensional and ongoing developmental process which shapes and is shaped by the complexities of personal and contextual issues” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 128). In this process, contextual and personal factors have strong influence on language teachers’ identity formation. Contextual factors such as mentoring relationships (Nguyen, 2017b, 2019; Trent, 2011, 2013), interaction with peer preservice teachers (Dang, 2013), and “‘multimembership’ in ‘multicommunities’” (Nguyen, 2016a) have been documented as influential in language teachers’ identity formation. Personal factors, including self-positioning through metaphors (Nguyen, 2016b) and sense of competence in terms of language proficiency and pedagogy (Le & Phan, 2013), have been identified as those shaping language teacher identity.

Especially, in preservice English language teacher education, preservice teachers’ linguistic background has been documented as having a strong relationship with their identity. For example, a non-native English speaking background and associated English language learning experiences can strengthen preservice teachers’ sense of confidence and competence in a number of areas such as knowledge of learning strategies and grammar as well as empathy with learners (Miller, 2007, 2009). On the other hand, non-native preservice teachers may feel a sense of inadequacies in fluency, pronunciation, and pedagogical skills in relation to English language teaching and the need to improve their proficiency and gain teaching experiences (Miller, 2007; Richards & Farrell, 2011). In the same vein, Pennington and Richards (2016) argued that, “A person’s identity as a language teacher relates to the person’s language background and language proficiency” (p. 11). This implies that the person’s experiences in learning the language and the outcomes of that process have strong connection to how they represent his/herself as a teacher of the language.

The current literature on graduate employability predominantly discusses the development of identity capital, among other graduate capitals, in relation to graduates' participation in curricular and extracurricular activities around the higher education course (Tomlinson, 2017). However, identity formation may have strong connections with the experiences graduates had earlier in their life, such as their earlier schooling experiences and "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). In the age of neoliberalism and globalization, English is viewed as a means to enhance employability, transnational mobility, economic development, status, and prestige (Enns-Kananen et al., 2014; Shin, 2016). Around the globe, English education has become an expanding industry both in public and private sectors (Kubanyiova, 2020; Murray, 2020). In Vietnam, as mentioned before, 90% of Vietnamese students study English at all levels of schooling (Nguyen, 2016b; Tran et al., 2016). Consequently, English language learning experiences, which span from formal experiences in the schooling system to informal experiences in private classes and independent learning, have become a significant part of many preservice teachers' personal histories. Although our literature review above shows that there have been periodical studies into preservice English language teachers' non-native backgrounds and identity (Miller, 2007, 2009; Richards & Farrell, 2011), where preservice teachers' self-concepts as non-native speaking teachers are focused upon, there is a dearth of research into how non-native preservice teachers of English develop professional identity in relation to their English learning experiences.

The present study aims to address the aforementioned gaps in the literature. The following research question guided the investigation: *What forms of identity capital do preservice English language teachers in Vietnam develop through English language learning experiences?*

### 9.3 Methods

The present study used a qualitative case study design because this approach is particularly suited for exploring complex issues where the boundary between the problem of interest and context is not clear-cut (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) such as the influence of distinct English language learning environments on teacher identity capital development. The study was conducted at Babel (pseudonym), a public university that trains foreign language teachers and interpreters in Northern Vietnam. The two focal participants were Ha and Thu (pseudonyms), both enrolling in the teacher education program at Babel's English Faculty. Their selection was initially due to their prompt and enthusiastic acceptance of the second author's invitation to participate in the project. This willingness to participate is an essential consideration since enthusiastic participants are more likely to provide in-depth accounts required in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, since this research focused on the influence of language learning experiences on preservice teachers' identity formation, Ha and Thu were chosen to represent two vastly different language learning

environments, namely the privileged urban setting and the underprivileged mountainous and suburban context (see below for further details). This sampling strategy, also known as maximum variation sampling, was intended to ensure the richness of data and facilitate cross-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ha was born and grew up in an inner suburb of Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city and received formal English instruction right from Grade 1 in her primary school. During her junior secondary school days, Ha attended a high-ranking private school. She later had the chance to develop her English further at a top-notch foreign language specializing senior high school and the selective fast-track English program at Babel. Ha aspired to become an IELTS trainer after graduating from Babel. Unlike Ha, Thu came from a sparsely populated, mountainous commune in the North East of Vietnam, where most people, including Thu, were members of ethnic minority groups. Hence, she was not exposed to English until Grade 6 when she attended a junior secondary boarding school for ethnic minority students located 15 km from her house. Afterward, to continue her education, Thu had to leave her hometown and go to a boarding school for exchange and ethnic minority students in an outer suburb of Hanoi. Nevertheless, the English lessons there were also delivered in the grammar-translation method similar to those at her junior secondary school. It was only when she attended Babel that Thu could experience the communicative language teaching approach and be given the chance to develop all four skills.

Our data collection and analysis were mainly guided by Tomlinson's (2017) graduate employability concept of identity capital, which is defined as "the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability", "abilities to draw on experiences and articulate a personal narrative" aligning to their future work, and "self-concepts" relating to future employment (p. 345). Tomlinson (2017) particularly highlighted the role of experiences and personal narratives in constructing identity capital toward employability, arguing that these narratives allow graduates to present their employable self through compelling stories that convey their identity to impress employers. Furthermore, we also drew on Norton's (2016) concept of investment due to its prominence in the field of language education and its compatibility with Tomlinson's (2017) framework. While Tomlinson (2017) viewed *investment* as the efforts "a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability" (p. 345), Norton (2016) suggested that "learners invest in the target language if they anticipate acquiring a wider range of symbolic and material resources that will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (p. 445). Moreover, Norton (2016) argued that "a learner's imagined identity and hopes for the future will impact his or her investment in the language and literacy practices" (p. 447).

In line with Tomlinson's (2017) emphasis on personal narratives and Norton's (2016) argument on imagined identity, we collected data on each participant's English learning experiences and their formation of identity capital across past, present, and future from a set of narrative frames followed by an in-depth semi-structured narrative interview. Initially, participants were asked to complete a set of narrative frames which are a series of sentence starters provided to assist them in composing a story

detailing their language learning experiences, and the associated thoughts and feelings (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) (see Appendix A). This instrument was utilized because its scaffolding makes the task of narrating experiences less daunting for participants, while its explicit structure ensures that key information could be efficiently obtained and analyzed (Barkhuizen, 2014; Wette & Furneaux, 2018). To triangulate and explore in greater depth the data collected from these frames, each participant was then invited to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview which was a sensible compromise between the reliability of the standardized interview and the freedom of the open interview (Prior, 2018). Following the advice of Creswell and Poth (2018), the research team prepared and piloted an interview schedule with a student teacher of the same cohort as the participants. During both interviews, the participants were allowed to communicate in their preferred language, which was Vietnamese in both cases, while an appropriate level of rapport was also maintained so that they would not hesitate to provide accurate and complete information. In accordance with Prior (2018), the interviews started with general questions to give interviewees more freedom to share information, followed by appropriate prompts and probes to explore the topics in further detail.

The interviews were first transcribed, and the transcripts, together with the completed narrative frames, were imported into NVivo12 for data management and thematic analysis. Similar to our data collection, our coding was informed by Tomlinson's (2017) conceptualization of identity capital, which involves "investment", "abilities to draw on experiences and articulate a personal narrative" aligning to their future work, and "self-concepts" relating to future employment (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 345). Interview excerpts that were used in this chapter were then translated into English by the first author and crosschecked by the second author for accuracy.

## 9.4 Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data about Ha and Thu showed evidence of their identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017) in relation to future employment as English language teachers. Their identity capital as seen through the narratives was manifested through their investment in the language and literacy practices (Norton, 2016), abilities to draw on experiences in establishing their employable self, and self-concepts in relation to English language teaching. The data also showed the important role of the participants' English language learning experiences in shaping their identity capital. The findings are presented and discussed below.



### **9.4.1 Case Study 1: Ha**

#### **9.4.1.1 Investment in English Language Learning and Literacy Practices**

Ha had actively invested in the English language since the beginning of her schooling. She recounted, “Actually, I started learning English in Grade 1 at school and concurrently going to extra English classes [...] with foreign teachers”. Ha’s early investment in English language learning seemed to be consistent with the trend of the majority of Vietnamese students, especially those living in big cities (Nguyen, 2016b; Tran et al., 2016). After one semester, Ha stopped learning English at school due to the MOET’s directive that students could only learn English from Grade 3, and she resumed her formal English learning in Grade 3.

Another example of Ha’s investment in the English language was her attendance of extra English classes from Grade 8 to prepare for her selective senior secondary entrance examinations as, she said, “my goal was to go to an English specialised school”. This shows that Ha not only invested in the language financially. She also invested a great amount of effort and time as she aspired to go to a selective school specialized in English language. In Grade 9, she showed further investment when taking part in the district’s English talent contest and this led to a sense of achievement because, as Ha said, “My teacher came to know that I am good at English”.

Ha eventually passed the entrance exam into an English specialized high school and had the opportunities to experience project-based learning in Grade 10 and 11. Ha and her classmates were encouraged to concentrate their efforts on projects that required them to develop and use a range of skills. However, this approach was discontinued in Ha’s final high school year when a senior teacher took over the class and reset her class into the university entrance exam-coaching mode. Toward the end of her schooling, Ha had developed a high level of proficiency in English thanks to her investment in formal and informal English language learning over the years. At his point, Ha said, “there was no suitable extra classes for me because my proficiency level was higher than those classes, and classes that prepare for university entrance examinations were too easy, so I wouldn’t learn anything new”. She further explained that, “If I want to prepare for the English exam for university entrance, I have to study by myself” because “my school English teacher prepared for the exam but it was also too easy”. No longer finding the formal and extra English classes useful in preparing herself for the university entrance examination, Ha invested in enhancing her English skills by independent studies. Evidently, Ha’s “hopes for the future” (Norton, 2016, p. 447) in striving for university admission was the driving force behind her investment in English.

Upon high school completion, Ha, with her interest in English and teaching and family support, decided to enroll in Babel where she chose to sit competitive exams to enter the fast-track program reserved for the top ten percent of students instead of continuing in the mainstream program. In the first two years at university, Ha

completed four language skill-based courses each semester with numerous project-based assessment tasks. She considered learning in this course “happy and comfortable” because “my ability is constantly extended”, as opposed to the less demanding mainstream program. Ha also liked the fast-track program because “everyone else is at my level; it helps to develop many areas” and “it’s like, I get to know everything”. Ha’s preference for a learning environment where all her peers were at a compatibly high level and there were many learning activities to develop her skills showed her continuing investment in enhancing her language skills and developing her “cultural capital and social power” (Norton, 2016, p. 445). She invested in working hard and engaging with learning English in the fast-track program even when it was more challenging than in the mainstream program. While completing the teacher education program, Ha further invested in an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) course at a private language center to further enhance her English ability and work toward her future employment (Tomlinson, 2017) or imagined identity (Norton, 2016) as an IELTS trainer in future, which she revealed in the interview.

#### **9.4.1.2 Abilities to Draw on English Language Learning Experiences and Articulate a Personal Narrative**

Not only committed to long-term and lasting investment in the English language, Ha also demonstrated her ability to draw on her rich and diverse language learning experiences in developing her identity capital, which is an important aspect of identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017). When speaking about her future career as a teacher, Ha said:

I hope that my English language learning journey..., the background knowledge and lived experiences I gained through this journey, will become a good source of inspiration for my students. Like, I’ve always been interested in English and that interest has brought me this far.

Here, Ha articulated a personal narrative linking her past learning experiences to her future identity as a teacher. She saw herself as an inspirational, resourceful example of successful English language learning and hoped that her future students would benefit from what she had to offer. In the same vein, she wrote in the narrative frames, “I want to be able to tell stories, to live what I share, what I teach and not just repeating the textbook”. In addition, Ha also commented on the value of her “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) in developing her identity capital:

For all of my teachers, I picked up some of the great qualities that I love about them; for my IELTS teacher, I am preparing myself for an international environment, which means teaching someone who don’t speak my mother tongue.

In this extract, Ha seemed to indicate that her learning to become an English language teacher began as she started learning the language and observed different teaching methods. She placed great importance on the role of her teachers and her exposure to their teaching in the development of her identity, as she said, “I am able to draw

on their effective teaching strategies and form my own teacher identity”. This is in line with Lortie’s (1975) contention that teachers’ prior learning experiences have strong influence on the development of teachers. In particular, Ha was particularly interested in developing her teaching identity by drawing on the experiences she had in the private IELTS course taught by the Filipino teacher:

When I learned IELTS with my Filipino teacher, she offered very effective tips for practice and development of my language competences rather than telling me how to speak. I mean she didn’t expect a fixed way to respond to the speaking section, and I like to follow that teaching approach.

It seemed that the Filipino teacher’s teaching style had strong impact on Ha both in terms of English language proficiency and teaching identity. Ha indicated that she would like to adopt many of the strategies she experienced under the Filipino teacher’s teaching and apply them in her future practice. In the narratives, Ha kept her future identity as an IELTS trainer in perspective, which shows a strong connection between her imagined identity, her investment in the language, and how she capitalized on her experiences in learning the language.

#### 9.4.1.3 Self-Concepts

The data also revealed Ha’s self-concepts in relation to her future job as a teacher of English. When responding to the question, “Which parts of your long English language learning journey contributed the most to your English proficiency?”, Ha said:

Perhaps the senior secondary years when I got to do meaningful and practical learning activities. Of course, I’ve always loved learning English since I was little, so my progress has been steady. However, in senior secondary years, my English ability was consolidated and shaped into its best form. I don’t remember having any difficulty communicating with foreigners from the first time, so I just engaged in such communication naturally. Some of my university peers seem to be nervous and uncomfortable when communicating in English, but naturally, I’ve never had that feeling.

She perceived herself as having high English language proficiency and an ability to communicate comfortably and effectively in English. Ha attributed this to her many years of English language learning experiences, especially her senior secondary years at the language specialized school. Language proficiency has been reported as an essential domain of language teacher knowledge (Nguyen, 2013; Richards, 1998). This finding not only supports past research on the role of self-perceived language knowledge and skills in language teacher identity (Miller, 2007, 2009; Nguyen, 2017b). It also confirms the role of prior learning experiences (Lortie, 1975), especially investment in language practices (Norton, 2015, 2016) in shaping these self-concepts and consequently teacher identity.

When projecting herself toward her future teaching, although Ha appeared to be confident in terms of her language proficiency, she had some concerns about her teaching skills, as she said in the following interview extract:

R: You said in the narrative frames that your strong point is language proficiency or language competence. Is there anything else?

H: Amongst everything, I think I'm best at that. I mean I have sufficient subject matter knowledge to teach. But when comparing myself with my peers, I find that my teaching skills are not as good as theirs. For example, in the microteaching session in class, [...] I felt that I was subject to public criticism and judgement. It's the same when I sit in the class as a student and form thoughts about my teachers' instructions such as 'They could do this, they could do that'. Therefore, I'm still nervous teaching in front of a class.

This extract shows that Ha was well aware of the important role of her high English language proficiency in her future teaching. However, she was also conscious of her anxiety about delivering lessons in front of students. This anxiety resonates with findings of previous studies where non-native preservice teachers feel a lack of confidence in pedagogical skills (Miller, 2007; Richards & Farrell, 2011). Further, it also seemed to be rooted in her other identity as a student, who would form judgments about her teacher's instruction. This exemplifies how preservice teachers' learning experiences contribute to shaping their teacher identity.

## 9.4.2 Case Study 2: Thu

### 9.4.2.1 Investment in English Language Learning and Literacy Practices

While Ha actively invested in learning English since Grade 1, both within the formal curricula and in private classes, Thu's English learning experiences were mostly associated with formal schooling. She started learning English in Grade 6, and the school strictly followed the MOET's textbook. Similar to the situation of English education in many public schools in Vietnam (Le & Phan, 2013; Le, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019) in and other countries (Murray, 2020), English was taught using the grammar-translation method, focusing mainly on grammar and vocabulary. However, Thu said, "At that time, I didn't feel that English was important, so I didn't have strong impression with the subject and teaching". At senior secondary school, the curriculum and teaching that Thu engaged with were similar to her junior secondary school, except the teachers were better qualified. At this stage, Thu had started to realize the benefits of learning English and invested in the subject more. She said:

When I started senior secondary school, I felt that English would be important in the future, so I focused on learning English more and wanted to become a teacher of English.

Realizing the role of English in contemporary society, as she finished high school, Thu decided to apply to Babel, which she regarded as "one of the best institutions in English education" based on her Internet research. This reveals that Thu had started to agentively invest in searching for a good institution to continue learning English and to learn to teach the language. Such investment was evidently driven by her understanding of the benefits of learning English in enhancing her cultural capital and social status (Ennser-Kananen et al., 2017; Price, 2014; Shin, 2016).

Different from Ha, who attended the fast-track English program at Babel, Thu's mainstream program at the university included 10 courses in English, divided into three streams (general English, academic English, and exam preparation). Thu appeared to invest in learning English both in class and independently much more than when she was at school. She commented on the intensity of English language learning at university:

All the subjects have deadlines. At first, I was not used to that and I had to focus on developing my language skills, so managing the deadlines was really challenging. Also, my classmates were much more capable, so I felt a lot of pressure when working in groups.

Despite the challenges mentioned in this quote, Thu expressed tremendous satisfaction with these courses, which offered ample opportunities to practice language skills:

The deadlines are important [...] because there is not much time in class to practice English, so there needs to be homework, such as recording your speaking, which was then marked by the teacher. So, I find the homework useful because it provides opportunities for practicing the language by myself.

This showed Thu's high level of investment in literacy practices and commitment to developing her language skills to make up for the gaps in her ability due to the unproductive experiences learning English at school. Although not mentioned explicitly, Thu seemed to be investing in addressing the gaps between her current ability level resulted from her past English language learning experiences and her future identity as a teacher of the language, which is the kind of investment discussed by Norton (2015, 2016).

#### **9.4.2.2 Abilities to Draw on English Language Learning Experiences and Articulate a Personal Narrative**

Similar to Ha, Thu also considered her English learning experiences as a type of resource that she could use in her future teaching. This exemplified a form of identity capital (Tomlinson, 2017) that Thu developed. She wanted to "share with students the learning tips and experiences gained throughout my learning". Thu had only learned English at school, and the English education programs she attended were grammar focused. Although Thu was frustrated with the way English was taught at school, she also appreciated the good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary she was able to develop through these experiences. This finding is in line with the findings of past research in highlighting the resources that non-native preservice teachers have and the way they shape teacher identity (Miller, 2007, 2009; Nguyen, 2017b, 2019). In response to an interview question about how her English education experiences in schools contributed to her future teaching, Thu said, "It developed my content knowledge. [...] because although language skills were neglected, much attention was paid to grammar structures and vocabulary". The following extract further demonstrated Thu's view on the essential role of grammar and vocabulary in English education at school levels:

T: Regarding grammar, at secondary level, grammar is definitely very important if students want to take university entrance exams. So it needs to be taught, not a little but in-depth.

R: But would you use a different teaching approach?

T: In terms of grammar, I find it dry and many students don't like it. [...] High school teachers often teach the grammar rules then let students do exercises. I think I would provide examples first then teach the grammar rules so it is easier for students to remember. [...] For example, with the present simple tense, students would already be using it in their conversations. I would use their own sentences as examples to teach the grammar rule. That way they will remember for longer.

R: Would you want to include more listening and speaking at high school levels?

T: Yes, listening, speaking and especially pronunciation. It needs to be correct right from the beginning; otherwise, it will be very difficult to correct later on.

Acknowledging the role of grammar in high school English education and university entrance examinations, Thu emphasized that it should be taught more effectively. Based on her experiences having “dry” grammar lessons, she projected her future teaching to be more engaging by involving students in giving authentic examples before discussing the grammar points. The last part of the extract also showed that Thu would focus on communication and pronunciation skills alongside grammar and vocabulary. Thu's commitment to teaching communication skills was because through her own experiences, she became well aware of the disadvantages of her lack of communication skills. In reflecting on her English learning experiences at university, Thu said, “My classmates were much more capable, so I felt a lot of pressure when working in groups”, and “At first, I was frightened as I couldn't catch much in listening. Yeah, I was most scared of speaking because I couldn't speak”.

Moreover, Thu also demonstrated her ability to draw on her experiences learning English at university in forming her future teaching identity.

There are a number of ideas I can learn from my university teachers of English, such as learning activities they organised and their feedback strategies. For example, in writing, they often provided feedback on idea logic as well as common and recurring mistakes, instead of minor mistakes.

The data extracts presented in this section showed that in developing her teaching identity, Thu was drawing on the less productive learning experiences at school as well as the perceived effective teaching methods used by teachers at university. Here, Thu seemed to draw a close link between her past English language learning experiences and her imagined identity as a teacher in future, which formed an important part of her identity capital in the graduate employability model (Tomlinson, 2017).

### 9.4.2.3 Self-Concepts

In projecting her future role as a teacher of English, Thu perceived herself as an approachable, motivating, and at the same time strict teacher. She discussed these in the interview:

R: What do you think are your strong points as a teacher?

T: I think I'm quite approachable to students to help them feel more relaxed in my class.

R: So you would be approachable, but you also mentioned that you are a strict person?

T: Yeah, strict in terms of setting class ground rules for students, but approachable in terms of sharing with students... [...], guiding students.

R: How would you help students feel more relaxed?

T: I would do that by motivating them to learn.

Thu also wrote in the narrative frames, "I will also try to orientate them to learn English by themselves because I cannot teach them everything in a limited time in class. If students know how to learn English effectively, they can learn no matter where without teachers' instructions". In these self-concepts (Tomlinson, 2017), Thu seemed to be developing an identity that she considered as beneficial to students' learning. The way Thu positioned herself was purposeful, as she would like to be approachable and motivating in order to help her students feel relaxed and enjoy learning English while being strict would help her students stay engaged.

When situating herself as a teacher in the classroom, Thu expressed some negative self-concepts:

My teacher-fronted presentation skills and explanation skills are areas where I am currently not confident. [...] I speak too fast and I often tremble. If I'm not well prepared, I will tremble. I speak too fast so I'm worried that students will not understand what I say. (laugh)

This self-awareness is similar to Ha's self-perception discussed in the previous section. Both preservice teachers were nervous in delivering lessons. While Ha's anxiety seemed to be influenced by her identity as a student, Thu's anxiety was due to her speaking speed and inadequate preparedness. Being aware of the causes of her anxiety, Thu identified strategies for overcoming these, including "more practice in teaching through part-time teaching jobs and observation of my peers and my teachers' teaching". This is in line with the findings of past research that preservice teachers feel the need to gain teaching experiences (Miller, 2007; Richards & Farrell, 2011) to develop their desirable teacher identity.

## 9.5 Conclusion and Implications

The graduate employability model developed by Tomlinson (2017), especially the concept of identity capital, supported this investigation into the question "*What forms of identity capital do preservice English language teachers in Vietnam develop through English language learning experiences?*". The forms of identity capital found included: investment in English language learning and literacy practices, abilities to draw on English language learning experiences and articulate a personal narrative, and self-concepts. It was found that both preservice teachers invested remarkably in learning the target language at school and university. They were able to draw on these experiences and articulate a personal narrative in light of their

imagined identity as a teacher of English in future. They also formed a number of self-concepts in relation to their future work as English language teachers. The study offers a number of insights that could be useful for preservice English language teacher education in developing graduate teachers' employability based on identity capital and for employers in selecting teachers for their English education programs.

First, Ha and Thu's stories reflect the neoliberal trend that many preservice teachers of English have rich English language learning experiences which span over many years before they enter teacher education (Murray, 2020). The study found that such experiences played an important role in shaping the participants' identity capital, which in turn was considered an essential aspect of their employability. Such wealth of experience in learning the target language needs to be recognized and capitalized on in preservice teacher education programs in efforts to develop preservice teachers' capitals for employability. With increased international mobility and the resultant changing face of the field of TESOL (Nguyen, 2019), "the majority of the ELT teaching force globally comes from, and teaches in, settings well outside the 'inner circle' [i.e., Anglophone countries]" (Freeman, 2020, p. 10). Therefore, rather than focusing on native/non-native speakerism, which "cannot be fully defined linguistically" (Freeman, 2020, p. 12), preservice teachers should be empowered by engaging in discussion about what capitals they can develop and have accumulated over their years of education.

Second, it is important to also acknowledge the diverse levels of language experience and competence that preservice teachers have and how this may impact differently on the development of their identity capital. Preservice teachers like Ha, who had successful language learning experiences in elite schools and private centers and had developed a high level of language proficiency from their investment in the language, should be encouraged to create narratives drawing on the success of their learning in articulating their identity capital. It is also important to understand what areas they feel a lack of confidence in, such as pedagogical skills, and provide support contingent on this. However, Thu would belong with the majority of English language learners, whose language learning may be limited to the formal schooling system. Formal English education is often criticized for its exam-focused curriculum using grammar-translation method (Murray, 2020). In many contexts, including Vietnam, high-stake examinations also do not assess communication skills (Murray, 2020). Consequently, many preservice teachers' communication skills are not well developed when they enter teacher education. In order to support them in developing identity capital, they should have opportunities to articulate narratives based on the profound grammar and vocabulary knowledge they have gained through their education experiences. In addition, teacher education curriculum should provide ample opportunities for them to develop their communication skills to bridge the gaps between their current level and the demands of their projected role. Based on the participants' narratives, Babel, the teacher education institution where Ha and Thu studied, seemed to provide an exemplary curriculum in this sense since it recognized the lack of communicative competence preservice teachers have on entry and reserved a significant portion of the curriculum for developing their communication



skills, which supports the findings of Nguyen (2013) that English language proficiency development subjects make up the largest part of the English language teacher education curriculum.

Finally, the study not only confirms Tomlinson’s (2017) conceptualization of identity capital but also expands the conceptualization to include narratives of activities preservice teachers engaged in long before they started the higher education course. Alongside the development of teacher knowledge and skills within the curriculum, English language teacher education needs to create spaces for preservice teachers to articulate a narrative connecting their future identity and past learning experiences. Employers should also set selection criteria that not only focus on teacher qualifications and teaching experiences, but also their learning experiences in the language they teach as this is in most cases the richest resources that preservice teachers bring to teacher education and subsequently to employment (Murray, 2020).

### Appendix A: Example of Narrative Frames

Part 1: Primary school [Please skip this part if you started learning English in secondary school].

I started learning in (1) ..... [year] when I was (2) ..... years old. I had (3) ..... periods of English a week, and the course book was (4) ..... Most of the class time was spent on (5) ..... [What skills? What elements?] What I loved most about these English classes was that (6) ..... What I did not like was that (7) .....

### Appendix B: Example of Interview Questions

#### Interview 1

1. Tell me about your experiences learning English?
2. How did those experiences contribute to your future job as an English teacher?
3. Which part of your English learning journey contributed the most to your English language proficiency? What are the most important elements of that part?

## Interview 2

1. What do you think makes a good English class?
2. What qualities and skills should a good English teacher have?
3. Tell me about a teacher of English that you regard as your role model. (Will you try to follow/ replicate his/ her style?)
4. How do you describe yourself as a teacher of English in future?
5. What is your current English teaching philosophy? Will it change in future? (How/why?)
6. What do you think are your strengths as a future teacher of English? How did you develop these?
7. What areas are you working on to improve your teaching ability? Why do you want to focus on these?
8. What ingredients in your English language learning experiences would you bring into your future teaching?
9. How will your teachers of English and classmates influence the ways you will teach?
10. What do you think are your responsibilities as a teacher of English in future? Why do you think so?

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**Part III**  
**English Language Education in Vietnam:**  
**Current Practices and Challenges**

# Chapter 10

## Graduates' Feedback on the Contribution of General English Courses to Their English Skills for Work Purposes



Tran Le Huu Nghia , Nguyen Phuong Anh, Anh Thi Nguyen,  
and Nguyen Thi My Duyen

**Abstract** This chapter begins Part III that assesses the effectiveness of English language education in Vietnam and challenges that hinder the effectiveness. It reports a study that examines current employees' feedback on their experiences with the General English courses offered by their former universities. The data includes 159 responses to the survey from graduates currently working in different professional sectors. The analysis reveals that overall the employees found that the English courses equipped them with good English knowledge and skills that can support their English use at work to some extent. However, several aspects of the English courses can be further improved to better prepare students for the world of work: (i) theory-based curriculum, (ii) unauthenticity of teaching activities, learning materials, and assessment tasks, (iii) a lack of ongoing feedback from using formative assessment so that students can improve their weaknesses, and (iv) students' inability to self-regulate their learning. We discuss measures to improve such inhibitors so that the General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities can be more effective in preparing their students' English skills for work purposes.

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## 10.1 Introduction

Every year, a large number of students graduate from universities with high hopes of securing a decent job offer within a short period of time. For example, in 2018, there were 325,171 graduates from 39 comprehensive universities in Australia (Universities Australia, 2020); the number of graduates in Malaysia in the same year was 4.94 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2020). While the job market is full of fresh candidates with university degrees, employers still struggle to find suitable candidates who match their requirements (Dolce et al., 2020). According to the latest report of International Labour Organization (ILO), the percentage of youth unemployment rates around the world was at 13.6%, and it is expected to increase to 13.7% and 13.8% in 2020 and 2021 respectively. Although the unemployment rate among fresh graduates is skyrocketing, higher education expansion continues in every country (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016). Thus, universities are blamed for collecting tuition payments but fail to prepare career-readiness for their students (Tran, 2018a).

In order to solve this problem, many universities organize activities to train students in soft skills via curriculum-based or extra-curricular activities (Tran, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c), and service-learning activities (Kelles & Ryan, 2015), internships (Shoenfelt et al., 2013), or field trips (Chmielewski-Raimon et al., 2016). Despite some success in improving graduates' work skills, employers have kept lamenting about new employees' work-readiness, especially in non-English speaking contexts where internationalization process is taking place rapidly. In such contexts, on top of essential employability skills such as communication (in their mother tongue), teamwork, problem-solving, etc., graduates are expected to be able to use a foreign language fluently to work collaboratively with international business partners and clients (Dolce et al., 2020; Ritter et al., 2018; Tan & Laswad, 2018; Tsirkas et al., 2020).

In the last three decades, Vietnam, a non-English speaking country, has been on a remarkable socio-economic transformation since the 1986-dated Doi Moi (Renovation) policy, which aimed for economic reforms and attracting foreign investment. Under such a policy, a central management system was formally disbanded, and the government has shifted to a market-driven economy since the mid-1980s (Fan et al., 2019). The Doi Moi contributed to promoting entrepreneurship and improving agricultural production and industrialization, all of which fostered urbanization (Beresford, 2008; Kirk & Nguyen, 2009). As a result, the country has witnessed a rapid growth rate of over 5% since 1988 (Vo & Ho, 2021). With this shift in political and economic orientation, there has been an influx of foreign investment from many countries such as the United States of America, Australia, or the European Union, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Between 1995 and 2017, the total foreign invested sector in Vietnam has increased from 5 million USD to over 25 billion USD (Anh et al., 2019).

With the socio-economic boom and foreign investment, the demand for graduates with proficient foreign language skills is rocketing in the country. Despite the



variety of foreign languages required for jobs in international business, English as a lingua franca is in high demand (Ton & Pham, 2010). A majority of job advertisements demand applicants to provide English certificates to fulfill the job requirements (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Several reforms have been launched to improve the teaching and learning of English, aiming to produce graduates who can use English effectively for work purposes (Nhung, 2019). Unfortunately, despite significant efforts, a majority of Vietnamese students, who had studied English for seven years, are unable to command their English for daily conversations (Bui et al., 2019). Hence, it is essential to investigate how Vietnamese universities are preparing English skills for their students. Otherwise, graduates of Vietnamese higher education will be disadvantaged in their own home labor market and fail to join the international market in this increasingly globalized world.

In this chapter, we will report a study about the effectiveness of English language courses offered by Vietnamese universities with regard to meeting work requirements using graduates' experiences. Although the study is exploratory in nature, it provides a snapshot on how well such English courses have prepared students for their future work roles. The rest of the chapter will be structured as follows. Following a discussion about the role of English skills as a valuable asset for graduates' employability in non-English speaking countries, we will discuss English teaching and learning reforms in Vietnam as the background for our study. After the method section, we will present the findings and discuss how English courses can better prepare Vietnamese students for their future careers.

## **10.2 English Skills as a Valuable Asset for Graduates' Employability**

Although the concept of "employability" has been debated in different studies for decades, scholars seem to support Yorke (2004, p. 8) who describes "employability" as a "set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes—which makes graduates more likely to gain employability and be successful in their chosen occupations". Elaborating on Yorke's framework, Oliver (2015, p. 63) defines employability as the abilities to "discern, acquire, adapt, and continually enhance their skills, understands and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaning paid and unpaid work that can benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". Adding to the literature of employability, Tomlinson (2017) proposed an employability capital framework, including human capital, cultural capital, identity capital, social capital, and psychological capital that graduates should achieve in order to enhance their employment and career prospects. Although researchers hold different beliefs on what constitutes graduate employability, they all want to understand what makes a graduate qualified to the job market.

Due to the impact of globalization, students are expected to possess English skills as an international language communication. Even in English speaking countries, English skills are considered as an important employability capitals which can secure a good job (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2016). In Australia, employers expect graduates to perform high-level oral and written communication skills in English to compete within the international market (Graduate Careers Australia, 2012). Similarly, Tran et al. (2020) found that investment in English language capital was crucial for international graduates who aimed to get their work visa and accumulate their job opportunities in Australia.

In non-English speaking countries, English language skills are seen as soft skills which have been found to be a determinant of graduates' employment and career prospects. First of all, graduates who have good English language skills can enhance their opportunities for getting a job. For example, Clement and Murugavel (2015) found that good English communication skills led to better employment prospects among engineering graduates in India. Since English is chosen as the official working language for trading among the ASEAN regional economic integration (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015), English language skills can help Malaysian graduates get a high rate of employability (Abdul Kadir et al., 2015). In Vietnam, over 50% of management jobs in different sectors require applicants to perform advanced English communication skills to negotiate and present their organizations to overseas clients and potential business partners (Doan & Hamid, 2019). In addition, an English language proficiency can affect employees' job promotion. For example, Ting et al. (2017) clarified that Malaysian employers only promoted some employees with a high level of English language proficiency to be executives who had the ability to communicate with staffs and clients sufficiently. Similarly, Dash et al. (2020) found that most Malaysian employers considered a qualified manager as a self-motivated person with an excellent English communication skills. In the Philippines, to get a job promotion, lawyers need to use advanced English language at the court. Moreover, a good command of English can also boost employees' career advancement opportunities. For example, to train human resources for a specific high-level position, many Vietnamese universities offer overseas training opportunities for academics with a high level of English proficiency (Le & Chen, 2019). Big companies also tend to offer expatriation opportunities to competent employees with English skills as the language can help these employees set the bond of friendship with the host community, understand the culture, and increase their work effectiveness (Othman et al., 2021).

## 10.3 English Language Education Reforms in Vietnam

### 10.3.1 Drivers of the English Language Education Reforms

With socio-economic successes following the 1986 Innovation (Doi Moi) Policy, English has become central in the national language policy (Hoang, 2019; Tran, 2018b). In Vietnam, there are 12 grades in the school system, divided into three levels: primary (6–11 years of age), secondary school (11–15), and high school (15–18) (Nguyen, 2016). All school levels follow the curricula designed by MOET (Educational Law, 2005). English is an optional course for elementary students in grade 3, but a compulsory subject from grade 6 to grade 12. At the tertiary level, except for those directly majoring in English language studies/teaching or translation and interpretation, students are offered some General English language (GE) courses which aim to improve student's English reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills as well as general knowledge to use English effectively (Hien et al., 2019). Unfortunately, after completion of high school, and even university, not many students/graduates can use English fluently if they do not join in private English classes. As the demand of English skills from employers has kept increasing, numerous English language centers have been established (Tran, 2018b). They are informal business education organizations with diverse teaching methods, English courses, and native and non-native teachers from different backgrounds. According to Tran (2018b), not all teachers from the English language centers are fully trained as English language teachers, which can negatively affect the students' learning outcomes. This can explain the reason why Vietnam has nearly 90% of English language learners, the percentage of those who can make English daily conversations is minimal (Bui et al., 2019). Such a level of English language proficiency has not been on par with socio-economic development and thus may put Vietnam in a disadvantaged situation in terms of competitiveness for further socio-economic development.

Realizing the need to prepare graduates with a proficient level of English, the Government has launched several reforms to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning. In fact, English language teaching and learning reforms in Vietnam were initiated in the early 2000s. The Prime Minister of Vietnam approved Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP in November 2005 called "Fundamental and comprehensive renovation of higher education in Vietnam in the period 2006–2020". Accordingly, the Resolution clearly defines goals as well as specific plans to implement innovative activities, creating a premise for comprehensive reforms in all fields including English language education (MOET, 2005). To promote the quality of language teaching and learning, in 2008, the MOET, under the approval of the Minister of Education and Training, issued Decision No 1400/QĐ-TTg on approving a project called "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Educational System, Period 2008–2020" (hereafter referred to as the Project, 2020). The project officially started to roll out in 2010 with a number of aims indicating that, "by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently.

This will enable them to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with a variety of languages” (MOET, 2008).

### ***10.3.2 Contents of the Reforms***

One of the most significant changes, introduced by the reforms, was the introduction of a new curriculum of English and textbooks. This curriculum places a strong focus on promoting communicative language teaching (CLT) and learner-centered approaches in all levels of education (MOET, 2006). Also, a new system of textbooks, which basically consider CLT principles to be a policy backbone for the design, was implemented for all educational levels ranging from primary to upper secondary. However, it is worth noting that at higher education, the university is allowed to design their own teaching syllabus provided that they follow a general guideline given by the MOET (The Government of Vietnam, 2018). Needless to say, this may create a flexible choice and adaptability and lead to inevitable chaos and confusion among universities (Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2013).

The second important content of the reforms is to increase English language teachers’ teaching effectiveness. In response to the need for the increase of both quantity and quality of English language teachers nationwide, the Project, 2020 has made a lot of effort such as recruiting new high qualified English teachers for schools, training and re-training in-service teachers for both language proficiency and teaching capabilities so that they can train students in English skills that meet the requirements of employers. Under this massive project, the Vietnamese government invested 80% of the Project 2020 budget (US\$446.43 million) on teacher training (Van Canh et al., 2020). Upgrading teachers’ English proficiency and improving their teaching practices are the two main goals of this approach (Van Canh et al., 2020). Generally, teachers have been trained in innovative English language teaching methods.

The third remarkable change introduced by the reforms was assessment and learning outcomes. In terms of assessment of language outcomes at the tertiary level, according to the Decision No. 17/VBHN-BGDĐT issued in 2014, it is calculated based on regular test scores during the learning process and a final exam score, in which the final exam score is mandatory and has a weight of not less than 50% of the total (The Government of Vietnam, 2014a). Lecturers can propose assessment tasks, weighting of these tasks and marking criteria; then these should be approved by the faculty leaders and finally signed by the rector of the institutions. All information regarding assessment must be specified in the syllabus. A couple of benchmarks for English language learning outcomes were also introduced. It is reported in Circular No. 01 dated on January 24, 2014, of the Minister of Education and Training that university graduates need to attain an English proficiency of level 3 in the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework for Vietnam or get an overall score of 4.5 in the IELTS (The Government of Vietnam, 2014b).

### ***10.3.3 Positive Outcomes of the Reforms***

After several years of implementation, the reforms have achieved significant outcomes. First, the reforms have pushed the introduction of a new English curriculum which adopts CLT and learner-centered approaches as a priority for teaching and learning activities (Doan & Hamid, 2019). The new curriculum embraces a new series of textbooks and teaching materials in which real-life target tasks and communicative-based activities are essential. It also includes a variety of topics which are closely related to daily situations such as education, environment, and economics with the rationale that learners could be given best opportunities to equip themselves with socio-cultural, economic, and cultural understanding (Bui & Nguyen, 2016).

Secondly, in accordance with the new teaching curriculum, in-service teachers nationwide have also been trained and re-trained to on the one hand upgrade themselves in both professional teaching and language proficiency, and on the other hand to conduct teaching successfully in such a new curriculum. Due to great effort made by the MOET regarding developing teachers' English proficiency, for example, the percentage of English teachers who met the language proficiency requirements increased sharply just after three years, from approximately 13% in 2011–2012 to 54% in 2014–2015 (Project, 2020, 2016). Their teaching practices are also improved and remarkably, embrace digital or online learning resources or teaching methods to provide needed learners with a wider choice of learning (Vietnamese Government, 2017).

Thirdly, the reforms have contributed to raising public awareness, not just students, of the importance of English skills resulting in the promotion of teaching and learning English. To satisfy the fast-growing and ever-changing workforce, meeting English skills requirements has now become a prerequisite for graduation and employment. Therefore, to satisfy a high demand of different groups of English language learners for improving their competitiveness in the labor market, numerous English language centers have been established across the country, both as part of the public and private educational systems (Hoang, 2010).

Last but not least, adopting the benchmarks for English language learning outcomes, as mentioned above, has greatly contributed to the improvement of graduates' English skills compared to the past (Nguyen et al., 2018). However, it appears that in reality, graduates still face difficulties in using their English skills for work purposes; and employers still complain about their employees' English skills. This will be further elaborated in the next section.

### ***10.3.4 Effectiveness of Preparing Students' English Skills to Meet Employers' Demands***

Although much effort has been made by the Vietnamese MOET, Vietnamese higher education institutions and teachers to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning, it is little known as to whether English courses offered by Vietnamese universities can effectively equip students with English skills. Several studies have consistently pointed out that although there has been improvement, graduates have not developed adequate English language skills for work purposes. Luong (2016) found that Vietnamese student's English skills could not satisfy the employers' expectation and requirements. The results from data analysis revealed nearly 80% of students felt uncertain when listening to different topics, collecting information, answering phone calls, and understanding work documents. In terms of career-related skills in English, more than 70% of students were not capable of solving problems, working with people worldwide, and debating. They explained that they only learned grammar and theories instead of communicative skills in English. This means the teaching approach adopted at universities appears not to be effective in developing students' English skills for work purposes.

Using industry stakeholders' experiences, some studies also found a lack of English language skills in Vietnamese graduates. For example, Tran et al. (2017) conducted a study about cultural differences in work-related attitudes between 763 Vietnamese employees, 43 Vietnamese managers, and 33 Western employers. The findings showed that the Vietnamese employees rarely spoke out their opinions or actively engaged in decision-making because they did not feel confident in their English speaking. Similarly, Thi Ngoc Le (2018) collected the data from meetings and phone talks with 15 business managers to understand their requirements and evaluation of fresh graduates. The results showed that employers complained about graduates' lack of English language skills, computer skills, and knowledge of intercultural diversity.

A couple of studies have attempted to identify causes of failure in equipping graduates with English language skills for their work. Impractical curriculum at schools and their passivity in promoting a life-long career were identified as the root cause (Nhung et al., 2020; Tran, 2018a). Traditional teaching practices were also found to prevent students from developing sufficient English skills for work purposes. Teachers mainly focus on teaching grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension rather than English in daily communication (Hoang, 2008). Ton and Pham (2010) revealed that most Vietnamese university students did not set a specific goal of learning English; they learned from the English textbook to pass exams instead of using English for real-life purposes such as communication. Some students are aware of the importance of English for their employment prospects, but they mainly studied to get certificates for job applications rather than for using it in real life (Tran, 2018a).

In short, English has become central in the national foreign language policy of Vietnam and numerous initiatives have been launched, aiming to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning and to enhance graduates' employment

and career prospects. Unfortunately, it appears that such a goal has not been reached as both students and industry stakeholders are still complaining about the effectiveness of English courses in preparing them for English skills for work purposes. The primary goal of most students is to land a good job after graduation. As mentioned earlier, in an emerging economy with intense foreign investment like Vietnam, English language skills are an important passport for their career success. Failing to equip students with English language skills will influence the competitiveness of Vietnam's labor workforce and slow down its socio-economic development. Therefore, it is important to investigate the effectiveness of English courses in preparing students with English skills for work purposes, identifying the weaknesses for improvement.

## 10.4 The Present Study

This study aimed to explore graduates of Vietnamese universities' experience with the contribution of General English courses to the development of English skills for work purposes in Vietnamese labor market. In particular, it sought the answers to the following research question:

To what extent did General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities contribute to the development of students' English skills for work purposes?

The study was conducted using quantitative method research approach (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach was appropriate for the research purpose as it allowed to measure the contribution of General English courses offered in Vietnamese universities to graduates' English skills for work purposes.

To collect quantitative data, we developed an online survey (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The content of the survey was developed based on a simple concept: learning experiences result from the interactions between the learners (with their beliefs and behaviors toward learning), the teachers (with their qualities and teaching practices), the assessment activities (being a powerful driver for teaching and learning activities), and the materials (being the means teachers used to deliver their teaching and students used to construct their learning).

In addition to a section collecting participants' demographic information, the survey firstly asked graduates to rate the contribution of the General English courses to their English skills for work purposes on a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 denotes "very little" and 5 denotes "very much". Then they were asked to express their level of (dis)agreement with descriptors related to the General English courses using a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 denotes "completely disagree" and 5 denotes "completely agree". Similar to collecting qualitative data, we provided descriptors of the curriculum, learning materials, assessment, teachers and teaching as well as the learners. For the exploratory nature of this study, we primarily aimed to collect data from graduates of the two major universities in the South of Vietnam, although we anticipated that graduates of other universities would participate. We sent the link



of the survey to teachers that we knew in the two universities, requesting them to forward the link to graduates that they knew. Within a five-month period, we collected 159 responses from the target participants. Among them, 36.5% and 63.5% are male and female respectively. Participants were alumni of 16 universities although the majority of them came from two large universities in the south of Vietnam. Based on their self-report, they were working in 25 different job sectors. Their work experience ranged from one to five years, with an average of 2.4 years.

The quantitative data were checked for internal consistency and analyzed using principal component analysis and descriptive analysis (mean and standard deviation–SD, and percentages to show congruence of their perspectives), with the support of SPSS version 26. The procedure and the results will be reported in the Finding section to ease readers' understanding.

## 10.5 Findings

### 10.5.1 *Graduates' English Skills for Work*

We asked graduates to rate the extent to which English language courses offered by Vietnamese universities contributed to the development of their English language competence for work purposes. For this data set, the internal consistency was high, with Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.92$ , and item-total correlation values ranging from 0.74 to 0.80. Principal component analysis using varimax rotation suggests one principle factor to be extracted based on eigenvalues greater than 1. This solution explained 67.72% of the variance. Descriptive analysis was conducted to generate the means (M) and standard deviations (SD). The mean values were interpreted as below:

- $1.0 \leq M < 1.8$ : contributing very little
- $1.8 \leq M < 2.6$ : contributing little
- $2.6 \leq M < 3.4$ : contributing moderately
- $3.4 \leq M < 4.2$ : contributing much
- $4.2 \leq M \leq 5.0$ : contributing very much

The descriptive analysis results (Table 10.1) showed that in graduates' experience, the General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities contributed much to the development of their English skills for work. It was reported that these courses developed their English vocabulary the most ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), which appeared to foster their reading skills ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). The contribution to grammar knowledge, writing, listening, and speaking skills were rated a little lower. The least contribution was for English pronunciation ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ), which may be explained for why speaking and listening skills was also low. It is natural that if students fail to pronounce sounds correctly, their oral communication will be negatively affected and their listening ability will also be influenced as they may not be able to recognize the sound/word being articulated by another speaker.



**Table 10.1** Graduates' English skills for work purposes

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>English skills for work purposes</i>	3.58	0.90
The GE courses provided me with a large volume of vocabulary useful for my work	3.77	0.80
It helped improve my English reading skills for work purposes	3.75	0.89
It helped improve my grammar knowledge to use English precisely for my work	3.65	0.87
It helped improve my English writing skills for work purposes	3.50	0.93
It helped improve my listening skills for my work purposes	3.47	0.93
It helped improve my fluency in English speaking for work purposes	3.47	1.00
It helped improve my English pronunciation to enhance communication effectiveness	3.42	0.90

### 10.5.2 *Graduates' Feedback About the English Language Curricula*

We asked graduates to rate their level of agreement/disagreement with 10 descriptors of the English curriculum they used to study on a 5-point Likert scale. For this data set, the internal consistency Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.94$ , and item-total correlation values ranged from 0.62 to 0.81. Following the steps reported above, we conducted principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The results with eigenvalues greater than 1 suggested one principal component to be extracted, which explained 64.51% of the variance. We continued to run descriptive analysis to find means and standard deviations. The mean values were interpreted as below:

- $1.0 \leq M < 1.8$ : completely disagree
- $1.8 \leq M < 2.6$ : disagree
- $2.6 \leq M < 3.4$ : neutral
- $3.4 \leq M < 4.2$ : agree
- $4.2 \leq M \leq 5.0$ : completely agree

Quantitative data analysis results (Table 10.2) showed that graduates agreed with all of descriptors about the English language curricula that they used to study at the university. The three aspects that received the lowest level of agreement were up-to-date contents ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ), affordance for flexibility in students' learning ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), and diversity of the contents ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). The three aspects that received the highest level of agreement were the age-appropriateness of the contents ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), communication of the teaching-learning methods ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), and communication of the assessment method ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

**Table 10.2** Graduates' perspectives about English language curricula

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>English language curricula</i>	3.68	0.92
The contents of the curriculum are diverse	3.58	0.89
The contents of the curriculum are updated with recent events or information	3.45	0.99
The contents of the curriculum are logically organized	3.71	0.84
The contents of the curriculum are adapted to the student age group	3.86	0.88
There is a balance among theory, practice, and skills development contents	3.59	0.99
The curriculum articulates the learning outcomes clearly	3.75	0.95
The curriculum provides adequate information about teaching–learning methods	3.80	0.86
The curriculum provides adequate information about assessment methods	3.84	0.85
The curriculum offers rooms for learners to variate their learning pace	3.52	1.02
The curriculum offers opportunities for learners to reflect on their progress (e.g., revision lessons or self-tests)	3.67	0.94

### ***10.5.3 Graduates' Feedback About the English Language Learning Materials***

Graduates were asked to express their agreement/disagreement to five descriptors about the learning materials used for the English language courses offered by their universities on a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of this data set was measured by Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.88$ . The correlation between these variables (i.e., descriptor) ranged from 0.63 to 0.80. Principal component analysis was run with varimax rotation. The results based on eigenvalues greater than 1 suggested one principal component to be extracted, explaining 68.37% of the variance. We also ran descriptive analysis to find means and standard deviations. The mean values were interpreted like the above.

Generally, graduates agreed with all English learning material related descriptors. Following the results (Table 10.3), graduates agreed the most that the learning materials developed their English linguistic competence from a simple to a complex level ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). However, they were not so much agreed on the diversity ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) and authenticity ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) of learning materials. Many of them found the learning materials easy to understand ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), and even worse, these materials were considered not to contribute to their achievement of the learning outcomes of the course ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ).

**Table 10.3** Graduates' feedback about the learning materials used in General English courses

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>Learning materials used in General English courses</i>	3.65	0.89
They were easy to understand	3.61	0.92
They were diverse	3.57	0.92
They effectively contributed to my achievements of the intended learning outcomes	3.62	0.88
They helped develop my linguistic ability from a low to a high level	3.81	0.82
They included much information related to real-life and work situations	3.65	0.93

### ***10.5.4 Graduates' Feedback About Assessment Activities in General English Language Courses***

Graduates were asked to express their agreement/disagreement to six descriptors about assessment practices used for the English language courses offered by their universities on a 5-point Likert scale. The data set has a high level of internal consistency, showing by Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.87$ . The correlation between these variables (i.e., descriptor) ranged from 0.62 to 0.74. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation and eigenvalues greater than 1 resulted in one principal component being extracted, which explained 68.37% of the variance. We further computed descriptive analysis to find means, standard deviations, and percentages of participants having the same perspectives on the descriptors. The mean values were interpreted like the above.

The results (Table 10.4) showed that graduates agreed all descriptors, signifying their contentment with assessment practices in the English language courses. The descriptor that received the highest agreement among graduates was about fairness in assessment ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), followed by the alignment between what was taught and what was assessed ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). However, it was noted that their level of agreement about the authenticity of assessment task was much lower compared with other descriptor in this dimension of the program ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ).

### ***10.5.5 Graduates' Feedback About Their Learning***

Graduates were asked to express their agreement/disagreement to 10 descriptors about learners on a 5-point Likert scale. The data set has a high level of internal consistency, showing by Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.90$ . The correlation between these variables (i.e., descriptor) ranged from 0.42 to 0.77. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation and eigenvalues greater than 1 resulted in two principal components being extracted, which explained 72.45% of the variance (53.86% and 18.59% for components 1 and 2 respectively). All variables loading uniquely on either of the

**Table 10.4** Graduates' feedback about assessment in English language courses

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>Assessment activities in General English courses</i>	3.87	0.87
Assessment tasks were informed to students clearly	3.99	0.82
Students were assessed of what had been taught	4.06	0.78
Assessment was conducted fairly for all students	4.11	0.80
There was adjustment in assessment activities to accommodate students' situations (e.g., hearing impaired students)	3.79	0.94
The content of assessment tasks reflected the use of English in real life	3.55	0.97
Assessment activities were conducted throughout the course for students to identify and improve their weaknesses	3.71	0.89

two components: *Awareness of the importance of English skills* (measured by three descriptors) and *Engagement with English language learning* (measured by seven descriptors). We computed descriptive analysis to find means, standard deviations, and percentages of participants having the same perspectives on the descriptors. The mean values were interpreted like the above.

The results (Table 10.5) showed that since they were students, graduates had a very high level of awareness about the role of English skills in their future careers ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ). However, their level of engagement with English language learning was not as high ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). Based on their rating for each descriptor in the second component, it appeared that they engaged cognitively ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) and affectively ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), their behavioral engagement was hindered due to their lack of learning skills. They did not invest much time for learning ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ); they could not self-study ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ); they could not solve difficulties in their learning ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ); and they could not check upon their learning progress ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ).

### ***10.5.6 Graduates' Feedback About Teachers and Teaching in English Language Courses***

Graduates were asked to express their agreement/disagreement to 15 descriptors about teacher qualities and their pedagogical practices in English language courses offered by their universities on a 5-point Likert scale. The data set has a high level of internal consistency, showing by Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha = 0.95$ . The correlation between these variables (i.e., descriptor) ranged from 0.67 to 0.79. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation and eigenvalues greater than 1 resulted in two principal components being extracted, which explained 67.70% of the variance (36.00 and 31.7% for components 1 and 2 respectively). However, two variables did not load uniquely on one component; therefore, we removed these two variables and ran the principal component analysis following the same procedure again. This time,

**Table 10.5** Graduates' feedback about their learning

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>Awareness of the role of English skills</i>	4.38	0.68
I understood the importance of English skills for my future careers	4.55	0.63
I knew the expected learning outcomes of General English courses	4.25	0.74
I was aware of employers' demands for English skills	4.34	0.66
<i>Engagement with English language learning</i>	3.74	0.89
I had positive attitude toward learning English	4.12	0.75
I studied English passionately	3.88	0.91
I always motivated myself to study English	3.88	0.87
I could self-study English effectively	3.57	0.98
I could self-check upon my progress in learning English	3.64	0.85
I invested a lot of time for learning English	3.50	0.96
I could solve difficulties to learn English better	3.58	0.94

it resulted in a two components, explaining 69.48% of the variance (36.93 and 32.55% for components 1 and 2 respectively). All variables loading uniquely on either of the two components: *teacher competencies* (measured by five descriptors) and *teaching practices and professionalism* (measured by eight descriptors). We further computed descriptive analysis to find means, standard deviations, and percentages of participants having the same perspectives on the descriptors. The mean values were interpreted like the above.

The results (Table 10.6) showed that graduates valued their teachers' use of pedagogies and professionalism ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) than teachers' competencies ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). They completely agreed that their teachers had a good knowledge of the English language ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) as well as English skills. They valued their teachers' cultural understanding of English speaking countries ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and abilities to make English lessons easy to understand ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) a little bit lower. Graduates showed a high level of agreement on their teachers' professionalism, with mean values above 4.0 on a scale of 5.0 for all three descriptors (the last three in Table 10.6) and so did they to descriptors about their teachers' pedagogical practices, especially enthusiasm in teaching ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and encouragement for students to engage with learning ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ). However, it seemed that they were not very impressed with teachers' ability to integrate the actual use of English in the workplace in their teaching activities ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). This means that in graduates' experience, the teaching activities in General English courses lacked authenticity and applicability in reality.

**Table 10.6** Graduates' feedback about teachers and teaching in English language courses

Descriptors	M	SD
<i>Teacher competencies</i>	3.92	0.85
Teachers had a good knowledge of the English language	4.20	0.79
Teachers could satisfactorily explain linguistic issues that students asked	3.99	0.80
Teachers could speak as a native speaker of English	3.92	0.89
Teachers had a profound understanding of the cultures of English speaking countries	3.74	0.91
Teachers could make English lessons easy to understand	3.74	0.85
<i>Teaching practices and professionalism</i>	4.03	0.79
Teachers were enthusiastic in their teaching	4.20	0.71
Teachers maintained good relationships with students	4.16	0.73
Teachers often encouraged students to learn English for better career prospects	4.14	0.79
Teachers willingly spent extra time to support students for English skills development	3.96	0.74
Teachers regularly provided feedback for students to improve their weaknesses	3.88	0.88
Teachers integrated actual uses of English in the workplace into their teaching activities	3.62	0.99
Teachers complied with the university policies (time, attire, ...)	4.25	0.72
Teachers were always well-prepared when coming to class	4.06	0.72

## 10.6 Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the contribution of General English courses to students' development of English skills for work purposes in Vietnamese labor market, using graduates' experiences. The study found that such courses helped develop English language knowledge better than English skills for them. Generally, they could apply what they learned for work purposes, but there are several inhibitors for the development of their English skills. This section will further explain the findings and provide some implications for the improvement of the effectiveness of General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities.

The results revealed that students were highly aware of the importance of English skills for their future careers ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ), and most of them were cognitively and affectively engaged with developing English skills ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.75$  and  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.91$  respectively). However, their learning behaviors appeared not to show such a high level of engagement. This suggests that there were several factors interfering the translation of such a cognition/belief into actual behaviors for developing English language skills. Indeed, based on graduates' experiences, this

study revealed the following issues that may be hindering students from learning to develop English skills for work purposes:

- Firstly, the curriculum appeared to focus too much on language aspects and neglect the applicability of what was being taught for work purposes. This is consistent with graduates' rating about the contribution of General English courses to the development of their English language knowledge and skills, in which the former was rated much higher compared to the latter (see Table 10.1). The focus of the current curriculum of General English courses reflects the old approach to language education, e.g., teacher-led, theory-focused, one size fit all, etc. (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).
- Secondly, there was a lack of authenticity of the teaching–learning materials, assessment, and teaching activity. Authenticity of learning activities, materials, and assessment tasks have been found to be one of the critical factors contributing to graduates' inability to hit the ground running beyond their graduation (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Ornellas et al., 2019). They offered students with opportunities to understand about the real workplace with the application of the language aspects into a real-life situation. The closer the learning activities, materials and assessment tasks to the real-life situation, the better they are for students to develop relevant skills for work (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Ornellas et al., 2019). This issue appeared to be an inertia of the theory-based teaching tradition of Vietnamese universities when students were bombarded with so much knowledge and theories to remember and tested, they were rarely exposed to how such knowledge and theories are used in the reality.
- Thirdly, although teachers were reported to be professional and conducted effective teaching, what was missing from graduates' perspective was their use of ongoing feedback. Likewise, students reported a lack of using informative assessment, which prevent them from identifying and improving their weaknesses, as suggested in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). This can be attributed to the teaching practicality in Vietnam. Normally teachers have to take care of several classes of about 50–100 students (Tran, 2017a, 2017b). With such big class size, it is extremely difficult to conduct interactive learning activities, overcome challenges and provide tailored feedback to individual students.
- Fourthly, graduates' rating suggested that they failed to self-regulate their learning. As shown in Table 10.5, when they were students, they did not successfully engage with their learning behaviorally compared with their cognitive and affective engagement. This can be attributed to Vietnamese students' dependent learning habits, which were the results of the long history of using the traditional teaching–learning method, where teachers' voices out-powered students' voices. Students were expected to accept teachers' perspectives without questioning and just focus on what was being taught instead of leading their own learning (Tran et al., 2018). Gradually, most students became “slaves” in their thinking and learning behavior in the schools and universities. Such a habit is difficult to change and may challenge

students in their journey to look for jobs and perform their job roles proactively and effectively.

Such a disparity between (i) their cognition/beliefs about the importance of English and the expectation to master English language skills and (ii) their actual learning behaviors can be explained by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, three kinds of considerations that guide human behaviors are: behavioral beliefs (beliefs about the results of a particular behavior), normative beliefs (beliefs about the normative expectations of others or social pressure about certain behaviors), and control beliefs (beliefs about the existence of factors that may affect the performance of a specific behavior). When combined, these three considerations result in the formation of a behavioral intention, which then is translated into actual behaviors under suitable conditions. For this study, students' normative beliefs about the expectations of them being involved in English learning and develop a proficient level of English skills were very high. They also hold a high level of behavioral beliefs about the results of their engagement with learning English. However, a couple of factors affected their control beliefs in whether it is alright to carry out such activities for their learning, such as their inability to learn independently, teachers' busy schedules preventing them from providing feedback on students' learning, learning materials not matching their expectations of learning English for work purposes, etc. These beliefs result in different levels of engagement with their learning, mostly in terms of cognitive and affective engagement, but less in terms of actual behaviors of learning engagement. It is obvious that the disparities between their cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement varied between students; the low mean value of their actual behaviors of learning engagement indicates that such disparity is experienced by many students.

The discussion up to now also suggests one important issue related to the reforms of teaching and learning English in Vietnamese universities. Although the reforms have been carried out for quite a long time, there is evidence of existence of teachers' traditional teaching practices and students' independent learning behaviors. According to Bourdieu (Pierre Bourdieu, 1998; Pierre Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the environment where teachers and students function for a long time serves as a social field with its own norms, expectations, rules and regulations, etc.; teachers' and students' thinking and behaviors—referred to as *habitus*—are shaped by such norms, expectations, rules, and regulations. Both social field and *habitus* mutually affect each other and induce changes. If individuals in a particular social field need to function well and “win” what is expected in that social field, they must have relevant capital, or resources, or at least access to necessary capital.

In the case of English teaching and learning reforms in Vietnamese universities, the social field has changed in terms of the needs for developing English skills for students, initiated by the MOET policies, employers' demands, and students' expectations of being employed. Therefore, institutions—as a collective of people—had to react to meet such expectations: teaching English in an innovative way that aligned with the MOET's policies, employers' demands, and students' expectations. However, a lack of capital hindered them from carrying out such teaching–learning



reforming activities successfully. There was evidence that teachers “feel the game to perform in particular ways, align oneself with the “taste” of the field” (Pierre Bourdieu, 1990, p. 166). For example, they used innovative teaching methods, but they chose not to use formative assessment with tailored feedback to individual students because it was not feasible concerning their workload. In the same manner, students—being individual in a social field—recognized employers' demands for English skills. Therefore, they changed their behaviors toward investing efforts in developing such skills. Unfortunately, they do not possess enough ability to self-study, on top of learning under the guidance of the teacher who also faced a lack of capital in conducting their teaching, thus their English skills were not developed satisfactorily as they wished. As a result, graduates found that their English skills were at an acceptable level for work purposes.

Based on the issues that hinder the effectiveness of General English courses in terms of preparing students' English skills for work purposes, we propose a couple of measures to improve it. First of all, it is important to note that General English does not mean that English is universally used for all purposes. It should be defined in a narrow sense that it is the English skills used for general work purpose of a job sector. This is to separate from specialized English courses where students are taught with terminologies and difficult texts used for further academic studies, such as postgraduate courses or research. Indeed, although they are general English, there are still ways to contextualize these General English courses to meet the language use of a discipline. The curriculum needs to follow the contemporary approach in its design, focusing on the learners' needs and skills development (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). It should clearly specify the purpose and learning outcomes of such courses, with a focus on students' ability to use such skills for general work purposes within the context of their work in the future. The learning materials can be easily adapted to the characteristics of each discipline or job sector. For example, there are General English textbooks specifically written for Business or Tourism majors. Institutions can develop the curriculum and English textbooks for each faculty instead of using the same curriculum and textbook university-wide, which fails to help the General English courses relevant to the needs of students of different disciplines.

In addition, to deliver such General English courses, instead of just focusing on vocabulary and grammar teaching, teachers should focus on helping students how to read, write, listen, and speak to use for work purposes. Teachers can organize activities that truly reflect the activities at work, i.e., improving the authenticity of their teaching activities. These activities can require students to role-play a work situation, discuss to solve a work problem in groups, research on a topic then present it in front of the class or write a report, write letters to a business partner, etc. As such, students can use English as a means of communication—both written and spoken—and simultaneously develop essential work skills and attributes such as teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, confidence, and flexibility (e.g., see Kulamikhina et al., 2018; Singh, 2019). Similarly, teachers can assess students using formative assessment tasks to help students improve weaknesses and further develop their strengths (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The summative tests should focus on measure how well students use language for certain work situations instead of only

checking their precise use of grammar or words without paying enough attention to the context of language use.

Moreover, students need to be trained in self-regulated learning. In Vietnamese universities, there is an absence of an academic support services or such services are often invisible among many units and departments (Tran & Tran, 2020). Such services need to be made good use to prepare students with necessary learning skills before they commence university studies and when students are in need. Such a foundation can be then further trained in General English courses using authentic problem or project-based learning (English & Kitsantas, 2013). Such projects can be just as small as researching an aspect at work, preferably related to their future work sector, and reporting to the class. Teachers can also use blended teaching methodologies to cater for different learning needs and styles of students, giving them extra online learning resources and platforms, and thus promote self-regulated learning abilities (Kassab et al., 2015). The use of formative assessment activities and reflection can also help students develop their own self-regulated learning skills (Masui & De Corte, 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Finally, English language teaching and learning reforms will not yield expected outcomes if there are not enough investment and support from the institutions to remove impracticality for teaching and learning. Large class sizes are not ideal for such skills classes as English as they hinder interactive learning activities for language skills development and limit the use of formative assessment for tailored feedback so that students can improve their weaknesses. Like other soft skills, language skills take a long time to develop (Gonczi, 2006; Tran, 2019) and it is insufficient for the development if students only study in class for about four hours per week. Institutions should invest to build online learning resources so students can self-study after class. These are just some examples about what institutions can do so that they can improve teachers' and students' control beliefs that complement their behavioral beliefs and normative beliefs (Ajzen, 1991) so that they can actually act and truly engage with teaching and learning English.

In short, this study found that current General English courses do not develop adequate English skills for graduates to satisfactorily use for work purposes. The study identified inhibitors of such courses including (i) theory-based curriculum, (ii) unauthenticity of teaching activities, learning materials, and assessment tasks, (iii) a lack of ongoing feedback from using formative assessment so that students can improve their weaknesses, and (iv) students' inability to self-regulate their learning. We explained the findings in terms of the theory of planned behavior and Bourdieu's concepts of social field, habitus, and capital. We proposed some measures to tackle the identified issues (a) tailor the General English courses to reflect the characteristics of students' future work, (b) delivering the curricula by organizing simulated work activities, providing ongoing feedback, and embedding essential work skills in teaching activities, (c) foster students to develop self-regulated learning, and (d) providing sufficient support for innovative English language teaching and learning methods.

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# Chapter 11

## Perspectives of English Teachers on the Effectiveness of the General English Program on Students’ Employability: A Case Study in Vietnam



**Thi V. S. Nguyen, Phuong T. N. Phan, Anh Thi Nguyen,  
and Thu A. T. Huynh**

**Abstract** This chapter reports teachers’ perspectives on (i) the effectiveness of a General English program in a Vietnamese university with regard to enhancing students’ employability and (ii) factors influencing the effectiveness of the program. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 14 teachers of English as a foreign language and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The study found that the General English program is believed to help develop students’ employability mainly through the development of English receptive skills, soft skills, and intercultural competence. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of the program was affected by (i) students’ motivation and shyness, (ii) teachers’ English proficiency, teaching quality, and commitment, and (iii) administration and management issues. The chapter provides implications to improve the effectiveness of the General English program, with a focus on enhancing students’ employability.

**Keywords** Students · Employability · General English in Vietnamese universities · General English program effectiveness · English teachers · Perceptions on students · Employability

### 11.1 Introduction

Employability can be narrowly understood as knowledge and skills that make students attractive to potential employers or the labour market (Bridgstock, 2009; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Small et al., 2018). It is, however, argued that since the labour

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markets are changing in response to globalisation, technology, and mobility, employability should be redefined. The emphasis on just skills development to enhance graduate employability has been criticised as too narrow and insufficient to prepare students for their working life with unpredictable economic developments (Bates et al., 2019; Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

The current higher education agenda tends to focus just on developing students' human capitals (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) whilst other competencies to prepare students for the globalised knowledge economy and abilities to grow under constant changes are ignored (Pham, 2021; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020). A more holistic approach to employability recognises not only labour market's demands but also personal characteristics, disciplinary differences (Barrie, 2006), work context (Rychen & Salganik, 2005), and the ability to continuously recognise employment and training-related opportunities (Bridgstock, 2009). This approach emphasises the importance of developing the individual's capacity to manage their own career (Bridgstock, 2009) and the role of self-awareness, confidence, and adaptability (Clarke, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020). Universities have started to adopt different strategies to improve students' employability in response to this holistic approach: embedding transferable skills within curricula (e.g., communication skills, teamwork, complex problem-solving), incorporating opportunities for work experience (e.g., internships, placements, international study tours, or exchanges) (Clarke, 2017), providing extra-curricular activities for students (Barrie et al., 2009; Tran, 2017b) or creating an online community for students to engage in authentic communication and intercultural exchanges (Mai et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020).

In non-English speaking countries, there is a large volume of research describing perceptions of students, university administrators, and employers towards students' employability (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Hamid, 2015; Zainuddin et al., 2019). However, research on how English programs are being restructured to boost students' employability, using the broader framework of employability is still limited. This chapter aims to fill this gap by using the holistic approaches to employability to examine the effectiveness of a General English training program at a university in Vietnam. It is also one of the very few studies addressing the effectiveness of a General English program in a non-English speaking country with regard to employability. The study, therefore, will provide insights on the current practice of General English language education in response to its effectiveness on students' employability and suggest lessons learned for similar English programs.

## 11.2 Literature Review

### 11.2.1 *Employability and Its Dimensions*

Drawing on the broader and holistic approach to employability (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020), this study uses an employability framework that incorporates five key dimensions—human capital, social capital, cultural capital, career and identity capital, and psychological capital. Tomlinson (2017) framework was used because of two reasons: first, the framework covers employability attributes that are overlooked in the current higher education agenda as aforementioned, and second, the framework has been conceptualised and validated through recent research related to higher education employability (Pham, 2021; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

*Human capital* refers to the knowledge and skills that enable students to enter the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). According to Tomlinson and Tran (2020), human capital constitutes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students can add to their employment profile. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes refer to the extent to which the students can specify and apply technical abilities directly in their workplace (Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

*Social capital* refers to students' social relationships and networks with others such as family, peers, higher education institutions, and social organisations that can bring them closer to the labour market. Students' social capital can be extended via internships or other forms of employment, bridging between formal education and their future employment (Tomlinson, 2017). It is believed that social capital enables human capital to be mobilised within a wider social context (Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

*Cultural capital* is the formation of cultural knowledge, dispositions, and behaviours in particular social settings and workplaces that graduates will enter. Globalisation and internationalisation have made cultural knowledge and intercultural competence essential in the workplace (Jones, 2013). This capital is also illustrated as a “personality package” that includes accent, body language, and humour (Pham et al., 2019).

*Identity/Career capital* is the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career. Fugate et al. (2004) stated career capital enables graduates to identify and realise career opportunities. Trede et al. (2012) believed career identity enhances graduates' capacity to be proactive in their desired career outcomes.

*Psychological capital* refers to the changing of personal knowledge, skills, attitudes to meet the demands of the situation (Clarke, 2017). Some examples of this capital are self-confidence, resilience, adaptability, or flexibility (Tomlinson, 2017), optimism to challenges, propensity to learn, openness to changes and new experiences, and self-efficacy (Fugate et al., 2004).

It is noted that these five mentioned dimensions share features that are inter-related and equally important in enriching students' experiences and empowering them to

seek entry to the labour market and sustain their career development. Whilst human and identity capitals provide graduates with knowledge and skills to enter the employment market successfully, social, cultural, and psychological capitals help them adjust and navigate their pathways in career development under constant changes (Tomlinson & Tran, 2020). In this respect, these dimensions are highly interconnected in supporting graduates' employment opportunities and career sustainability (Pham, 2021).

### ***11.2.2 Teaching and Learning English in Universities for Employability: Asian and Vietnamese Context***

It has been demonstrated that competent English language proficiency is highly correlated to economic opportunities, especially in Asian contexts (Hamid, 2015; Tsui, 2021). English education is believed to help students develop soft skills and intercultural competence to work in an increasingly competitive global economy (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Fang & Baker, 2018; Tsui, 2021). Whilst there is a positive link between English education and economic benefits, studies have emphasised the fragile role of English education in strengthening the employability capacities of students (Bui et al., 2017; Erling, 2014). For instance, Belwal et al. (2017) found that educational institutions in Oman were mainly restricted to the basic generic language skills as graduate attributes. The way English was taught in Oman did not develop students' overall proficiency and communicative competence. The lack of English proficiency and communicative competence was reported as major causes of unemployment amongst Omani graduates (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). In a Malaysian context, Zainuddin et al. (2019) found that many essential skills for employability (such as the ability to communicate in other languages, confidence, and a good attitude), which were acknowledged by employers, were not perceived as very important by the students. In Thailand, researchers also found the English curriculum in Thai universities was not successful in helping students to communicate English and succeed in the workplace (Chuanpongpanich, 2021; Wiriyaichitra, 2001). It is also suggested that modern teaching techniques such as task-based learning, project-based learning, flipped-classrooms, etc., should be included in the English programs for Thai students to improve the student's self-learning skill, self-responsibility, and adaptation (Baker, 2012).

In Vietnam, English has become central in the national language policy (Vu, 2019). In parallel with the overall changes in education, English language policies have undergone significant shifts with the implementation of the National Foreign Language Project (NFL) (Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008). The general aim of this project was to ensure that the majority of young Vietnamese graduating from the secondary, college, and university levels would be able to use English fluently and confidently in their study and work (Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). The NFL project has radically impacted language education in Vietnam with regard to improving teachers'

proficiency and pedagogy (Le et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2015) through incorporating curriculum modification with adapted language outcomes for all levels or through developing professional development initiatives for the teachers. However, the NFL has been subjected to a lot of concerns about its ambitious goals due to local constraints (lack of resources for classroom innovations, exam-oriented-driven language education, or centralisation of educational management) (Vu & Ha, 2021). The project, therefore, has been extended to 2025.

English programs in Vietnamese universities have been criticised for not helping graduates to apply for jobs that require English skills (Bui et al., 2017) or use English skills effectively in their professional jobs (Tran, 2017b). English education is believed to be marginalised compared to specialised subjects such as Maths, Information Technology and the like, and there is a disconnection between English and specialised subjects (Nguyen & Pham, 2016; Trinh & Mai, 2019). The impact of English programs on university students' employability was reported to be negligible. In examining the effectiveness of the English program of an at-home international program in Vietnam on students' employability skills, Bui et al. (2017) found that students were uncertain about both their English language and career skills, and therefore, their chances of being employed were limited (Bui et al., 2017).

### ***11.2.3 General English Programs for University Students in Vietnam: Current State***

Under the NFL, university students are required to take 12 credits of General English over the three semesters to fulfil their graduation requirements and it was expected that by 2020 students would be able to graduate with B1 (CEFR<sup>1</sup>) or Level 3 (VSTEP<sup>2</sup>) language outcomes. It is noted that during the time this study was conducted, due to the diversity of students' intake in age, background, previous educational experiences or interest in the study across the country, most colleges and universities still had a certain degree of flexibility in deciding the language outcomes of the General English programs. Some universities in Vietnam do not follow CEFR or VSTEP language outcomes but have adopted other standardised English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC and TOEFL as students' graduate requirements whereas others might adjust the CEFR or VSTEP outcomes depending on the sociodemographic status and English education experience of their students.

Despite the efforts of the NFL project in improving students' English proficiency, the level of English proficiency of non-English major students in Vietnam was still relatively low and uneven (Trinh & Mai, 2019). It was also impossible for teachers to create interactive and interesting activities due to the time constraint of the program

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<sup>1</sup> CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

<sup>2</sup> VSTEP: Vietnamese Standardised Test of English Proficiency, a locally designed test of general English proficiency based on CEFR with 6 levels from Levels 1 to 6, corresponding to A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 of the CEFR.

(Trinh & Mai, 2019). In addition, the time commitment to the job of the majority of English teachers is often low (Hoang, 2013). Nguyen et al. (2015) found that there were still many negative factors hindering the efficacy of General English teaching and learning, including insufficient time for English courses, lack of speaking component in tests and examinations and large class sizes. Low motivation to learn English (Ngo et al., 2017) was also listed as a factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of the General English programs. Other attributing factors included the divergent gaps between students' learning outcomes and employers' needs (Tran, 2013), resources and material constraints or exam-oriented tradition in Vietnam (Vu & Ha, 2021). In general, it has been reported that the General English programs in Vietnamese universities play a very minimal role in equipping students with proficient English knowledge and skills to improve their employability due to mismatched teaching orientations, which still place a strong focus on achieving linguistic forms rather than the ability to use the language in communication (Bui et al., 2017; Tran, 2013).

Therefore, just like their Asian counterparts, it appears that the General English programs in Vietnam just primarily focus on linguistic understanding, and intercultural competence, rather than equipping students with practical language skills for their future education, work, and life (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017; Vu, 2019). In addition, there have been many studies that look at the relationship between English programs in Vietnamese universities and employability, but very few studies have focused on General English programs for non-English major students, who constitute a big proportion of the student population in Vietnam. Moreover, there is a need for more studies that use a holistic approach to employability as discussed above. This study attempts to address those gaps by examining the effectiveness of a General English program in Vietnam through a holistic approach to employability. The study seeks to answer the two research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of the General English program with regard to enhancing students' employability?
2. What are the factors influencing the effectiveness of the General English program?

The study will contribute to filling in the gap in the literature in regard to General English university students' employability in Vietnam. The study will also provide empirical evidence to support the growing literature on the reconceptualisation of graduate employability in universities, using the holistic approach by Tomlinson (2017).

### 11.3 The Current Study

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain in-depth and detailed understanding (Creswell, 2014) of how the teachers perceive the effectiveness of the General English program on students' employability. The case in this study is the General English program provided by a multi-disciplinary public higher education

institution in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The School of Foreign Languages, specifically the General English Department, is responsible for coordinating the General English program for approximately 1200 students in one academic year. At the time the study was conducted, the General English curriculum consisted of three General English courses: General English 1 (4-credits), General English 2 (3-credits), and General English 3 (3-credits). The three courses comprised of 150 teaching hours in total. A2 level (CEFR) or Level 2 (VSTEP) was the required outcome for the exit of the General English program at this university, which was still lower than the expected outcome of CEFR-B1 or VSTEP-Level 3 required by the NFL project at the time due to the lower entry in terms of English proficiency of the students. After students finish the General English program, they can enrol in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program of their disciplines. It should be noted that these ESP programs were not compulsory and were managed by other disciplinary Departments or Faculties. The General English program was chosen in this study for three reasons: (1) General English is a foundation program in Vietnamese universities, and it is representative of General English in the Vietnamese university system, (2) the General English program accounts for a large number of students from diverse disciplines, and (3) there is a lack of research in General English programs with regard to employability.

We utilised semi-structured interviews to collect data from fourteen English teachers (thirteen females, and one male) from the Department of General English of a university, who volunteered to participate in the study. The interview questions were developed based on the literature in relation to the employability framework (Tomlinson, 2017). The interview guide included (1) teacher background information such as teacher's teaching experience, English courses, and proficiency levels taught, educational background, (2) in-depth perceptions of the effectiveness of the General English program in contributing to students' employability according to the five dimensions by Tomlinson (2017), and (3) factors hindering the effectiveness of the program from the teachers' perspectives. The questions were piloted with one teacher to address possible unclear or confusing questions. The teacher was chosen as she had five years of teaching experience with the university and used to work in a few translation/interpretation projects, which was helpful for the feedback on the translation of the questions from English to Vietnamese. Generally, the questions were adequately clear. However, some terminologies related to employability capitals, such as psychological capital, or human capital were hard to translate into Vietnamese; thus, the translation was accompanied by examples to make it clearer to the participants.

As for criteria to select the participants, it was required that the participants must have at least four year of General English teaching experience in order to allow the depth of experience and perspectives on the effectiveness of the General English program. The participants were recruited by either email or phone, through which the research purpose and their role in the study were explained. Two of the teachers were also currently the coordinators of the program, contributing to program development. Information of the participating teachers is presented in Table 11.1.

**Table 11.1** Participants' profiles

Teachers	Degree	Teaching experience	Types of employment	Notes
Teacher 1	Master	8 years	Permanent	
Teacher 2	Master	8 years	Permanent	
Teacher 3	Master	8 years	Permanent	
Teacher 4	Master	15 years	Permanent	
Teacher 5	Master	7 years	Permanent	
Teacher 6	Master	7 years	Permanent	
Teacher 7	Master	6 years	Contracted	
Teacher 8	Master	9 years	Permanent	
Teacher 9	PhD	17 years	Permanent	Coordinator 1
Teacher 10	PhD	19 years	Permanent	Coordinator 2
Teacher 11	Master	8 years	Contracted	
Teacher 12	Master	4 years	Contracted	
Teacher 13	Master	8 years	Contracted	
Teacher 14	Bachelor	25 years	Contracted	

Following their consent, each teacher participated in a semi-structured interview which was conducted in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of both the interviewer and interviewees in order for them to express their opinions at their best convenience. Each of the interviews lasted from 40 to 60 min. Data was collected between September and October 2019. The validity and credibility of data were ensured through the rigorous steps of developing, piloting, and conducting the semi-structured interview questions. The interviews were audiotaped in Vietnamese, transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese, analysed in Vietnamese, then significant quotes were translated into English.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where Tomlinson (2017) five dimensions of employability: (i) human capital, (ii) cultural capital, (iii) identity/career capital, (iv) psychological capital, and (v) social capital served as pre-determined themes. First, each interview transcript was read line-by-line several times by two researchers before the initial codes were generated based on dimensions listed. The codes were gathered based on their similarities and put into categories. Data referring to two pre-determined employability capitals were analysed separately to see which subset of the pre-determined capitals fit the most. Salient themes and dimensions were reviewed and verified for coding accuracy. Finally, codes were selected from each category to provide evidence for the analysis and were then translated into English which was also double-checked by two independent translators for its original meanings.



## 11.4 Findings and Discussion

### 11.4.1 *Perceived Effectiveness of the General English Program with Regard to Enhancing Students' Employability*

The study found that the General English program was perceived to contribute to developing students' human capital (receptive English skills and soft skills predominantly), cultural capital (cross-cultural awareness and competence, not work-related cultures), and a certain degree of psychological dimensions (self-confidence in English learning). Social capital and identity capital, however, were believed to be overlooked.

#### 11.4.1.1 Human Capital

Thirteen teachers agreed that the General English program helped develop students' English skills and soft skills. In particular, all interviewed teachers agreed that the program helped to develop English skills for students but at a very basic level (A2 CEFR). Participant 06, for example, shared:

Yes, all English skills like reading, writing, speaking, listening and elements of language like grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary are integrated well to help students develop their language skills and competences according to the curriculum objectives: A2 level. (P06)

In response to the effectiveness of the General English program in developing productive skills (speaking and writing), however, many teachers ( $n = 11$ ) questioned its effectiveness.

Students' speaking skills are really limited, even with the highest General English course (at the university), students can only communicate a few basic sentences. (P14)

The General English program outcome is A2 level, which is primarily just basic communication purposes.... From my observation, the two skills that students are still struggling with after finishing their English program are speaking and writing. (P11)

The program should focus more on enhancing students' communication skills: listening and speaking. (P13)

With regard to developing students' soft skills, 100% of the teachers shared that the program incorporated a lot of soft skill tasks for students. The most popular skills developed for General English students included Information Technology (IT), information search, public speaking, presentation, teamwork, discussion, and critical thinking skills.

In terms of IT skills, yes, the program is effective, because there is an online component complementing the textbook. Students need to do activities online as part of their assessment practice. The activities in the book help students develop skills of working in groups, presentations and public speaking. (P12)

It is obvious that students can enhance their soft skills including group work, IT and presentation skills. Specifically, they are required to practice speaking, writing and reading in groups. Moreover, the online assignments force students to level their IT skills to meet the requirements of the course. In terms of public speaking skills, students are asked to deliver both individual presentations and group presentations. (P07)

The course itself targets to improve students' critical thinking skills through the exercises in each unit. Self-study skills and info analysis are listed in the course syllabus... For example, when it comes to reading the passage, I can ask the students whether they totally trust the information in the passage 100%, if not, I ask them to check the reliability by going online to look for the counterarguments...if they can argue with reasonable justifications, they will earn a bonus mark. (P04)

As for the food and drinks topic, I set up a situation in which students are divided into groups to make conversations. Through those situations, students learn how to solve problems. Also, they can introduce the specialties or typical food of their living place... Furthermore, many students can improve their IT skills through video-filming and subtitle-creating activities. (P02)

#### 11.4.1.2 Cultural Capital

Most teachers ( $n = 12$ ) agreed that the General English program contributed to developing students' general cultural competence and intercultural competence. The teachers believed a lot of intercultural lessons and materials were introduced in the General English program.

The intercultural elements were embedded in the textbook and the materials. Students learn about different cultures and make conversations taking cultural factors into consideration. (P15)

However, the levels of intercultural competence taught were dependent on individual teachers' practice and lesson design. For example:

I think we help the students develop cultural competence well. Our textbook focuses on the awareness of other cultures of different countries in the world. The key to successfully integrating intercultural lessons into English classes depends on how well the teachers design at the post-task phase (of the communicative approach). (P10—Coordinator 02)

It was also mentioned that due to time constraints, cultural capitals could only be partly introduced into the program.

The General English program offers some units related to cultural issues in other countries. For instance, students learn about some Malaysian festivals or local food in other countries... Although being introduced in certain parts of the program, intercultural competence is not the focus of the program. To fully understand a culture of a country, learners must encounter real-life situations. (P08)

Teachers can only introduce the cultural aspects mentioned in the course book... It's impossible for teachers to assist students with improving intercultural competences due to time constraints. (P02)

In addition, 100% of the teachers shared concerns about the effectiveness of the program on developing students' workplace culture. Although intercultural/globalised contents were mentioned, work culture was not perceived in the program. For example, two participants shared:

I teach students how to write emails in workplace settings. I teach them about the writing styles, and formats but in general, it only provides general information about one aspect of workplace communication. Workplace culture demands more complicated languages and work experiences. It is too high for General English students. (P06)

The coursebook doesn't cover the work-culture-related feature. It partly introduces job interviews and dress code in general but fails to help students to have insights into work culture in a certain field. (P02)s

From the findings, it might be concluded that the General English program, in this context, does contribute to the development of students' human capital and cultural capital. However, human capital and cultural capitals were perceived from a narrow perspective (Bridgstock, 2009), focusing on just students' language skills (basic language level) and other soft skills at the workplace (IT skills, teamwork, public speaking, information searching, and analysis skills), whereas students' competence in using English in their discipline (especially communication skills: listening and speaking) and applying work cultures and practices in specific contexts were not addressed. The program's lack of focus in addressing students' ability to use English in the workplace has been discussed in the literature in other contexts (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Belwal et al., 2017). The findings are also in line with Tsui and Tollefson (2017) or Vu (2019), who claimed that English education in Vietnam was just helping students develop linguistic understanding, and intercultural competence whilst practical language skills/abilities for job-readiness were ignored.

#### 11.4.1.3 Psychological Capital

Current literature supports the important role of developing students' self-confidence, resilience, and adaptability in higher education, especially in uncertain movements of the current global economy and job markets (Cai, 2013; Pham, 2021; Tomlinson, 2012, 2017; Zainuddin et al., 2019). In this study, nine teachers thought that the General English program was quite helpful in developing students' self-confidence or patience. For example:

I believe the program helps students be more confident. For example, parts of my class assessments include oral presentations on a certain topic, which make my students become more confident in public speaking. The more they practice public speaking by presenting, either in groups or by themselves, the more confident they become... (P09—Coordinator 01)

In my class, students need to do a lot of group work, and then summarise their ideas to present to the class. At first, they were not comfortable, and shy to work in groups and present, but gradually, they became more confident sharing their ideas in English (even broken sometimes). (P06)

To some extent, when they did group work with their peers, they needed to help each other, the one more proficient was expected to help the less proficient, and they might learn to be patient with one another. (P10—Coordinator 02).

With regard to resilience and adaptability, teachers' views tend to be doubtful. Half of the teachers ( $n = 7$ ) questioned the ability to develop those psychological attributes for the General English students. For example:

Those attributes like adaptability or resilience, to me, are quite “general” and cannot be developed by just participating in the General English program. I don't think the General English program can help students build up those attributes, considering the limited time we have with students. (P08)

I don't think the program helps students to develop resilience or adaptability, to the best of my understanding. Those are the qualities they might gain from their living experiences, or maybe later years in their students' life. (P02)

Overall, the teachers mentioned that the General English program might help develop students' patience and confidence, through the introduction of group work or public speaking presentation activities. Nonetheless, other psychological dimensions that help students proactively respond to career challenges or life transitions such as resilience and adaptability (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020) were totally absent. To some teachers, some of those psychological attributes could only be achieved in students' later years at the university and in their transitions after graduation.

#### 11.4.1.4 Social Capital

Most teachers ( $n = 11$ ) were doubtful about the role of the General English program in connecting students to other stakeholders (recruiters, employers) and in helping them to network. It was explained that due to the time constraints and the focus of the program on only language outcomes, developing students' social capital was not the responsibility of the General English teachers.

We only have three-period per week for General English. Networking between teacher-students or students-students is not even strong. The relationship (between teacher-students) is hard to build upon a limited class time like this, let alone incorporating other networking activities. (P10—Coordinator 02)

It would be difficult for teachers to include teaching social networking skills in the program due to our limited time. Those activities would be helpful to improve their social or networking skills, but we need to focus on their language skills first. (P07)

Our program was limited to just teaching basic English skills, and there was little role for us as teachers to help students network with employers. Sometimes the university organises some job fairs in which students are informed. The focus of the General English program to me is only to improve their basic language skills, maybe they can learn more about networking in their disciplines or through participating in extra-curricular activities which are organised by their disciplinary departments. (P14)

However, a few teachers ( $n = 3$ ) suggested teachers have a role to play in orienting students' networking skills, both in their social contexts, and in their future jobs. For example:

I think teachers have a role to play to help students extend their social networks. As an English teacher, we can encourage students to find out about certain companies they want to work for and connect with them in terms of social networking, following the company pages/Facebook pages. (P05)

We could incorporate activities in which students research their potential employers and how to reach them through emails or participation in their job fairs events. However, this might apply to only topics related to employment or social networking. (P12)

Clarke (2017) and Fugate et al. (2004) suggested that social networks could provide more occupational opportunities for students. Social capital or the ability to help students to network was not present in this General English program. The participants in this study generally believed that this should be the responsibility of the disciplinary departments. Currently, many other Vietnamese universities have started incorporating extra-curricular activities, internships, and study exchange programs to help students develop social capital (Bui et al., 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Tran, 2017a, 2017b). Tran et al. (2019) found that an at-home international program at a university could help students improve their social network much better than other programs (General English included) by promoting opportunities for students to network with leading experts and professionals as well as friends in and out of their fields, both locally and overseas (p. 826). Those activities, however, were designed for students of at-home international programs only. The role of the General English program in promoting students' social capital was still vague.

#### 11.4.1.5 Identity/Career Capital

All teachers were in agreement that the General English program did very little in helping the students develop their identity capital (e.g., exploring career direction, developing a sense of belonging to a certain industry, and having confidence in applying for a job etc.). The reasons justified by the majority of the teachers were the large number of students and the mixed disciplines of the classes.

In one class, there are many disciplines, uhm...for example, education students and IT students...who have different job purposes and personalities and even goal orientations. And there are usually 40-50 students in a class. I can't go deep into inspiring them for a certain industry or encourage them to develop their identities for a certain industry either. I think their faculty can help them develop career identity better. (P01)

Students in our class come from different disciplines and it is impossible to orient their career identity. (P10—Coordinator 02)

Considering our program objectives and the mixed disciplines of our students, I think it is difficult for us to include elements related to identity or career belonging in our program. Maybe that is something their disciplinary faculty could do better. (P04)

Trede et al. (2012) argued that if career identity is encouraged, graduates tend to be more proactive in their desired career outcomes. However, little research has investigated how General English programs might help students improve their career identities. From this case study, it seems that the General English program did very little in inspiring students to explore their discipline/career or developing a sense of belonging to a certain industry. Tran et al. (2019) found that in one high-quality program in a Vietnamese university, the program could target career identity by helping them obtain the jobs they wanted and assisting students in navigating their career development. Teachers interviewed in this General English program, however, believed that disciplinary lecturers were responsible to help students identify “who I am or want to be” (Fugate et al., 2004).

### ***11.4.2 Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of the General English Program***

The findings reveal three factors influencing the effectiveness of the General English program with regard to employability: teacher-related factors, student-related factors, and management and administration-related factors.

#### **11.4.2.1 Teacher-Related Factors**

It is found that teachers’ English proficiency, teaching quality, and commitment of teachers were hindering the effectiveness of the General English program. In particular, some participants ( $n = 5$ ) stated that due to teachers’ insufficient English proficiency and ineffective teaching methods, the program was not really good. For example;

As I can tell, some teachers have bad English pronunciation and students will imitate their bad pronunciation. I think ... teachers should be encouraged to take English proficiency every two years to constantly improve their English proficiency. And also, teachers should include more ITs because they are teaching Generation Y. The situation at our department is the stagnation of the teachers, who do not want to apply innovative teaching methods or find ways to improve their own English proficiency. (P05)

Some teachers do not have very good teaching methods and they still used grammar-translation methods to teach English communication skills those days... (P15)

This was also observed by the program coordinator, as she insisted the English proficiency and the teaching competence of the teachers in the department was not similar. “*The quality of teaching of our teachers is not the same and so does their motivation to teach*” (P09-Coordinator 1).

Four other teachers also observed that General English teachers did not have the enthusiasm for teaching and spent little time for the lessons because they had very busy teaching schedules. One shared:

Some teachers tend to have very little devotion in teaching General English classes, and they did not want to use communicative teaching methods as designing those communicative activities could be time-consuming for them. This could demotivate the students. (P04)

The two coordinators also confirmed that the teachers of the program were not equally qualified and committed to teaching. In fact, permanent teachers of the General English Department were believed to be less committed than contracted teachers as contracted teachers needed to work hard to have their contracts renewed.

For contracted teachers, there is a threat to stop the contracts which stimulate teachers to invest more for the teaching quality, whereas tenured teachers tend to be less motivated to teach. Some teachers therefore are more committed to teaching quality than others. Some other teachers are busy with their teaching and come to class with less preparation. (P10—Coordinator 2)

Teachers' English proficiency in Vietnam has been discussed in many studies (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Vu & Ha, 2021) and the NFL has attempted to improve teachers' language competence by delivering a lot of language competence training. Vu and Ha (2021), however, observed that although the NFL seeks to address teachers' language competencies, it is unreasonable as the language proficiency of many student-teachers at the entry level is very low. Although under the NFL, it is expected that university teachers should have C1 English proficiency (CEFR), in reality, it is still a work in progress as it might take a while for teachers to achieve that level. In addition, it is noted that even with good English proficiency, some teachers cannot effectively use English for teaching purposes (Le et al., 2017; Vu & Ha, 2021). Vietnamese teachers' teaching methods in English programs have been widely discussed (Hoang, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2015; Vu & Ha, 2021). It was suggested that more support for teachers' professional development activities (using communicative teaching approach, using tasks-based portfolio in teaching language) is needed (Nguyen et al., 2015). Five out of the 14 teachers in this case study insisted that more professional development opportunities (e.g., using communicative teaching approach effectively) were needed. Those suggestions are in line with Dudzik and Nguyen (2015) and Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2018) who believed that a more communicative approach to teaching English should be encouraged if English programs in non-English countries want to improve students' communicative competence and other employability competence and skills.

#### 11.4.2.2 Student-Related Factors

Most interviewed teachers ( $n = 12$ ) perceived students' low motivation as the most significant issue refraining them from learning English. Many teachers shared similar views:

The motivation of students in this program is worth discussing. Most of them (after graduating from universities) just want to go back to work in their hometown and for the local government [where English is not required], and they do not see the roles of English in their future employment prospects. (P10—Coordinator 2)

General English students have a very low level of English proficiency and they come to class just to pass the General English courses as they are compulsory. How can they have the motivation to learn? (P08)

Most of the students just wanted to finish the three General English modules as a requirement of the university. Some students even said they would go back to work in their hometowns in rural areas where local agencies or companies do not consider language competencies as a requirement of recruitment. (P01)

The perceptions of teachers in this study are similar to Nguyen et al. (2014) who accentuated students' low motivation in language learning as the biggest problem associated with the General English programs in Vietnamese universities or to Trinh and Mai (2019) who suggested that even when General English was made mandatory, students still would not have the intrinsic motivation to learn English. However, Nguyen and Habok (2021) suggested that Vietnamese students could be more motivated to learn English if their awareness of the importance of English in the era of the fourth industrial revolution was addressed (p. 8). Contrary to the findings from this study, Nguyen and Habok (2021) believed that student's motivation could improve if the English program shifts away from linguistics and exam-oriented to career development and communicative purposes.

In addition, being shy, and passive was addressed as another factor preventing students to use English in class and to interact with friends and others, as two participants shared:

General English students are timid and cannot communicate in English at all and this affects their interpersonal interactions with others. (P03)

When they are merged with other disciplines for groupwork activities, they do not want to blend in whatsoever when I asked them to do group work. Students are very passive, and they just don't want to go out of their comfort zone. (P08)

This finding is in line with the past studies on how shyness prevents Vietnamese university students from communicating in English (Bui & Duong, 2017; Trinh & Mai, 2019). Wen and Clement (2003) persisted that group cohesiveness and attachment to group members are factors influencing students' communication in the classroom and suggested teachers use group work activities to encourage students to overcome shyness and interact with other members in the class. However, Vietnamese General English students were believed to be passive and rote learners who are not familiar with engaging activities such as paired or group work, discussion (Trinh & Mai, 2019). The findings, therefore, support other studies (Bui & Duong, 2017; Trinh & Mai, 2019; Vu & Ha, 2021) in concluding that students' cultural factors (shyness, passive, inferiority to friends of other disciplines, afraid of making mistakes, losing faces...) are one of the biggest factors hindering students to use English effectively.

#### **11.4.2.3 Management and Administration-Related Factors**

All interviewed teachers ( $n = 14$ ) perceived the management and administration as another hindering factor to the effectiveness of the General English program. There



were four distinct areas related to management as external factors of teaching: big class size, the program outcomes, teaching and learning incentives, and collaboration between departments/faculties.

Big class sizes and mixed-disciplined grouping were deemed as one factor influencing the effectiveness of the program, as one participant shared:

In one class, there are many students, ranging from 35-50 students, who are from many disciplines, uhm... and it is just tough for us to teach big and mixed classes. (P02)

Big class size is also a challenge and if language quality is to improve, language class size should be smaller. In accordance with the present results, previous studies (Bui & Duong, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2015; Trinh & Mai, 2019) have already demonstrated that class size should be reduced in order to help improve the effectiveness of English programs. Large class size was believed to hinder teachers from using communicative teaching methods (Trinh & Mai, 2019; Vu & Ha, 2021).

There was a consensus on the two coordinators and twelve teachers' viewpoints about the low outcomes of the program (Level 2 VSTEP). The teachers agreed that the low outcome of the program restricted students' ability to use English for employability purposes. As one participant said:

I think we can improve the employability of students by making a few changes in terms of program management, like changing the outcome of the program... I doubt whether recruiters will value the outcome (A2) we are targeting right now. (P10—Coordinator 02)

Some other teachers even believed that if employability is the focus of the program, then the outcomes should be aligned to some international testing systems such as TOEIC or IELTS because VSTEP Level 2 (the NFL Project) was too localised and cannot prepare students to use English communicatively for their future career.

I personally thought that with the current outcome of General English, once finishing the program, students will not meet what future employers want: communicating fluently in English. We need to adopt an international testing system as some other universities have done [TOEIC, IELTS]. (P11)

According to Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg (2008), the outcome of university students when finishing university should be equivalent to B1 CEFR (or Level 3 of VSTEP). The language outcome of this General English program was, therefore, one level lower. Employers might also expect students to possess an international English proficiency certificate depending on their workplace settings. Employers might also want students to use English in professional contexts rather than academic English or linguistic understanding (Vu, 2019). There is a need to reconsider the outcomes of the General English program considering the diverse and changing job markers nowadays in Vietnam (Tran, 2013).

In addition, the lack of teaching and learning incentives or financial resources was believed to discourage the effectiveness of the program. A few participants believed that grants, scholarships, bonuses could help improve students' motivation. Teaching effectiveness was also affected due to the lack of incentives for teachers, which demotivated them in their careers. As one participant explained:

Teaching effectively or not, we are paid equally, so why do we have to invest more time designing soft skills activities for students? There is no incentive for teaching innovations. (P03)

When asked if the General English Department planned to help their students to develop social networking skills and communication skills by organising some extra-curricular activities, most participants agreed that those activities would be helpful but they could not do it as their budget was limited.

Extracurricular activities or job fairs or internship opportunities are great for students but due to the lack of financial and human resources, and the coordination with other departments, we are unable to organise it for our program. (P09—Coordinator 1)

The lack of incentives and funding for activities outside class time is quite common for General English programs in Vietnam. Activities, such as English speaking clubs or job fairs or music festivals that might help students improve their English and other skills (group work, public speaking, networking), are useful, but funding has always been an issue (Nguyen et al., 2015).

There also seemed to be a disconnection between the General English department and other faculties in the design of the English curricula. Most teachers ( $n = 11$ ) mentioned that they did not know what were taught in other English programs (e.g., ESP, at-home international English programs).

There is no connection between our department and the other disciplinary departments. General English and ESP programs are different, and I do not know what they teach in ESP. High-quality (at-home international) programs also use different English curricula, so it seems like... we do not speak the same languages here (in our own university). (P06)

The disconnection between the ESP and the General English programs could also be counted as one management-related factor influencing the effectiveness of the General English program. In this context, the General English program was administered by the School of Foreign Languages, which includes three modules as discussed in the Methodology. After finishing those modules, students can choose to enrol in an ESP program administered by their disciplinary department. Teachers teaching ESP are recruited by the disciplinary departments, and the teachers could be either English teachers or disciplinary lecturers. The design of ESP programs is different from one faculty to the other (the outcomes and the module numbers) and it is not related to the General English program examined in this case.

Most of the teachers in this study suggested that some of the employability capitals (e.g., connection with external stakeholders, social networking, career identity, or knowledge of their disciplines in English, etc.) could only be developed through ESP programs, which were beyond their job responsibilities. Their perceptions align with Cigar (2013) and Harding (2007) who stated that ESP programs had a more pragmatic value and were more selective towards students' occupational goals. However, it must be noted that although students' demand for ESP was increasingly high, teaching ESP at Vietnam universities was found to heavily focus on grammar and vocabulary whilst English communication skills were also neglected (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). In the scope of this study, it is unclear how the ESP in this context helped students improve

their employability, but it might be concluded that there was a disconnection between the two English programs with regard to the learning outcomes, interconnection of the two programs, and their collaboration opportunities.

## 11.5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The present study explores teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the General English program with regard to enhancing students' employability in one Vietnamese university. The results show that the General English program contributes to developing students' human capital: English skills (with less efficiency on productive skills), and soft skills; cultural capital (cultural knowledge, intercultural competence, but work culture is excluded); and a certain degree of psychological capital (self-confidence). Social capital and identity capital were the overlooked capitals. The study also reveals three factors influencing the effectiveness of the program: students-related issues (low motivation, shyness, and unwillingness to communicate), teachers-related issues (English proficiency, teaching methods, and commitment), and management issues (large class size, outcomes of the program, incentives for program, lack of collaboration between the General English Department and other disciplinary departments).

In fact, although the General English program was perceived to focus on human capitals (helping students to develop linguistic knowledge and soft skills), the program was not effective in helping students to use English to communicate in real life and in the workplace. Findings in this study are aligned with studies that found English programs in Asian countries can successfully develop students' linguistic skills, but fail to strengthen their employability for future education, work, and life (Belwal et al., 2017; Chuanpongpanich, 2021; Erling, 2014; Tsui, 2021). In line with previous studies (Bui et al., 2017; Tsui & Tollefson, 2017; Tran, 2017a; Vu, 2019), this study confirms that the examined English program did not provide students with sufficient practical language skills for their career development. The following recommendations could be considered to help improve General English program students' communicative competence and address the employability dimensions that were overlooked. Firstly, it has been suggested that a student's self-learning skill, self-responsibility, adaptability, or resilience (psychological capitals) could be improved through using task-based learning, project-based learning, flipped-classroom in language teaching (Baker, 2012). Secondly, since online learning has become popular, it is recommended that language teachers should create online platforms or communities to help students develop intercultural exchange and network with their peers and potential recruiters (Mai et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). Interactions with selected virtual sites and foreigners could facilitate authenticity and participation in the language practice community and improve students' motivation to learn English and become more career-ready (Nguyen & Habok, 2021). Finally, it is also highly recommended that work-related themes, extra-curricular activities (projects, job exhibition, recruiters' exchange, internship, etc.) be incorporated into

the General English curricula so that students' employability is enhanced (Bui et al., 2017; Clarke, 2017; Tran, 2017a, 2017b; Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

Furthermore, the study supports the claims that teachers' qualities and commitment remain a challenge in English education in Vietnam (Hoang, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2015). On-going professional development training with a focus on teaching English communicatively and using new approaches such as task-based or project-based should be conducted more often and effectively (Baker, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015). It is, however, advised that the varying needs of the students and teachers should be considered in teachers' professional development opportunities and that the delivery of the training should be designed in a more interactive and sustained way, rather than the so-called intensive, one-off training workshops (Nguyen et al., 2019; Vu & Ha, 2021). Nguyen et al. (2019) asserted that professional learning activities (e.g., peer observation, peer mentoring, instructional rounds, action research) for teachers should be on-going and interactive to help teachers reflect, collaborate, and improve their teaching practice. If teachers are motivated to teach and are competent to teach, issues related to students' motivation and shyness could be overcome.

The lack of resources (facilities, class size, budget for extra-curricular activities) mentioned in this study has been addressed in the literature (Tran, 2013; Trinh & Mai, 2019; Vu & Ha, 2021). If class size was smaller and there were more human and financial resources allocated for the English programs, the program could have done better with regard to employability. In specific, funding for English programs to embed work-related elements (projects, guest speakers, job fairs...) should be allocated. Curriculum developers and administrators need to also consider the shift from linguistic and exam-oriented English teaching to one that focuses on communicative purposes and career development (Nguyen & Habok, 2021; Tran, 2013). As Tran (2013) put it "there is a need to re-design English classes, to reconsider the aim and the focus of English teaching in English non-specialized programs" (2013, p. 138) as it is not clear if students learn General English for what purposes: for communicative purposes, for academic purposes, or for occupational purposes. If possible, the role of the General English program in helping other more advanced English programs such as ESP should be articulated. Indeed, participants in this study revealed that developing certain employability capitals (identity/career or social capitals) should be the responsibility of the ESP program and the disciplinary faculties, not the General English program. More collaboration amongst different English programs administered by different disciplinary faculties is needed to address the gaps described in this study.

This study only involved 14 teacher participants; thus, whilst it reflects the perceived effectiveness and contribution of the General English program with regard to students' employability at a Vietnamese university, the findings are not typical for all General English programs in Vietnamese universities. Future studies can consider using interviews and a large-scale survey with students, graduates, and employers to add more perspectives on the effectiveness of the program regarding students' employability. Overall, the present study makes two contributions to the field of English language teaching (General English programs) and employability capitals at universities. First, it fills the gaps in research related to a General English

program and its roles in developing students' employability in a Vietnamese context. The effectiveness or challenges of the program were discussed using the holistic approach to employability. Pedagogically speaking, it reveals some gaps in the design and implementation of one General English program and suggests strategies that teachers, policy developers, and administrators could adopt to improve the program effectiveness. Secondly, the study provides empirical evidence to support the overlooked employability capitals (social, identity/career and psychological capitals) which have been argued as necessary for students' career development (Bates et al., 2019; Clarke, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Pham, 2021), from a Vietnamese university context. The study concludes by providing suggestions to embed more employability capitals in the language programs so that graduates could be well-prepared for their career development and career sustainability (Pham, 2021; Tomlinson & Tran, 2020).

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# Chapter 12

## English for Specific Purposes Courses and Vietnamese Graduates' Employability



Do Na Chi and Ngoc Tung Vu

**Abstract** There has been an increasing demand for graduates with proficient levels of English, especially English skills associated with a particular occupation. To meet that labor market demand, Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs) have integrated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in the curriculum, aiming to create a highly qualified workforce who can perform their work effectively in a globalized world. However, how well these ESP courses are able to equip students with a sufficient level of English skills for work purposes has not been adequately researched. Drawing on the framework of graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2017) and the learning-for-profession principle of ESP courses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), this study investigates the contributions of ESP courses to Vietnamese graduates' employability, by using graduates' self-reflected experiences. Data for this study included 16 responses to an open-ended survey and 220 responses to an online survey which asked graduates about their experiences with the ESP courses and the contributions of such courses to their employability successes. The findings showed that these ESP courses contributed to the development of specialized language, knowledge, and generic skills that ensure graduates' employability. However, there were limitations in ESP course designs and teaching practices. This chapter discusses ways to increase the benefits of these courses for Vietnamese graduates' employability.

**Keywords** Employability · English for specific purposes · Specialized language · Knowledge · Generic skills

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## 12.1 Introduction

In this globalization era, English language has been used worldwide in various education, business, and diplomacy settings, hence being acknowledged as the most popular lingua franca worldwide with predictably an increasing number of people speaking English as an additional language (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018). Thus, possessing advanced English language proficiency is undoubtedly crucial for those intending to work effectively in multilingual environments and promising professional advancements. In Vietnam, the contribution of English language proficiency to Vietnamese graduates' career prospects has also intensified the need for learning English language (Pham, 2011; Pham & Bui, 2019; Tran, 2018a). This belief has led to an integration of English language subjects in the national curriculum across educational levels (MOET, 2008) with different English language benchmarks required for Vietnamese college graduates (Pham & Bui, 2019). These benchmarks demonstrate the different English language levels that EFL learners in Vietnam need to achieve as per their levels of education. Normally, the evidence of such language proficiency is indicated by their achievements in internationally recognized English language standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL or other recognized English language proficiency tests. In addition to General English courses, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam have initiated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, which marks an increasing attention and demand for English language skills for job-oriented purposes, especially since Vietnam's participation in World Trade Organization in 2007 (B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019).

However, despite many well-stated policies across universities in the nation on improving English language proficiency for Vietnamese learners to advance their careers, it has been reported that Vietnamese graduates appear to fail to use English for communicative purposes effectively, even including those who are English-major graduates (Nguyen & Pham, 2016; Pham & Bui, 2019). Evidently, these policies on mandating and benchmarking English language proficiency for Vietnamese graduates may impose negative aspects of anxiety on students, causing them to learn the language as being mandated rather than the awareness of the benefits that the language offers for their future work and education (Pham & Bui, 2019).

In addition, whether Vietnamese higher education (HE) graduates' professional prospects can entirely depend on their English language skills still needs further consideration. Indeed, employability necessarily comes into play, which is understood as fundamental opportunities for their chances of being employed based on their qualified knowledge and skills required beyond this language. Expanding necessary knowledge and skills for employability, Tomlinson (2017) presents different forms of capital that one should obtain. These forms of capital refer to resources that a graduate possesses in terms of social relationships, knowledge, wealth, and sense of belonging that construct a well-qualified individual for successful work performances. Therefore, it seems that employability demands other aspects of knowledge and skills beyond English language proficiency which is only a form of the necessary capital.

Thus, there may still be a void of other required knowledge and skills that graduates need to possess for their desired employment opportunities and employability.

To produce a well-rounded workforce, HEIs in various contexts have shifted their views of ESP courses in the curriculum, transforming from advancing learners' English language proficiency to creating an inclusion of professional knowledge (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Under the expansion in ESP courses to cover both linguistic and professional knowledge and skills at higher education level, challenges still occur as ESP instructors are found mainly to have expertise in General English and lack specialized knowledge and skills relevant to the disciplines that they are teaching such as Tourism, Business, or Nursing. In a different scenario, those who are qualified in their specialization may not be proficient in English language to make it a medium of instruction (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). This inadequacy in covering professional terminology and knowledge has been well seen in Vietnamese HEIs, but this has not yet been adequately solved. This long-lasting pitfall in ESP education restricts Vietnamese higher education learners' English language proficiency and professional development for their future careers, as a result (Nguyen & Pham, 2016).

To track the circumstances of ESP education in Vietnamese educational context and how these ESP courses impact Vietnamese graduates' employability, this study explores how the ESP courses contribute to employability of Vietnamese graduates who had undertaken ESP courses in their college degree programs before current work and what needs to be further addressed in these courses for better support of employability of the future graduates. This study consists of two phases in which the first one involves an open-ended survey with Vietnamese graduates to develop a 4-point Likert scale survey in the second phase, covering the themes found in the first phase and including the benefits of ESP courses toward Vietnamese graduates' employability, the mismatches between the goals of the courses and the actual knowledge and skills that Vietnamese graduates encounter at their workplaces. These findings subsequently support recommendations for improvements in ESP course design and teaching practices to enhance Vietnamese graduates' employability.

## 12.2 Literature Review

### 12.2.1 *Employability*

Employability is a topic of extensive discussion as the primary goal that HEIs aim to achieve. To define employability, Yorke (2006) reflects on graduates possessing “a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes” to assist graduates' employment and work performance, “which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (p. 8). This view on employability covers a wide range of personal and social aspects that altogether help graduates identify elements that they need to become qualified labor forces and identify the roles of these

elements to both self and social development. Despite this comprehensive perception of employability, different interpretations of what it means are unavoidable. On the one hand, employability may refer to an outcome of certain labor markets or the workers' employment status (Forrier & Sels, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). On the other hand, employability should be extended to cover workers' employment-related meaningfulness (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Pham & Jackson, 2020).

The changing view of employability reflects the development in sociology research, showing that employability is not solely limited to the workers' knowledge, skills, and attributes to enable them to seek jobs as they desire. Such a perspective on employability also stresses the negotiations between the employers and workers about how both of them support each other in achieving the workers' goals of accepting requirements and expectations of the other. Explicitly, a wider range of employment types has emerged, and a larger number of graduates have persisted in the shift of the labor market. Thus, employability is not limited to a story of how the graduates find different ways to fit themselves to be employed, but how they should find strategies to make them employable workers, according to the rapidly changing labor markets in size and shape (Pham, 2021). Having different outlooks about employability is complicated but essential for educators in HEIs to define it properly and seek appropriate teaching approaches commensurate with different aspects of employability. Thereby, prospective graduates can respond well to the high demands of stakeholders in various job settings.

Following the various standpoints toward employability, different models have been proposed to capture the qualities that qualified graduates should obtain. As indicated above, Tomlinson (2017) pinpoints five forms of capital that prospective graduates or current graduates should acquire, including *human capital*, *social capital*, *cultural capital*, *psychological capital*, and *identity capital*. These forms of capital respectively indicate graduates' possession of relevant characteristics, social networks, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and a sense of belonging to fit themselves to the work conditions and potentially undertake in-service professional development. These forms of capital are likely to be interrelated and altogether promising for their professional prospects. Besides Tomlinson (2017), Clarke (2018) also constructed her employability model that emphasizes graduates' psycho-social aspects, which could be developed together with many other stakeholders in the job market.

Discussions about employability have then shifted from its elements to agents that are responsible for ensuring graduates' acquisition of these important elements for their employability. Tran (2015) and Tran (2018b, 2018c) state that stakeholders seem to blame each other regarding who should be primarily responsible for developing the graduates' employability skills although researchers seem to agree with shared responsibilities of different agents in this regard. Firstly, Tran (2018b, 2018c) suggests that HE institutions are the most responsible party for this goal by offering various forms of learning (formal learning, field trips, extra-curricular activities, or learning with guest speakers from the industries). Meanwhile, external partners

also need to join this collaborative effort to minimize the gaps between the institutions' availability of competencies in equipping the graduates' competencies and the employers' expectations toward their graduates' resultant competencies upon graduation (Rae, 2007). Indeed, employability is extended to cover both pre-service and in-service courses when many skills can only be developed in the work contexts. This extension to the in-service stage suggests that employers be critical helpers of the graduates' employability skills (Hager, 2006; Holland, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006). In other words, employers should not just "take everything and give nothing" (Yorke, 2006, p. 3).

However, some other researchers (Bridgstock, 2009; Leong & Kavanagh, 2013; Van Buren, 2003) argue that the primary responsibilities of employability should lie in students and graduates themselves because they are those bringing real experiences, engaging in their work-related situations by themselves, and strategically pulling down many work-related challenges based on their personal choices and capabilities. Because different stakeholders, job markets and disciplines have distinctive demands on graduates, it should not be only students' tasks to bring the potential employers' expected competencies to the forefront (Holland, 2006). Thus, employability skills should be the ultimate result of collaborations between relevant parties, higher education institutions, and other parties, such as policymakers, students, graduates, and employers (Tran, 2015). The voices of policymakers, employers, higher educational school leaders and administrators, and students are altogether of significance to help students visualize the demands of the job markets and importantly how to apply the academic knowledge and skills related to their chosen subjects to succeed in the actual work settings (Tran et al., 2020).

### ***12.2.2 ESP Education and Employability***

English language has become increasingly important in this globalization era for being a global language across and among nations. As English language proficiency is a key driver for graduates' employment or employment sustainability (Tran, 2015), the roles of universities in equipping them with English knowledge and skills specialized for their field of studies become inevitably critical to support the students' readiness to their future work contexts (Ritter et al., 2018). Following the roles of English language in enhancing graduates' employability, HEIs have paid extensive attention to designing courses that help learners become proficient in this language for professional purposes.

ESP education generally prepares learners with adequate English language skills to handle communicative situations in a specific professional area. This preparation creates language immunization (Hamid et al., 2019), meaning that learners or graduates will handle different situations in their professional settings using the acquired language and knowledge from ESP courses. To illustrate, Swales (1992) contends that ESP is a subfield of Language for Specific Purposes that promotes "the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programs for people who

need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs” (p. 300). To sufficiently prepare learners for future professional communication, ESP courses need to adhere to “the requirements of the learner rather than by external factors” (Stevens, 1977, p. 186). Thus, ESP courses should aim to foster a certain type of specifically purposeful communication. Therefore, teaching ESP courses should also be student-centered, needs-based, and relevant to workplace scenarios.

While the conventional view of ESP courses heavily emphasizes language skills, an effective ESP course is further argued as *learning for profession*. Learners should also learn the knowledge and skills relevant to their prospective professions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). One of the reasons for this expansion from language to professional knowledge and skills in ESP courses is to support learners’ acquisition of ESP knowledge and their future employability. Johnson (1993) provides an example of how ESP can be tied to disciplinary knowledge. Focusing on Business English, he states that to acquire Business terminology effectively, learners need to be equipped with Business knowledge to see how a term is used in a specific business context. Nonetheless, this requirement of both language and content knowledge turns out to be challenging for both learners and instructors in ESP education (Gaye, 2020; B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019). This is because a word in General English may be interpreted differently in Business contexts. In another instance of Nursing discipline, Basturkmen (2010) stresses the need for ESP teachers in Nursing to know the language and nursing-related knowledge to comprehend health reports, which is necessary for them to contextualize how Nursing terminology is used.

These principles of having both ESP terminology and specialized knowledge for the learners to make sense of ESP terms suggest that the associated contents in the ESP classrooms be closely intertwined with the reality of how English is used in the students’ intended or current workplaces (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; van Naerssen et al., 2005). Despite its potential to produce a well-rounded labor force, this requirement is in turn problematic due to the imbalance between English language and specialized content knowledge that ESP instructors should obtain to teach ESP courses successfully. To explain, Nguyen and Pham (2016) found that ESP teachers are in fact trained in General English programs in some contexts. Although this step is foundational to teaching ESP courses, it highlights the lack of sufficient training for specialized content knowledge that ESP instructors are entitled to. Therefore, while requiring ESP courses to prepare learners with specialized language and knowledge, it seems unachievable when ESP educators themselves are not always specialists in these aspects.

Following the imbalance between language and professional knowledge in ESP courses, this dismay questions the qualities of graduates from ESP courses when they enter their professional world. Several forms of capital have been pointed out as constituents of employability such as human capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (network with others), cultural capital (understanding of work culture and practices in a specific industry), psychological capital (attributes that make one bold in their career development), and identity capital (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). Meanwhile, the extent to which ESP courses can construct these capital forms for the learners before their entrance to different career paths is under-addressed. For

instance, ESP courses, despite their provision of both professional terminology and knowledge, may only satisfy the demand of cultural capital, and let alone other crucial elements for employability (Tomlinson, 2017). Through several challenges in ESP education that have been raised by different researchers (Le et al., 2020; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019), the core obstacles refer to the absence or imbalance of either the language or the content knowledge that ESP learners are provided for their future work areas.

### ***12.2.3 ESP Education and Employability in Vietnam***

Implementing ESP courses in HE degree programs is no longer unfamiliar in many educational contexts, including Vietnam. However, how these ESP courses are designed and taught and their contributions toward employability require further investigation. In some contexts, such as Vietnam, there have been debates on whether graduates who have undertaken ESP courses at the HE level are qualified for employability. The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has unstoppably developed many educational guidelines and innovations that correspond to the national needs and integration into the global forces. The National Foreign Language Project 2020 (2008–2020) aimed to develop Vietnamese citizens' abilities to use English as a foreign language in daily and professional settings (Nguyen, 2011). Despite such goals and efforts in raising Vietnamese learners' English proficiencies, it has been unknown whether professional skills are given adequate attention to, which requires further exploration to visualize the circumstances of ESP education in Vietnam and the graduates' employability as the outcome of these ESP courses.

Limited research has attended to the operations of ESP courses in Vietnam and the extent to which learners are benefitted from those courses for future careers. Some studies conducted in Vietnamese context emphasize the acquisition of ESP terminology and the actual language used for communication at workplaces (Le et al., 2020; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019). These studies show a gap between what is taught in ESP programs and the authentic job demands when the knowledge in ESP textbooks seems too general and inauthentic. Several reasons regarding ESP instructors' qualifications, ESP course design, and other institution-related problems altogether restrict the contributions of ESP education to employability (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Despite some available findings on ESP education circumstances in Vietnam, further research is still needed to delve into Vietnamese graduates' perceptions of the benefits of ESP courses toward employability, the irrelevant issues in the design and teaching of ESP courses, and potential implications for more effective ESP course design and teaching. Given that graduates have been immersed in work settings, their perceptions are valuable to reflect on the values of knowledge acquired in ESP courses for their employability. The expected outcome of this understanding would contribute to a better understanding of how well graduates are prepared for employability from ESP programs. This finding will further provide implications



to effectively design and implement ESP courses in higher education to maximize graduates' employability.

### 12.3 Methodology

This study aims to explore Vietnamese graduates' perspectives toward the benefits of ESP courses for their employability. The study also emphasizes aspects that ESP courses are unable to provide learners. Particularly, this study seeks answers to the following questions.

- *In what ways and to what extent did the ESP courses benefit Vietnamese professionals in terms of career development?*
- *What were the limitations and obstacles of ESP classes, in their experiences?*

This study primarily relied on a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2009) as a viable and potential tool to help us determine the differences in motivations and perceived benefits of and challenges they faced regarding joining ESP courses between participants, the challenges facing them in terms of the ESP courses, and the suggestions benefitting future success of the ESP courses for the Vietnamese college students. Participants of this study included currently employed graduates, preferably with one to two years of work experience after graduation. However, due to difficulties in approaching graduates, this study was open to those with more than two years of experience, but we still preferred those graduates with one to two years of graduation so that they could provide us with their experiences with most recent ESP courses offered by Vietnamese universities and how such courses influenced their employability.

We understood that different work settings would have different demands on graduates, and ESP courses at different HEIs would follow different learners' needs, course objectives, curriculum design, teaching and learning resources, and teaching approaches. Therefore, before designing a survey to collect quantitative data from a large group of participants, we explored the diversity and authenticity of work demands of the wide groups of potential graduate participants, characteristics of ESP courses that they partook in, and the (mis)matches between what ESP courses offered and their work requirements as perceived by graduates based on their real experiences, as well as suggestions for improving ESP courses (Cameron, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Given, 2008; Khng, 2020). This initial understanding would support the creation of items in the survey to be as relevant to Vietnamese graduates' employability skills and ESP education in Vietnam as possible. Keeping that in mind, we conducted the study in two phases:

In Phase 1, we developed our first draft of the open-ended questionnaire (in English) with the content being checked by a few EFL college-level teachers in Vietnam who taught English to both major and non-major English learners. Then, in September 2021, we finalized the English version of the questionnaire, translated it into the Vietnamese language and cross-checked with a Vietnamese EFL lecturer

for translation accuracy. Then, we distributed the Vietnamese translated version of the questionnaire to collect the opinions of Vietnamese graduates with 1–2 years of work experience about their past ESP learning experiences at their universities. There were ten questions in the questionnaire, including their professional English learning experiences, prior academic disciplines, and types of universities that they attended. Also, we were curious about the professionals' current types of work, job descriptions and demands, and the necessity of English language in the workplace, the knowledge and skills that they had learned in ESP courses, and the extent to which they thought ESP courses could prepare them for successful work performances. The graduates were encouraged to draw on their experiences with ESP courses and current work circumstances to respond to the questions. We distributed the questionnaire to Vietnamese universities' alumni groups and directly to the graduates.

After collecting the responses from 16 graduates, we separately coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The responses were read, and segments related to our predetermined themes in the research questions about the benefits and challenges of ESP education to employability were highlighted. We also noted sub-themes and other emergent themes from the data. The researchers met to discuss the coding process and the themes. As a result, the predetermined and emergent themes as noted in parentheses included (i) the reasons for taking ESP courses at college (core course selection and availability, intended career paths, personal interests), (ii) the current work demands (English language, professional knowledge, and various generic skills), (iii) the benefits and mismatches that ESP courses offered in alignment with those demands (English language, disciplinary knowledge, and generic skills), and (iv) recommendations for ESP education (curriculum design, learning resources, instructors' qualities, teaching approaches, and assessment).

In Phase 2, drawing on the themes identified in Phase 1 and from literature review, we developed an online survey to collect data from a larger number of participants. This survey had three main sections. Section 12.1 aimed to collect participants' demographic information. Section 12.2 explored college graduates' motivations for enrolling in ESP courses and the benefits they perceived to get from participating in such courses. In Sect. 12.3, we sought to explore participants' experiences with the challenges they faced when taking the ESP courses. In Sects. 12.2 and 12.3, participants were asked to rate the items on a 4-point Likert scale, in which 1 as “*No ideas/comments*”, 2 as “*Strongly disagree*”, 3 as “*Disagree*”, 4 as “*Agree*”, and 5 as “*Strongly agree*”. In October 2021, quantitative data collection process started. We adopted a snowball sampling technique to ensure that the data would be collected within the timeframe we had. We sent the link of the survey to 15 colleagues in several universities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi so that they could share it to their alumni networks. After three weeks, we received 232 responses. The demographic information of the participants will be reported later in the Results section.

We analyzed the quantitative data using the SPSS (version 26). We first identified and removed outliers. We checked internal consistency of the retained data set for Sects. 12.2 and 12.3 of the survey using Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha = 0.87$  and  $0.73$  respectively). We calculated Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) to determine

the levels of expectations prior to enrolling in ESP courses, the levels of benefits they gained out of the ESP courses, and the levels of challenges they faced while studying these courses. We also used percentages to show the ratio between groups of participants who showed their positive or negative reflections with these ESP courses, named “agreement” (combining “*strongly agree*” and “*agree*”) and “disagreement” (combining “*strongly disagree*” and “*disagree*”).

## 12.4 Results

### 12.4.1 Demographics

There were a total of 232 responses; however, we decided to remove 12 responses that were identified as outliers by SPSS due to the incompleteness. Out of 220 participants, 153 were females and 67 were males, working in three primary sectors of the labor force and having an average of 24.8 years of age. Moreover, there were 178 participants working in the private sectors, 38 in the public companies, and 4 as the self-employed or freelancers. Also, a total of 99 participants were employed in the Economics, Business, and Services sectors, greater than that of the Science, Engineering, Technology (69 participants) and the Social Sciences and Humanities (40 participants), and the Agriculture and Fisheries (12 participants).

Among the participants, 87 participants had worked from one to two years, 70 from three to four years, and 57 with five years and over. Out of 220, 180 participants shared that their current work was not directly related to their ESP studies. Also, 131 participants reported to use English regularly in their work environments, 78 participants reported that their work required to have an occasional use of English, and only 11 revealed that their work required little to no English use (Table 12.1).

### 12.4.2 Perceived Benefits of Participating in ESP Courses

Our findings showed that the professionals reflected their positive opinions on ESP courses, with particular regards to the courses’ scientific knowledge (such as terms and structures). In this regard, they benefited from their past ESP courses (70.40%;  $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). However, the findings also mentioned the participants’ low rate regarding the ESP courses toward their later work opportunities (45.90%;  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) and toward their general major-related knowledge (42.70%;  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). However, the ESP courses could not strengthen their chances of career development (31.80%;  $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) (Table 12.2).

Contrary to their experiences in the ESP programs at any time of the degree programs or after, the consequences of their participation were slightly positive. From Table 12.3, they found that they became more confident to take several classes

**Table 12.1** Participants' demographics

Demographics	Sub-component	No	%
Gender	Female	153	69.50
	Male	67	30.50
Current work sector	Public	38	17.30
	Private	178	80.90
	Start-up/Self-employed	4	1.80
Past studies/Discipline	Science–Engineering–Technology	69	31.40
	Social Sciences & Humanities	40	18.20
	Economics & Business & Services	99	45.00
	Agriculture & Fisheries	12	5.50
Years of work experience	1–2 years	87	40.00
	3–4 years	70	31.80
	5 years and over	57	28.20
Relevance of the current work to previous studies	No	180	18.92
	Yes	20	81.08
English use at work	Rarely	11	5.00
	Occasionally	78	35.45
	Regularly	131	59.50

**Table 12.2** Participants' responses to what they expected to gain before their ESP courses

	Percentage (%)			Level of agreement		
	No idea	Disagreement	Agreement	N	M	SD
Scientific term	0.90	28.70	70.40	218	3.85	0.73
Job-related general knowledge	1.80	55.50	42.70	216	3.39	0.88
Higher work opportunity	2.30	51.80	45.90'	215	3.45	0.84
Career development	2.30	65.90	31.80	215	3.19	0.95

related to their academic disciplines (63.60%;  $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), which altogether enabled their better attainment of general knowledge as part of their majors' ultimate outcomes (57.30%;  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). It was observed that this was closely aligned with their motivations before taking the ESP classes (referred to Table 12.2). In addition to that, parallel to the General English courses, the professionals showed their differing opinions about the benefits of ESP courses toward their English language proficiency (Table 12.3). Evidently, the Listening skills were the most noticeable, with nearly 58.20% realizing the positive impacts ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). Next came their Reading skills at a smaller percentage (68.70%;  $M =$

**Table 12.3** Participants' responses to what knowledge they gained after ESP courses

	Percentage (%)			Level of agreement		
	No idea	Disagreement	Agreement	N	M	SD
Writing skills	8.60	67.30	24.10	219	3.75	0.84
Speaking skills	0.50	34.50	65.00	201	3.05	0.86
Reading skills	0.90	30.40	68.70	219	3.80	0.84
Listening skills	1.80	40.00	58.20	218	3.89	0.81
Disciplinary course	0.50	35.90	63.60	216	3.63	0.80
Major-related knowledge	4.10	38.60	57.30	211	3.68	0.99

**Table 12.4** Participants' responses to what skills they gained after their ESP courses

After	Percentage (%)			Level of agreement		
	No idea	Disagreement	Agreement	N	M	SD
Negotiation	1.40	33.10	65.50	217	3.88	0.89
Teamwork	0.50	8.10	91.40	219	4.52	0.69
Critical thinking	3.60	46.00	50.40	212	3.60	0.88
Presentation	1.40	38.20	60.40	217	3.70	0.87
Creativity	0.00	42.70	57.30	220	3.63	0.87
Life-long learning	1.40	61.80	36.80	217	3.35	0.79
Problem-solving	1.80	61.90	36.30	216	3.26	0.88
Leadership	15.50	59.00	25.50	186	3.04	1.03
Contributing ideas	0.90	15.90	83.20	218	4.23	0.73
Management	0.50	6.30	93.20	219	4.52	0.62

3.80, SD = 0.84) and the Writing skills (24.10%; M = 3.75, SD = 0.84). The lowest one belonged to the Speaking skills (65.00%; M = 3.05, SD = 0.86).

As seen from Table 12.4, the ranges of their positive opinions on how the ESP courses can benefit non-academic skills were clear. Accordingly, teamwork (91.40%; M = 4.52, SD = 0.69) and management (93.20%; M = 4.52, SD = 0.62) were the most developed skills in the ESP courses, closely followed by their skills of raising new ideas (83.20%; M = 4.23, SD = 0.73). These skills were found to considerably outperform some others, including negotiation (65.50%; M = 3.88, SD = 0.89), presentation (60.40%; M = 3.70, SD = 0.87), creativity (57.30%; M = 3.63, SD = 0.87), and critical thinking (50.40%; M = 3.60; SD = 0.88). In stark contrast, the ESP courses still challenged the professionals to develop their life-long learning (36.80%; M = 3.35, SD = 0.79), problem-solving (36.30%; M = 3.26, SD = 0.88), and sense of leadership (25.50%; M = 3.04, SD = 1.03).

As listed in Table 12.5, the certain benefits of ESP courses toward our professionals' academic and non-academic competence were indicated in seven different aspects as follows:

**Table 12.5** Participants' responses to what caused them to participate in ESP courses ineffectively

Obstacles	Percentage (%)			Level of agreement		
	No idea	Disagreement	Agreement	N	M	SD
<b><i>Students' background knowledge</i></b>						
Lack of General English (GE)	0.90	48.20	50.90	218	3.54	0.92
Lack of Major-related knowledge	4.10	54.10	41.80	211	3.41	0.87
<b><i>ESP teachers' background knowledge</i></b>						
Insufficient major knowledge	3.20	45.00	51.80	213	3.66	0.96
Insufficient GE knowledge	25.00	54.10	20.90	165	3.04	0.98
<b><i>ESP courses' focus of delivery</i></b>						
Lack of focus	0.50	20.40	79.10	219	4.09	0.80
Heavy theory	0.90	16.80	82.30	218	4.29	0.78
<b><i>Curriculum and learning resources</i></b>						
Curriculum's insufficient updates	0.50	20.50	79.00	219	4.11	0.80
Resources' insufficient varieties	1.80	53.20	45.00	216	3.50	0.85
<b><i>ESP teachers' practices</i></b>						
Insufficient hands-on skills	0.00	37.70	62.30	220	3.76	0.78
Insufficient career-related needs	0.00	7.20	92.80	220	4.43	0.64
<b><i>Assessment applied in ESP courses</i></b>						
Based on memorization	2.30	46.70	51.00	215	3.61	0.94
Low levels of continuation	0.00	29.10	70.90	220	3.95	0.82
<b><i>Size and workload</i></b>						
Large class size	0.00	30.50	69.50	220	3.89	0.79
Low quantity of ESP courses	2.30	48.20	49.50	215	3.58	0.85

- **Knowledge management:** The professionals seemed to have contradictory views about the influence of their General English on their study in ESP courses, with a little more than half (50.90%) believing that it helped whereas almost the same percentage of them believed that it did not help (48.20%). Also, more professionals believed that a lack of major-related knowledge could negatively affect their study in the ESP courses (41.80%; M = 3.41, SD = 0.87).

- *Instructors*: They slightly felt confident about their past instructors' major-related skills (51.80%;  $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), but not with their instructors' General English (GE) knowledge in the majors (20.90%;  $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). However, a considerable number of them had no ideas about their ESP teachers' GE skills, so there was little evidence of the quality of ESP courses' teaching workforce.
- *Focus on content knowledge*: They reported that the ESP courses were too heavy in theory (82.30%;  $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) and failed to focus on certain areas of knowledge (79.10%;  $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).
- *Curriculum and learning resources*: They could utilize learning resources (e.g., styles, contents, origins) (45.00%;  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), but they were concerned about the inadequate updates in light of the global and national contexts (79.00%;  $M = 4.11$ ;  $SD = 0.80$ ).
- *Teaching practice*: A majority of them showed concerns about the ESP courses neglecting the learners' career-related needs (92.80%;  $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ), with 62.30% of the professionals also pointing out their special attention to the ESP courses' hands-on skills (62.30%;  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ).
- *Assessment*: Just more than half of the professionals agreed that ESP courses used assessment tasks that relied on (51%) whereas almost an equal percentage of them disagreed (46.7%). They held their downside views about interrupted assessment that prevented their progressive performance (70.90%;  $M = 3.95$ ;  $SD = 0.82$ ).
- *Workload*: While the class size in ESP courses lowered their chances of engagement ( $M = 3.89$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ ), the low number of ESP courses was considered (49.50%;  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ).

## 12.5 Discussion

This study aimed to identify Vietnamese HE graduates' perspectives on the impacts of ESP courses on their employability. In this study, ESP courses at HE level significantly contributed to graduates' employability by developing their specialized language, knowledge, and generic skills. However, while these forms of knowledge and skills are found in the study, there are proposed implications to maximize the benefits of ESP courses for practical professional experiences. These features are necessary but seem to be loosely attended to in the current literature. The study also confirmed the ultimate responsibilities of HEIs in preparing future graduates for their career prospects through the provision of courses that develop necessary knowledge and skills for students to sufficiently respond to the job demands (Tran, 2018b, 2018c). This responsibility refers to ensuring effective ESP course design, adequate learning resources, and qualified teaching agents.

### ***12.5.1 The Benefits of ESP Courses Toward Graduates' Employability***

The findings of this study revealed several alignments between graduates' perspectives of ESP courses that they had taken and the general principles of ESP courses as claimed in the literature. These alignments can be summarized as regards the coverage of disciplinary language and knowledge and remarkably an extension to generic skills. This contribution of ESP courses aligns with the characteristic of ESP education as learning for profession (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019) in preparing learners with necessary cultural capital of professional language, knowledge, and skills for successful work performances (Tomlinson, 2017). The development in these areas ensures job opportunities and successful job performances, both of which are essential for employability (Yorke, 2006).

Firstly, an advancement in language proficiency is still one of the central aspects of ESP courses. The students have demonstrated their expectations to advance their knowledge of professional terminology from taking these courses, which seems to be the foremost benefit of ESP courses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019). However, upon completing the courses, the students further admit a comprehensive development of receptive and productive skills which are essential in settings where English is a lingua franca (Liton, 2015; Nguyen, 2011; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019). Therefore, the study extended the dimension of language development in ESP courses, ranging from lexical resources to macro-language skills for different communicative purposes at work settings, affirming the significance of ESP courses in Vietnamese higher education for employability. For ESP courses aiming to prepare graduates for effective communication in work settings, developing micro-lexical features and macro-language skills assists graduates' use of specialized language for communicative purposes (Le et al., 2020; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, ESP courses are no longer primarily oriented toward language learning but advancing students' field-based knowledge. This shift helps learners succeed in major-related courses in their HE programs and prepare them with necessary knowledge for work settings. In addition, ESP courses are deemed to build up necessary generic skills for employability. The generic skills include negotiation, cooperation, critical thinking, communication, creativity, innovation, life-long learning, problem-solving, and leadership and management (Tran, 2019; Yorke, 2006). Despite the imbalanced development in these skills as perceived by the graduates, most generic skills are advanced after taking ESP courses. This advancement affirms the essence of ESP courses because current research concludes the importance of these skills for employability. For example, researching English language used in Customs settings in Vietnam, T. C. N. Nguyen et al. (2019) recognize that what has been taught in English for Customs subjects at school may not fit the language used in communication in actual customs scenarios. Therefore, Vietnamese Customs officers need to be competent in intercultural communication with multicultural-multilingual passengers to be able to recognize the language used in authentic work contexts, adapt to that use, and deal with miscommunication for a successful exchange of messages at



work. Thus, along with disciplinary language and knowledge offered in ESP courses, generic skills are crucial for work operations with efficiency and flexibility (Liton, 2015; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019) for successful job performances as an aspect of employability (Yorke, 2006).

Hence, ESP courses researched in the study have satisfied the principle of learning for profession and employability in that the students are well-rounded to deal with communication and work operation in their professional settings (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). These aspects of language, knowledge, and skills are of significance to advance graduates' cultural capital (Tomlinson, 2017) so that they are able to respond well to the demands in different job settings. Furthermore, cultural capital has been found to be closely related to and able to advance other forms of capital (Tomlinson, 2017). Thus, ESP courses are likely to play an essential role in creating a well-rounded labor force when different forms of capital could be developed, drawing on the advanced cultural capital in ESP courses.

### ***12.5.2 Limitations in the Design and Teaching of ESP Courses***

While ESP courses offer numerous benefits, there are limitations in ESP course design and teaching practices. It is noted that the design of ESP courses should effectively respond to learners' needs to inform ESP course design and teaching practices (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; Li et al., 2020). In designing an ESP course, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasize the coverage of materials, course content, teaching approaches, and assessment as core elements. Additionally, the teaching of ESP courses should be scaffolding students' practical experiences to familiarize themselves with the actual scenarios in workplaces to function well in work contexts. Nonetheless, there are still limited teaching resources, qualifications of instructors, and insufficient investment in ESP courses in Vietnam (Nguyen & Pham, 2016).

To obtain the benefits in ESP courses, students should be well-equipped with both the language and knowledge in their disciplines (Basturkmen, 2010; Johnson, 1993; B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019). However, the students are limited in their professional knowledge that supports their acquisition of the content in ESP courses. Moreover, the content of ESP courses seems to be too general, which fails to expose students to specific professional areas. The participants highlighted that curriculum and learning resources should be made important. Johns and Dudley Evans (1991) require that ESP courses focus on developing language and content knowledge relevant to the professional area that learners will depart for upon their graduation. Therefore, it is essential to understand learners' professional goals for a better design of ESP courses.

The graduates are widely concerned about practical experiences and readiness for employment, so they put forward the necessity of hands-on skills. However, theoretical knowledge presented in textbooks is predominant in ESP courses, limiting the

students' practical experiences in applying theory into practice. The theory-focused teaching tends to be influenced by conventional teaching approaches in Vietnam that aim at developing grammatical and lexical resources and test-taking skills (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). As theoretical knowledge is emphasized, the students are consequently assessed on their ability to memorize the knowledge, rather than their application of this knowledge to career-based scenarios. Thus, ESP courses are not effectively operated as learning for profession but as an assessment of language skills. Without explicitly delivering the hands-on skills, the instructors have no room to accurately assess and effectively support the learners in developing relevant cultural capital for future employability (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017).

In addition, ESP instructors might not obtain sufficient cultural capital to conduct their teaching effectively to support learners' advancement of their language, knowledge, and skills for employability. In this study, ESP instructors tend to be those with a General English (GE) major. While the participants mentioned that their instructors must have good General English skills, previous research has raised concerns about inadequacy in both English language and specialized knowledge in ESP instructors. ESP teachers originally are General English teachers and may be unable to provide students with adequate language, knowledge, and skills commensurate with the demands in work settings (Gaye, 2020; Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Basturkmen (2010) also questions ESP teachers' ability to transmit professional knowledge and the meaning of ESP terminology to students if they are not proficient in these aspects. As the graduates in this study highly attend to acquiring ESP vocabulary for communicative purposes, combining language and content knowledge and intensive practice is encouraged to train these graduates to use ESP terminology for communication successfully (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; Liton, 2015; Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Yet, these problems are reiterated by the students in this study, emphasizing the ineffective teaching approaches and limited experience with specific disciplines of the ESP teaching teams at higher education.

With these mismatches between learners' expectations and actual ESP education, ESP courses might fail to prepare learners to satisfactorily respond to the job demands. These obstacles have been long discussed in Vietnamese ESP education, but they seem to continually exist as limitations in ESP education in this context (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Although further information on the reasons for these limitations is not explored in this study, the problem of insufficient course designs and materials could be attributed to the lack of assessment of learners' needs. These limitations of ESP courses could reduce students' learning motivation and persistent engagement (Filak & Sheldon, 2008; B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019). Learners tend to be motivated and engaged in learning activities if their needs are satisfied. Given the limitations of ESP courses as reported by the participants, the risk of disengaging learners in the courses might be predictable and detrimental to the development of their English language, knowledge, and skills for their professional areas.

### ***12.5.3 Recommendations for Designing and Teaching ESP Courses***

Following graduates' perspectives on the benefits and obstacles offered in ESP courses, they have provided several recommendations for effectively teaching and designing these courses. From the findings, the students aim to develop professional language, knowledge, and generic skills for successful employment. As a result, they request a highly qualified teaching team and well-designed courses that offer practical experience to successfully handle different situations in their potential professional settings (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; Li et al., 2020). The suggestions on having discipline-based materials and integrating work-related experiences in ESP courses align with the requirements for constant analysis and assessment of learners' needs to sufficiently accommodate their future job demands in designing ESP courses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Liton, 2015).

The design of ESP courses is suggested with more practical experiences and increased students' engagement to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to their job demands. However, ESP courses tend to over-rely on materials whose information may not be applicable in different professional settings, making ESP courses content theory-based and irrelevant to different work conditions (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019). It is then strongly suggested that ESP students are exposed to authentic materials that are discipline- and context-relevant to represent the circumstances that the learners may confront at work (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991; T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019). As it may not be feasible to illustrate authentic work environments in ESP classes, organizing field trips to immerse students in a number of authentic work environments that are closely related to students' future professions is recommended, which may advance their understanding of future workplaces and conditions (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Through these trips to actual workplaces, students have opportunities to observe the operations of their prospective careers and interact with field specialists in those workplaces. Following that, they can cross-reference with the skills and knowledge that they have gained in their courses and recognize the need to acquire additional knowledge and skills which have not been adequately developed ( T. C. N. Nguyen et al., 2019).

To provide learners with relevant language, knowledge, and skills to their careers, ESP instructors need to be proficient in English language and knowledgeable in the disciplines they are teaching (Gaye, 2020; Nguyen & Pham, 2016). Therefore, ESP instructors need professional development to be well-equipped with specialized language and knowledge (Gaye, 2020; Nguyen & Pham, 2016). These ESP instructors are recommended to partake in training workshops relevant to their teaching areas and undertake experience-sharing sessions with their teaching fellows and disciplinary specialists to advance their understanding of the field (Gaye, 2020; Nguyen & Pham, 2016). In addition, they need to improve their teaching approaches that less focus on test-taking skills and create more work-based scenarios in their classes for learners to apply theoretical knowledge and skills in the course to develop practical work-related experience. Also, innovative teaching practices further require an

appropriate form of assessment in ESP courses. Gimenez (1996) suggests *process assessment* “which evaluates not only students’ “products” but also how they have come to acquire the proficiency needed to produce them” (p. 233). When students are assessed based on their learning process, they may become more active and engaged in classroom activities and devoted to acquiring necessary knowledge and skills to reach the learning outcomes (Gimenez, 1996; Li et al., 2020) and have their participation recognized (Kereković, 2021; B. H. Nguyen et al., 2019).

## 12.6 Conclusion

This study explored Vietnamese graduates’ perspectives towards the impacts of ESP courses on their employability. In this study, the graduates acknowledge the usefulness of these courses in the development of major-related language, knowledge, and generic skills that assist their job applications and performances. However, they also indicate the inappropriateness in ESP course design and teaching practices. These limitations refer to the predominance of theoretical knowledge in ESP courses, leaving a shortage of practical experiences. In addition, unfocused content and outdated materials also contribute to the shortcomings in the courses. Given the goal of learning for profession, it is recommended that ESP courses be designed and taught following the assessment of learners’ professional needs along with professional development of teaching agents. Understanding learners’ expectations through learners’ needs analysis for their future employment will inform educators of what needs to be included in the courses and how the content can be distributed to the learners so that they are well-rounded for both theoretical knowledge and practical experiences for their future work. Future research is still recommended with a wide coverage of different agents such as stakeholders, instructors, policymakers, and learners. In addition, in-depth interviews are also necessary to gain insights of these agents for a comprehensive understanding of constituents of employability and how ESP courses could accommodate learners for successful employability.

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# Chapter 13

## English-Medium-Instruction in Vietnamese Universities: Pitfalls, Accomplishments, and Impact on Graduate Employability



Huong Le Thanh Phan, Diep Thi Bich Nguyen, and Duc Thi Phung

**Abstract** This chapter explores the implementation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in Vietnamese universities. Ten teachers and twenty-two final-year students of two EMI programs at a well-established university are interviewed to investigate the ways in which English is used in the classrooms and its impacts on teaching and learning. The results show that the deployment of EMI in these programs creates various difficulties for both teachers and students. From the part of the teachers, it requires not only high English competence but also innovative pedagogical skills that are not necessarily familiar to all EMI teachers, resulting in lowered teaching quality. For students, the language barriers, the long-standing question-suppressing teaching culture, and the mismatch between new academic expectations and students' learning habits cause comprehension uncertainty and learning tensions which affect the development of their human capital and social capital. Despite the challenges in the implementation, findings unfold that students have improved their English proficiency from the first to the final year and benefited from the access to high-calibre disciplinary knowledge from multicultural perspectives delivered by both local and foreign teachers. These contribute to enhancing their graduate employability. The study is anchored at the intersection of language of instruction, internationalisation at home, and employability. The main findings are discussed in the light of Vietnamese socio-cultural conditions as well as institutional arrangements for the EMI programs.

**Keywords** English-medium-instruction · Internationalisation at home · Graduate employability · Higher education · Vietnam

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## 13.1 Introduction

This chapter is situated in the context of transformation of universities around the world under the impact of higher education (HE) internationalisation. Notable forms of university activities emerging over the last three decades include global student mobility on a large scale, expansion of branch campuses and partnerships, extensive provision of joint degrees, and the use of English as a language for teaching and research (Altbach & De Wit, 2018).

Over the years, Vietnamese HE is predominantly seen as a recipient of international education and a source of international students in Western HE systems, particularly in Anglo-American countries (Tran et al., 2014). With an aim to lift the position of Vietnamese HE in the international education market, the government of Vietnam has undertaken numerous strategies for revamping the HE system. After many large reforms, though criticised to gain only modest success, Vietnamese HE is now becoming a more active partner in international education (Tran & Marginson, 2019). Vietnamese universities have been putting much emphasis on its internationalisation agenda so as to renovate the curriculum to catch up with the regional and international quality benchmarks and to boost their global ranking (The Government of Vietnam, 2012; Tran & Marginson, 2019). Amongst various efforts to internationalise the HE system, the introduction of English-medium-instruction (EMI) programs is a symbolic initiative of internationalisation in Vietnam (Duong & Chua, 2016; Nguyen, 2018).

EMI programs, as the name suggests, are characterised by the use of English as the language for teaching and learning. EMI is generally praised for benefits of English language proficiency improvement on top of content knowledge acquisition, intercultural understanding and mindedness, and increased career and educational opportunities (Galloway et al., 2017). While the first EMI programs in Vietnam were introduced in the early 1990s mainly for postgraduate level, the delivery of EMI programs has expanded to undergraduate level since the 2000s (Nguyen et al., 2017). One can argue that EMI has gained its significance thanks to the accordance and integration of Vietnam's language policies with its internationalisation strategies. The EMI programs in Vietnam have been significantly promoted by the government through the National Foreign Language Program 2020 (The Government of Vietnam, 2008) and the National Strategy for Educational Development 2011–2020 (The Government of Vietnam, 2012) in an effort to enhance graduates' English language proficiency via content-based teaching to both augment the country's human capacity and catch up with the world's education systems.

Research on EMI implementation in Vietnam centres on the opportunities and tensions with regard to language policy and EMI management issues (Duong & Chua, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2017; Vu & Burns, 2014). Some studies also look at the linkage between internationalised programs (wherein English is the medium of instruction) and students' employability. For example, N. Tran et al. (2019) and N. Tran and Vo (2019) examine EMI programs in Aquaculture and Biotechnology and found that these programs positively contribute to the development of employability skills for

students despite the remaining issues in the implementation of such programs, e.g. funding cuts and student recruitment difficulties. However, literature on this topic remains patchy and is yet to fully reflect the landscape of teaching and learning practices across different kinds of EMI programs. Especially, the impact of EMI teaching and learning on students' employability is by far blurry captured. Against this backdrop, our study aims at providing the missing link between EMI implementation and the development of attributes that are conducive to student employability.

This chapter looks at two EMI programs in Business and Economics disciplines at a Vietnamese university, including one Advanced Program<sup>1</sup> in partnership with an American institution and a Joint Program partnering with a Japanese institution. We aim to portray the reality of implementing EMI, in two main aspects: the practices and challenges in the use of EMI from the teaching and learning perspectives; and the potential impact of EMI on the formation of capitals for employability amongst Vietnamese students. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of literature about EMI worldwide and in Vietnam. We then provide a demonstrative case study of EMI implementation at a Vietnamese university. In this case study, we analyse the opportunities and challenges in the teaching and learning of EMI, the strategies teachers and students adopted, and their contribution to students' employability.

## 13.2 English-Medium-Instruction in the Global Context of Higher Education

The internationalisation of HE on the global scale has placed an increasing importance on not only English language education but also education through English. As Galloway et al. (2017) remark, the deployment of English to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language of the majority of the population is not English, i.e. EMI, has become a "pandemic" (Chapple, 2015, p. 1) whereby even universities in non-Anglophone contexts are now prioritising EMI courses and programs in non-language study majors. Around the world, there were approximately 8,000 university courses delivered in English in non-Anglophone countries as of 2016 (Michell, 2016). With the predominant initial growth in Europe, EMI in Asia has spread impressively with hundreds of EMI programs offered across different countries. By 2016, EMI had been introduced in 420 universities in South Korea, over 100 in Malaysia, 80 in Bangladesh, over 70 in Indonesia, over 30 in Japan, over 70 in Vietnam, and 30 in China (see Hamid & Kirkpatrick, 2016). There appears to be a fast-moving shift in non-Anglophone countries worldwide, from English being an *object* of instruction to English being the *medium* of instruction.

Ideologically, countries have numerous rationales for the movement of EMI at HE. Drivers include (i) institutions' international profile development, (ii) income generation, (iii) academics and students mobility, (iv) graduate employability enhancement, (v) English proficiency improvement for national human capital, (vi) movement into

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<sup>1</sup> A signature initiative in the Vietnamese government's agenda for reforming HE.

communicative language teaching and content-based approaches, (vii) position of English as a neutral language in multilingual contexts, and (viii) capacity building through provision of high-quality education (Galloway et al., 2017; Wilkinson, 2013). Wilkinson (2008) generalises the drivers into five groups, namely practical, survival, financial, idealist, and educational. Particularly in Asia–Pacific, the gain in popularity of EMI is closely associated with the rise in the “geopolitical status” of English as a lingua franca, as well as the expansion of HE sector and large-scale internationalisation agenda amongst countries in the region (Walkinshaw et al., 2017, p. 1).

Despite such ethos, the provision of education in English has been critically problematised. Studies found that teaching content in English puts the quality of education at risk when teachers’ and students’ English proficiency is insufficient for teaching and learning (Chapple, 2015; de Wit, 2013). EMI implementation poses difficulties for students in understanding the discipline knowledge and in interacting with teachers, which, in some cases, causes student drop-out or resistance to EMI (Galloway et al., 2017). Similarly, the lack of EMI teachers who are both qualified and willing to teach in English has a negative impact on the success of EMI (Dearden, 2014). Seen as synonymous with Westernisation, EMI causes “loss of domain” of first language (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 11) and decreasing focus on other foreign languages (de Wit, 2013). Galloway et al. (2017) are also cautious of inequalities in access to EMI programs and social division as the result of EMI programs. EMI naturally leads to favouritism to teaching staff with overseas experience and more opportunities for students from higher socio-economic backgrounds since they are more likely to have higher English language proficiency (Shamim, 2011). This existing social inequality can be deepened by the emergence of an elite English-speaking class graduating from EMI programs, demarcated from the “masses” who take regular programs in the home language (Hamid & Jahan, 2015, p. 95). With regard to management, pressure on staff training, challenges in domestic and foreign staff recruitment, and changes in faculty culture amid the integration of Western style are also reported (Galloway et al., 2017).

### **13.3 English-Medium-Instruction in Vietnamese Universities**

In Vietnam, EMI has been regarded as a tool to achieve internationalisation goals (Tran & Nguyen, 2018), with at-home internationalised programs providing a platform for use of EMI in the HE system. Across Vietnamese universities, EMI was first observed in a small number of postgraduate joint training programs in the 1990s as a response to the emergence of “Englishisation of university programs” trend amongst non-English-dominant countries (Tran & Nguyen, 2018, p. 97). EMI has then expanded its reach due to the enthusiastic promotion of the Vietnamese government through a number of national policies and projects (The Government

of Vietnam, 2008, 2012). Currently, EMI has been adopted in a variety of internationally oriented programs in collaboration with overseas partners from Australia, the UK, the United States, and some English-as-an-lingua-franca European countries (Nguyen et al., 2017). In addition to the Joint Programs (JPs) and Advanced Programs (APs) whose curricula were entirely or partially imported from some of the top 200 universities in the world, the locally born High Quality Programs have also been developed by Vietnamese HEIs with reference to foreign curricula in an effort to internationalise the local forces.

The rapid spread of EMI proves to bring significant opportunities to universities and students themselves. Government funding, academic mobility, curriculum borrowing of recognised systems in the world, and an increase in international student enrolments are amongst various institutional gains associated with EMI implementation (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). EMI grants students access to the internationally accredited knowledge and contents through locally based education, and thus being of great interest to the Vietnamese middle-class who increasingly demand international education (Tran & Marginson, 2018). Other benefits of EMI for students include cognitive advantages, more exposure to English, and increased employment opportunities (Le, 2018; Phuong & Nguyen, 2019).

However, there is an increasing concern about the potential issues perpetuated by the switch to EMI in Vietnam. For one, EMI seems to be a label for a more expensive and higher quality program with brighter students and more qualified teachers than mainstream programs delivered in Vietnamese. This causes inequity and inequality in access and attitude towards EMI versus VMI (Vietnamese-medium-instruction) programs (Dang & Moskovsky, 2019). Despite being a “marker of distinction” (Tran & Nguyen, 2018, p. 91) in HE, EMI programs in Vietnam are reported to face the challenges of long-term quality and sustainability (Tran et al., 2018). Since the EMI programs’ tuition fees are significantly higher, around three to five times, than the regular VMI programs, which is not affordable for the mass of students, some HEIs have to lower their entry English requirements to weather a steady reduction in enrolments over the years (Tran et al., 2018). Such compromise on entry standards for the operation’s sake, in many cases, results in amplified challenges for teachers and students downstream. At the classroom level, L. Tran and H. Nguyen (2018) report that EMI creates challenges in the delivery and acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, which is best understood in students’ first language (Kirkpatrick, 2011). English proficiency is claimed to be a major difficulty for students due to inappropriate English entry examination during student recruitment process (Tran & Nguyen, 2018) or students’ multi-level language proficiency (Vu & Burns, 2014). Many teachers are puzzled at both their own English competence and EMI-focused pedagogy (Nguyen et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the lack of professional development relevant to English language and pedagogy intensifies challenges experienced by the teaching staff of EMI programs (Nguyen, 2018). Vu and Burns (2014) also report that inadequate supplies of reference materials and technologies are additional obstacles for the implementation of EMI programs.

### 13.4 Case Study

The study investigates the effectiveness of the EMI implementation in two undergraduate programs at a well-established Vietnamese university (VU). In recent years, VU has proactively responded to the Vietnamese government's mandate to adopt EMI by establishing strong cooperative partnerships with foreign HEIs to introduce various EMI programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. VU leadership has effectively recognised and acted upon the opportunity to address the domestic escalating demand for internationalised programs leading to internationally recognised degrees, to achieve competitive advantage, to fulfil branding purposes to attract students, and to pursue the government's economic and political aims (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Nguyen, 2018).

The major data source was from interviews with 10 Vietnamese academics (six females and four males) and 22 EMI students aged between 20 and 22 years old (12 females and 10 males) of VU. In selecting the academic participants, primary priority was given the opportunity to learn (Stake, 2000) and thus considerations of teachers' availability and enthusiasm to offer rich information. The academic participants had been teaching across EMI programs for different numbers of years (from 2 to 7 years), specialising in International Economics, International Business, Accounting, Marketing, and Business Administration. Four of them were in both management and teaching positions while the other six only held teaching responsibilities. The student participants were recruited using the convenience sampling strategy and snowball sampling suggested by Patton (2015).

Of 22 student participants, 12 were from an Advanced Program (AP)—commonly regarded as a signature internationalisation initiative of the Vietnamese government—and 10 were from a Joint program in partnership with Japan (JJP)—an institutional internationalisation initiative. The study majors of students in AP and JJP programs were International Economics and International Business. The interviews with academics and students were conducted in Vietnamese, the first language of both the researchers and participants. Relevant interview extracts were translated into English during the data coding process for analysis and discussion afterwards. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants without implication about their gender.

The interview data were coded using NVIVO 10 to identify emergent themes surrounding the use of EMI in the classrooms and its impact on teaching and learning. We first conducted line-by-line analysis to derive codes related to the practices and challenges in implementing EMI. We then compared each of these codes with all the other codes across the dataset to establish categories, including tensions between EMI policy and practice, academics' challenges and pedagogical approaches, and students' difficulties and overcoming strategies. In short, the data analysis was inductive, aiming to identify meaningful themes through a thorough process of engagement with the interview excerpts, constant comparison of data (Creswell, 2012), and careful interpretation of themes with reference to existing EMI literature.

## 13.5 EMI Implementation at VU: The Pitfalls

### 13.5.1 *Stepping Outside the Comfort Zone: Vietnamese Academics' Language Challenges*

In a non-English-dominant national context, the use of EMI is an integrated approach that uses English in the teaching and learning of non-language subjects to simultaneously develop both students' language competency and disciplinary knowledge. As such, in order for EMI to exert its rightful impact, there need to be teachers who have disciplinary expertise and English language knowledge as well as EMI pedagogy.

Interview data with VU academics and students reveal that there remained the long-reported shortage of such well-rounded staff (Vu & Burns, 2014). According to VU's regulations, academics teaching in EMI programs must have obtained post-graduate degrees overseas. VU's management board envisioned that the English proficiency the academics acquired overseas would transfer smoothly into their EMI teaching. However, this was proven to be too optimistic. While the academic participants reported no considerable difficulties in getting a solid understanding of the disciplinary content they were to teach in the EMI programs, the use of EMI created major issues regardless of which EMI program they were teaching.

I believe I have a firm grasp of disciplinary knowledge because I used to be a chief accountant for eight years. Now I am teaching exactly that subject...But it is [easy] when I teach in Vietnamese. When teaching in English, I feel like struggling. (Mai, academic, Accounting)

According to Luxon and Peelo (2009), language in teaching and learning situations has a direct influence on pedagogy. This viewpoint holds true for EMI academics at VU since for some academics, EMI appeared to be "a source of anxiety" (Luxon & Peelo, 2009, p. 654), especially when they were novices in EMI teaching. Such nervousness and worry first came from the tension between having to disseminate the required amount of disciplinary content within the allotted time frame and the (in)ability to speak English fluently and concisely. Foreign language barriers perpetuating verbose and unconcise expressions could lead to a content rush as reported by a student:

Some lecturers taught very carefully, but the first one or two slides took them almost 40 minutes. That was about the end of the lesson, so they had to rush through the slides as quickly as they could. (Tú, student, AP)

Second, academics' perception of students' language proficiency, to some extent, could influence the "expert power" (French & Raven, 1959) of academics in a subtractive manner:

Some EMI students have very strong English competence...much stronger than their lecturers who did not receive early exposure to native English. Or there are foreign students in the class. This leads some lecturers to think that "if I can't understand them well, it is better not to ask". Therefore, their lectures are merely one-way communication. (Tháng, academic, Marketing)



According to this academic, the current generation of students enjoys more opportunities to learn English through abundant books and resources, cable television, and the internet. AP students in particular had to pass an institutional English exam which included an interview in English. As a result, although these students might not be competent in academic English and have rich technical vocabulary, they are likely to be competent in oral communication. Besides, many academics belong to the Vietnamese generation who studied Russian as the foreign language at school due to the supportive impact of the former Soviet Union during and beyond the Vietnam War (Pham, 2014). This, to some extent, hindered their English proficiency, particularly in terms of pronunciation. As a result, many EMI teachers who had successfully proven their rich disciplinary knowledge and effective pedagogical skills when teaching in Vietnamese were now faced with new challenges. Common issues included pronunciation, context-specific vocabulary, and expressions. While a couple of interviewed students preferred Vietnamese lecturers to some non-native foreign lecturers, e.g. those of Japanese or Indian origins visiting from partner HEIs, because of the more familiar intonation and ways of expression, the majority of the student participants considered their Vietnamese lectures' English proficiency a major issue of concern. For example:

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of lecturers who have both good [disciplinary] knowledge and English proficiency. Our lecturers are all the top ones in the Departments with solid expertise in their field. However, the majority of them do not have sufficient English, which made it difficult for us to concentrate and comprehend the knowledge. (Tuán, student, AP)

This finding echoes a body of research, e.g. Doiz et al. (2011), L. Tran and H. Nguyen (2018), that find the use of EMI inhibits teaching and learning in class. Phan (2019) reports that as lecturers stumbled in the encoding process, i.e. conveying content to students, students sometimes found comprehension hard, uncertain, and inaccurate. The author argues that the deviation in the decoding process, i.e. students' unpacking of concepts, might be problematic once students' interpretation is too far from the accurate meaning of a concept, thus interfering with the comprehension of subsequent content. Although such issue was not strongly reported by the participants at VU, the data did reveal that language barrier, coupled with the long-standing Vietnamese educational culture that suppresses students from asking questions on the spot (Tran, Marginson et al., 2014), caused comprehension uncertainty and thus potentially hindering the development of students' human capital. While being aware of the possible snowball effect of misunderstanding, the student participants tended to delay asking questions, if at all, until after the lecture out of fear of wasting other students' class time. Some of them refrained from asking and chose to self-study and/or learn from their peers instead.

We didn't usually ask the lecturers... We asked each other. I myself usually asked the good students in my class, or we consolidated all the questions then one student would email the lecturers. We didn't have the habit of going to see lecturers in their office either. (Chi, student, AP)



Thus, the challenges posed by EMI helped students become more autonomous, resourceful, self-reliant and, at the same time, being supportive team players. These personal attributes are all important elements of employability capital (Tomlinson, 2017; Tran et al., 2019).

The data showed that the adoption of EMI posed negative impacts on classroom dynamics, i.e. teacher-student interaction or communication, since it created a psychological barrier between people of the same nationality and native language. As one academic revealed,

I myself do not have difficulties because I am confident in my English. But I know quite a few lecturers who thought it was weird and unnatural to use English among Vietnamese people. (Thăng, academic, Marketing)

Since “there is hardly any small-talk between lecturers and students” (Thăng, academic, Marketing), the affective aspect of pedagogy was detrimentally impacted. This affective challenge is supported by Wilkinson (2005) who states that difficulties in using English for communication purposes prevent lecturers from using humour, telling anecdotes, making digression, and giving spontaneous examples.

Since high-calibre lecturers like those recruited in the EMI programs could be reliable referees (Tran et al., 2019) or career mentors for students, the constrained relationship between the academics and students due to language and psychological barriers could deprive students of access to such a source of wisdom and support for post-study employment.

### ***13.5.2 EMI with Visiting Foreign Lecturers: Unfamiliar Accents and Academic Practices***

The data from interviews with students revealed that EMI-related issues involved both Vietnamese and visiting foreign academics, not only at the superficial level of language of communication but also at a deeper level of pedagogies. In terms of communicative language, students’ experience with non-native foreign<sup>2</sup> lecturers’ spoken English was not always positive. While emphasising that the lecturers were knowledgeable and dedicated, the student participants reported that non-native foreign lecturers’ accents and expressions created comprehension challenges and to some extent influenced their focus and learning motivation in a negative way.

Japanese lecturers...sometimes could not express themselves clearly in English. And we students could not express ourselves clearly as well. Even though we could still comprehend the lesson, the lecturers were not able to create an interest in us to learn. (Đạt, student, JJP)

According to a participant, Vietnamese students might be more familiar with British or American English, thus finding other accents such as Japanese English or Flemish

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<sup>2</sup> Lecturers who have non-Vietnamese nationality(ies) and do not speak English as their mother tongue.

English sometimes hardly intelligible. Although the lecturers strove to speak slowly and reduced the use of unnecessary technical terms or colloquial language, which assisted students' comprehension, the language barriers, coupled with different background and contextual knowledge, appeared to hamper classroom rapport.

Sometimes when we [students] explained, we tried to give examples but they [lecturers] did not know. Our vocabulary is not rich enough to elaborate those things [examples]. (Thu, student, AP)

Being a challenge for students, the exposure to different variants of English during their study would contribute to students' work readiness in terms of ability to work cross-linguistically. As English has become a lingua franca and there are varieties of Englishes being currently used for communication amongst multilingual speakers from different cultures (Akkakoson, 2019; Prabjandee, 2020), it is insufficient to only understand standardised English (e.g. British and American English). Although the unfamiliar accents of foreign lecturers caused comprehension difficulties, it was, in a way, a "blessing in disguise" where students can be well-prepared for today's English landscape and world of work.

With the involvement of foreign academics, English-native and non-native alike, EMI brought along different academic conventions and expectations which are another source of challenge for students and required much adaptation from their part. Despite recent changes in Vietnamese society towards modernisation, traditional transmission pedagogy shaped by the Confucian philosophy still dominates Vietnamese education (Tran et al., 2014) whereby students are expected to be obedient, passive recipients of knowledge rather than proactive participators in the classrooms. The long-standing habit of passive learning caused a mismatch between foreign lecturers' expectation and practices and Vietnamese students' behaviours as reported by the EMI student participants in this study.

Foreign lecturers required students' participation...They wanted us to ask questions, which was challenging for us. (Duy, student, AP)

We have got so used to passive learning. Some of my friends are from Amsterdam high school<sup>3</sup> or international schools, so they are a bit different. Regional students like us all study [passively] like that. Therefore, the way foreign lecturers teach is the biggest barrier to me. (Hài, student, JJP)

According to the students, the different academic conventions associated with the foreign language, particularly in writing, required much adaption from their part. While Vietnamese students tended to beat around the bush and sometimes use vague languages, American lecturers valued concrete ideas and conciseness (Thu, student, AP). Also, different pedagogies entailed different approaches to knowledge content.

I think foreign lecturers usually focus on the nature of the problems, why are they the way they are, where are they from...They [lecturers] focus on discussing and explaining phenomena. This is very different from our learning habit over the entire 12 years of schooling. (Chi, student, AP)

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<sup>3</sup> A renowned high school for gifted students in the capital city of Vietnam.

Again, while being a source of challenges, exposure to different ways of thinking and doing would potentially contribute to the development of personal adaptability, with which graduates are likely to have a higher chance of employment and advance their career (Tran et al., 2019).

### 13.6 Mindful of Students' Learning Needs: Pedagogical Strategies in EMI Classrooms

Besides a sufficient level of English proficiency, what requires of an EMI teacher is the ability to find alternative ways of disseminating academic content to students for whom English was also a foreign language. As some academic participants in the study remarked, EMI teaching was not simply a matter of translating course material and slides from Vietnamese to English. The adoption of EMI goes far beyond a switch in language of communication to call for alternative and/or additional pedagogical skills that are not necessarily familiar to all EMI teachers.

Learning in a foreign language could be challenging even for English competent students since understanding terminologies, abstract concepts, and theories requires more advanced language ability (Jon & Kim, 2011). As an academic observed, about 20% of the students still faced language barriers. Being mindful of the language challenges, many of the academic participants exerted considerable amount of effort to provide assistance to students' learning of disciplinary content. A number of strategies were employed, including supporting students' English needs, spending extra time on obscure contents, demonstrating theory with practice tasks, and guided home-reading to support content learning.

One way is having extra-tutorials to help students with English knowledge and skills. Another way is re-explaining in Vietnamese if students do not understand. This can be done in the breaks or briefly during class-time. (Liên, academic, International Business)

...giving them practice tasks. I usually told my students 'the more you practice, the better you understand'. When students do a lot of practice tasks, they get to understand difficult content. (Mai, academic, Accounting)

With every home-reading I assigned them, I gave them guidelines and instructions on how to read and what they should take away from those readings. (Giao, academic, International Economics)

These lecturers' pedagogy was guided by the learners' needs. Giao, for example, being mindful of her students' English proficiency, was able to support them in developing disciplinary reading skills and simultaneously delving into specialist topics. Another academic chose to "take the role of a listener" and gave students discussion questions through which he could figure out how students understood the home-reading materials as well as where they needed additional support.

... I try to listen to see how they understand the topics; my approach to teaching is listening more than speaking...I only explain the new content or what students misunderstand. Basically, I only relate what they believe with the theory and the theory with reality. (Thắng, academic, Marketing)

While some academics, as mentioned earlier, resorted to one-way lecturing to ensure complete delivery of the content that was deemed important, others, like *Thắng*, insisted on their role as instructors rather than knowledge transmitters and on the cruciality of interaction for students' understanding. In many cases, classroom activities were purposefully "customised" to suit students' language competence.

I use the same syllabus for all programs [both VMI and EMI programs] because I do not want knowledge gaps between programs. However, it [learning activities] needs a bit of customising. For VMI students, I focus on in-class debates and presentations because they use the native language. However, I require EMI students to do more case study analysis and projects. (*Minh*, academic, International Economics)

As this academic elaborated, apart from the fact that representative cases written in English (which cannot be used for VMI classes without translation) are relatively more available, case study analysis and projects are lengthier activities that allow EMI students to work at their personal pace and English competence level and to have more time to arrange their ideas into words.

By employing the above strategies to assist students with lower English proficiency, the academics simultaneously demonstrated dual identities, one of subject-matter teachers and one of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. They would need to take into consideration how the language of instruction could hinder comprehension so as to flexibly modify the input and interaction in class. As *Liên* mentioned in the interview excerpt above, she adapted her instructional techniques through code-switching (English and Vietnamese) to assure students' comprehension. *Liên's* rationale for the switch of language was the clear objective she set for teaching, i.e. disciplinary knowledge being prioritised over students' language development. According to her, enhancing students' English proficiency might be an implicit intention of the university's executives when introducing EMI but was not explicitly stated in policies, and thus not the priority of subject-matter academics.

The technique of employing L1 (mother language) to explain difficult concepts in English is not uncommon in EMI contexts. *Galloway et al. (2017)* even consider using the students' mother tongue in EMI classrooms as useful pedagogical tools. In practice, the technique received split opinions from the students. On the one hand, the student participants acknowledged the shared native language as an advantage that Vietnamese academics could resort to when facing comprehension difficulties. On the other hand, they considered it as "a loss of EMI programs' spirit" (*Quân*, student, AP) and insisted on the cruciality of using English entirely in EMI classrooms.

If this is an EMI program, EMI must be taken utmost seriously so that when students graduate, they can meet the global standards, at least in terms of English. (*Quang*, student, JJP)

Despite the controversy around the use of L1 in EMI classrooms, the above pedagogical strategies appeared to effectively support, scaffold and enhance students' learning, and thus contributing to the development of students' human capitals. These scaffolding strategies require considerations regarding contextual factors (e.g. student population, types of program, policies), student factors (e.g. English proficiency, prior experience), language factors (e.g. linguistic knowledge), and educational goals (e.g. language or subject-matter priority) (*Huang, 2011*). *Pawan (2008)*

considers scaffolding an important component of teachers' pedagogical knowledge. This holds true even more for EMI teachers who need more than generic pedagogy, i.e. pedagogy without language barriers coming into play.

### 13.7 EMI Implementation at VU: The Silver Linings

Despite the aforementioned pitfalls, the study identified some success stories told from the students' perspective. In terms of English competency, many students acknowledged that learning in English day-in and day-out contributed to the elevation of both their receptive and productive skills. For example:

The positive impact [of EMI] is that I am now very comfortable with English materials. And communicating with foreigners has become much easier. (Thu, student, AP)

My English has improved very much. In the first year I could only read and listen in English; my speaking and writing were quite weak. But after four years, my reading, speaking and writing have been lifted to another level... Also, I no longer find thinking in English hard. (Chi, student, AP)

The “beyond-expectation improvement” (Tú, student, AP) was attributed to various EMI-related aspects of their study programs, including the presence of foreign lecturers, the extensive exposure to English in class, reading a great number of English materials, and most importantly, the critical role of English in comprehending curricular content. Being placed in the cumbersome circumstances where they were compelled to improve their English to cope, the students reported to strive hard in their own time to overcome the EMI-related difficulties. Their purposeful strategies included reading English newspapers, watching English movies with English subtitles, or joining a student-run organisation providing free city tours for English-speaking travellers. These coping strategies were found to enrich the students' English over their course of study. While this EMI's success story came with the caveat being that students' personal agency greatly came into play, it was the extensive immersion in English throughout the EMI programs that, directly or indirectly, paved the way for students' development of English competency. In the heightened agenda of international integration in Vietnam, English proficiency proves to be an essential graduate capital. As Doan and Hamid (2019) have found through the analysis of job advertisements, a high level of English proficiency is in growing demand in the Vietnamese labour market in recent years, being a prescribed attribute sought after by employers despite the variation of demands across job sectors.

In terms of disciplinary knowledge, the student participants subscribed to the idea that once they had overcome the comprehension issues, they could understand the technical terms more accurately in English than their Vietnamese equivalents that are, more often than not, obscure or ambiguous. Having both Vietnamese and foreign lecturers was considered a tremendous advantage:

Learning with the Vietnamese lecturers, I feel very relatable. The knowledge they provided can be well applied in the context of my country. (Thu, student, AP).

The foreign lecturers' knowledge is extensive... so extensive that they can make students very interested... I was once taught by a Belgian lecturer... His knowledge is immense; he knows all the economies in the world... I think the foreign lecturers could analyse case studies at a high standard. (Binh, student, AP)

The academics teaching in the EMI programs under study are high-profile experts in their fields. A study by N. Tran et al. (2019) on the contribution of advanced programs to the development of students' employability finds that the up-to-date knowledge, skills, and authentic experience the lecturers brought into the programs greatly contributed to the students' occupationally specialised knowledge. This resonates with the experience of the EMI students at VU. As the student participants recalled, they had gained valuable disciplinary knowledge and comparative insights on Vietnam and other economies throughout their course from both Vietnamese and foreign lecturers. For example:

The foreign lecturers have been to many countries in the world... They have rich reservoir of knowledge and hence interesting lectures.... They usually incorporated many interesting cases from different countries, different cultures and different types of business... And the Vietnamese lecturers, many of them had their degrees from overseas. If they studied in the UK before, they would compare Vietnam and the UK. (Duy, student, AP)

The students' remarks on their lecturers' willingness to share their authentic experience echoed what researchers have found about the correlation between overseas study and quality of teaching and career advancement. Teacher returning from overseas tend to have a greater understanding of their host countries' academic norms, read more in foreign languages, and have a greater willingness to circulate their knowledge (see Cushner, 2007). In other words, EMI has granted students access to high-calibre sources of specialist knowledge as well as international, intercultural exposures, which is a privilege that their VMI counterparts do not necessarily have.

Becker (1993) and Tomlinson (2017) define occupationally specialised knowledge and skills acquired through the pursuit of formal education as human capital. As such, students in EMI programs have more chances to enrich their human capital from multicultural perspectives which is one of the core graduate capitals needed for future employment. Nonetheless, it is important to note that possessing disciplinary knowledge alone does not ensure graduate employability. As Barrie (2006) identifies, abilities to apply or translate disciplinary knowledge, and skills that complement disciplinary knowledge cannot be missing in graduate attribute clusters.

### 13.8 Conclusion and Implication

Examining the EMI provision in two undergraduate programs at a Vietnamese university, this chapter revealed a range of practices and challenges at the teaching and learning level that impacted EMI students' employability in both positive and negative ways. Regarded as a lever to achieve institutional and national development goals with educational quality enhancement being a prime focus to meet the demands of

the labour market, the introduction of EMI in reality represents a real challenge for academics even in the disciplinary area that has very much been their own backyard. The change in instruction language deprived many academics of clear articulation of expertise and took them out of their comfort zone, which resulted in transmission issues, content rush, lack of in-class interaction, and in some cases lowered teaching quality. For students, the main sources of difficulties involved comprehending spoken English by non-native English-speaking academics, from VU and partner institutions alike, and navigating the foreign instructors' EMI pedagogies which are somewhat contrastive to their long-standing habit of being passive recipients of knowledge. Consequently, the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and the student–teacher relationships were challenged and inhibited, thus constraining the development of human capital and social capital that could otherwise be further capitalised on in EMI programs.

From the perspective of teaching, the impact of EMI was clearly evident in that it required pedagogical alterations and brought about opportunities for academics to be mindful of their students and to be creative in their ways of teaching. A proportion of Vietnamese academics were capable of appropriating classroom pedagogies such as flexible code-switching, scaffolding through provision of additional guided reading, extending support beyond class time, and “customised” learning activities according to students' English capacity and needs. In so doing, the academics demonstrated dual identities as a subject teacher and an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher, which was found to constructively assist students' learning and their human capital development. That being said, navigating the EMI space was very much subject to individual academic's agency, and thus risking consistent learning experience and teaching quality across the classes and subjects. Also, even though some academics were willing to sacrifice their own time, i.e. after class or during breaks, to support their students, the question remains how much support is efficient within the constraints of their other commitments, the students' and their own English capacity as well as students' expectations and needs.

A prerequisite for EMI to have a rightful impact, perhaps, is sufficient space for academic autonomy. For example, putting aside the controversies around whether the EMI policy should be strictly adhered to, the academics' code-switching strategy appeared to be practical and effective in addressing the distinctive comprehension issue, accommodating students with insufficient English, and resolving the tension between achieving the expected disciplinary learning outcomes and the reality of EMI teaching. This was achievable thanks to the freedom VU academics were provided to be flexible in their teaching. One may effectively argue that the frequent use of first language would potentially risk students' language development and blur out the purpose of the National Language Project 2020 of developing students' ELP through the implementation of EMI (The Government Of Vietnam, 2008). However, with a shortage of linguistically competent subject-matter teachers, there is no guarantee that such developmental goal will be achievable even when the English-only rule is strictly applied, which was evident in the above-reported comprehension issues. From the academics' and students' EMI experiences reported thus far, it is arguably unviable to create English-only silos within the larger non-English institutional/



national context without sufficient linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural support for both teachers and students.

From the perspective of learning, EMI brought along opportunities of knowledge enrichment, in foreign language and professional knowledge alike, and more precise understanding of terminologies, all of which are of great values in enhancing EMI students' competitiveness and their potential to secure employment opportunities. These gains were accompanied by students' development of comparative understandings about Vietnam and other countries with regard to economic and cultural aspects, as well as adaptability in response to different ways of thinking and doing. Such knowledge and skills are critical elements of intercultural competence that more and more employers seek after nowadays (Rawal & Deardorff, 2021). If a purpose of universities is to prepare students for the uneven playing field of the labour market, EMI graduates are indeed armed with advantages in foreign language and international, intercultural knowledge to secure quality jobs and advance their career in the country or abroad. The EMI-related problems, though quite acute and intense in the early years, were mitigated over time from the first to the final year with students' constant efforts and investment in their study. Their substantial effort in designing their learning pathway, or need-response agency (Tran & Vu, 2017), in conjunction with academics' agency may contribute to the development of personal dispositions such as resilience and proactiveness that are essential to their employability and future professional success.

The findings have implications for institutional policy and practice. J. Tran (2012) indicates that enhancing graduate employability is considered as an important mission as well as a desire of the Vietnamese HE system, particularly in the era of industrialisation and modernisation of the country. Given such aspiration, the development of graduate capabilities and attributes through internationalisation of the curriculum requires more attention and investment in improving the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of EMI programs. The need for adequate institutional investment in change was strongly evidenced through the difficulties and tensions experienced by academics and students in our study. As mentioned earlier, what distinguishes EMI teaching and VMI teaching is the requirement for alternative and/or additional pedagogical skills. The study findings showed that such pedagogies involved a multitude of linguistic, conceptual, and academic scaffolding skills that tackle the distinctive issues arising from the change of instruction language. The certain level of anxiety and stress that some academics reported indicates that EMI academics are not necessarily equipped with the integrated knowledge and pedagogy that enable them to confidently and effectively navigate the EMI space. As Phan et al. (2018) argue, academics' and students' agency cannot be fully capitalised on without active institutional agency.

As found in this study, an encapsulated community of EMI students speaking only English, an expected ideal environment for English language development, was unlikely constructed within a non-English institutional/national context without sufficient instructional support for both teachers and students in all linguistic, pedagogical/academic, and cultural aspects. Professional development initiatives with regards to English proficiency and EMI pedagogies, therefore, would be much needed. By this,



we would like to take the arguments in the literature about the need for language and pedagogical support for EMI teachers (Nguyen et al., 2017) further to include learning skills and academic support for students. Formal university- or faculty-led professional development sessions, along with professional learning community of both Vietnamese and foreign teachers to share best EMI practices would significantly ease the tension facing EMI teaching staff. Recognition schemes would ideally incentivise and reward EMI champions who work overtime providing personal support to students. At the same time, students would be better prepared for their course if they were given orientations early in the course about learning skills, academic conventions, and expectations on learning outcomes. Institutions could also provide academic English courses for needing students to meet course requirements, which, in turn, relieves the burden for class teachers. As the impact of EMI is at personal, professional, and institutional levels, the success of EMI is very much dependent on the commitment of different stakeholders from both the policy/management level and the grassroots level of teaching and learning.

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# Chapter 14

## Vietnamese Teachers of English Perceptions and Practices of Culture in Language Teaching



Chinh Duc Nguyen  and Thang Kiet Si Ho

**Abstract** As languages and cultures are inseparable from each other, cultural content has been considered an integral part of language teaching. On the premise of this interdependent relationship, the current study was conducted in order to explore teacher perceptions and practices of culture in English language teaching at a Vietnamese university. Data for the study were collected from classroom observations and interviews with fourteen teachers of English language in a Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that although the participants were aware of the inextricable relationship between language and culture, their perceptions of culture teaching centred around topical dependence, priority of language over culture in language teaching, inadequate exposure to culture in language courses, and other constraints on culture teaching. Their teaching practices were dictated by traditional approaches to culture teaching, which focused on cultural knowledge about English speaking countries. Based on the participants' perceptions and practices, the study discusses implications for transforming culture teaching in English language education in Vietnam and in particular, for developing intercultural competence in relation to employability.

**Keywords** English as a foreign language · Intercultural competence · Intercultural teaching · Teacher perceptions · Vietnamese higher education

### 14.1 Introduction

As a universal tool to express human ideas, languages are inseparable from cultures and societies where they are used (Baker, 2015; Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). It has been widely accepted that languages convey a treasure of cultural values of humankind; and cultures, in return, reflect the origin and development of languages over the course of history. In the light of this extricable relationship,

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cultural content has been considered an integral part of language teaching regardless of whether the instructed language is native (mother tongue) or second/foreign to learners. In the field of English language teaching (ELT), a wide range of cultural topics has been integrated into language focus (Canale, 2016; Ho, 2009; Holliday, 2009; Tirnaz & Haddad Narafshan, 2018). In other words, learners are supposed not only to acquire language skills but also to develop cultural competence. As a result, they would use English appropriately in a given context of communication.

In the last few decades, the emergence of English as a global language has impacted both theory and practice of teaching culture in English language education (Baker, 2009; Kramsch, 2014; McConachy, 2018; McKay, 2012; Nault, 2006). That is, culture teaching is no longer grounded in the traditional model whereby learners are taught knowledge about Anglophone countries, such as geography, history, and traditions to name the few. Instead, English has been considered a vehicle for both exploring globally diverse cultures and introducing learners' own cultures and identities to people from other countries (Forman, 2014; Nguyen, 2014). This way of teaching cultures is known as the intercultural approach, which has been suggested for ELT and second language education (Baker, 2008, 2015; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Holliday, 2009; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Together with a sociocultural turn in language education today (Johnson & Golombek, 2018; Nguyen, 2017a), learners are expected to engage in culturally rich contexts beyond the classroom. As such, the cultural competence students acquired over the course of English learning would serve various purposes in their life. From the perspective of Bourdieu (2007), learners, when engaging with cultures in an intercultural way, are more likely to develop 'cultural capital' in the broad sense or 'intercultural competence' in the narrow sense. The concept of 'intercultural competence' refers to knowledge, skills, and behaviours which individuals can draw on to gain an advantage in social life in general. For example, graduates can deploy knowledge and skills accumulated from their life experiences and formal education for success in their careers and social life. In this sense, 'cultural capital' prepares learners for employability and advancement in social status. That said, the practice of teaching cultures in many education systems, where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), has not been reformed in response to such a substantial transformation in teaching and learning culture in the field of ELT. As indicated in the research literature, culture teaching in many EFL contexts is still confined to institutional aspects of English speaking countries rather than changing to intercultural focus, namely, knowledge, skills, and behaviours related to various cultures (Baker, 2015; McKay, 2010). Accordingly, it is strongly recommended that more research be undertaken in order to shed light on the current practice of culture teaching in various EFL contexts in the world. Based on the findings, specific actions would be taken for transforming culture teaching in a specific context of EFL education from traditional to intercultural approaches.

As with other education systems of non-English speaking countries, English language has been identified as a major priority for educational and socioeconomic development in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2018). Owing to the important role of English language in Vietnam today, a large proportion of students across all education levels are involved in EFL learning. As can be seen from the EFL curriculum for different

levels of learning, cultural knowledge has been combined with language skills (Ho, 2009; Nguyen, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Tran et al., 2019; Truong & Tran, 2014; Vu & Dinh, 2021). This reflects the perceived relationship between language and culture from the perspective of curriculum developers. However, research should be undertaken to explore how culture teaching is perceived and practiced by practitioners. This chapter, therefore, explores how cultures were perceived and practiced by teachers in a higher education institution in Vietnam. The findings would help to answer the question as to whether the perceptions and practices of culture teaching in contemporary EFL education yield ‘cultural capital’ for students’ employability as well as for their advancement in social life.

## 14.2 Literature Review

### 14.2.1 *The Relationship Between Language and Culture*

Language and culture have an extremely complex relationship (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarnio, 2013). As Agar (1994) states, ‘culture is in language and language is loaded in culture’ (p. 28). This means that language is an integral part of culture and also an expression of culture. Kramsch (1998) also mentions that language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality. Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that language and culture are acquired together with each supporting the development of the other. Liddicoat, Papademetre et al. (2003) claim that language and culture interact with each other in a way that culture connects to all levels of language use and structures, i.e., there is no level of language which is independent of culture. Specifically, at the lowest level of pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar, language conveys cultural factors manifested accent varieties, vocabularies used in different contexts, and language uses for various purposes and functions. In the middle of the continuum, language includes norms of interactions, pragmatic norms, and genres; cultural elements are found in corresponding language units, including utterances or text structures. At the highest level of world knowledge, language is situated in a sociocultural context. In addition to the points of articulation between culture and language forwarded by Liddicoat et al. (2003), Kramsch (1995) distinguishes three types of links between language and culture through the history of language teaching: universal, national, and local links. She argues that the universal links between language and culture are effectively captured in literature. These links can draw on the universal canon of world literatures to ensure ‘a certain cosmopolitan, at first religious, then aesthetic, view of the world, that various speakers of various languages could share across social and national boundaries’ (Kramsch, 1995, p. 86). The national links between language and culture convey a national perspective in which language teaching was separated from the teaching of literature and the teaching of culture. Subjects like French ‘civilization’, German ‘Landeskunde’, or English ‘culture’ were, therefore, taught separately from language



learning. The local links between language and culture place a focus on the pragmatic functions and notions expressed through language in everyday life.

In short, language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship, which is expressed through the way they interact with each other. The relationship between language and culture is made meaningful in language learning as ‘the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool’ (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 237).

### ***14.2.2 Approaches to Culture in Foreign Language Education***

Culture in language teaching has undergone many changes, each of which can be seen as a reconceptualization of culture and the role of culture in language teaching (Baker, 2015; Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999; Kramsch, 2014). Through the history of culture pedagogy, Liddicoat et al. (2003) identify four broad approaches to culture in foreign language teaching and learning.

*High culture:* This is the traditional way of teaching culture that focuses on an established canon of literature. Cultural competence is measured through the breadth of reading and knowledge about the literature. This approach to culture minimizes the use of language for communication with native speakers and sees culture residing primarily in the text itself.

*Area studies:* This approach to culture focuses on knowledge about a country, which is often presented as background knowledge for language learning. Culture competence is particularly viewed through the depth of knowledge of the history, geography, and institutions of the target language country. Culture was usually taught separately from language learning on courses such as *Landeskunde* (in Germany), *civilization* (in France), and *civilita* (in Italy) (Kramsch, 1993). Language and culture have a loose connection as language is mainly used for events, institutions, people, and places.

*Culture as societal norms:* This approach views culture as the practices and values that typify them. Everyday behaviours of members of speech communities are viewed as grounded in the national culture (Kramsch, 2006). Cultural competence is measured by one’s knowledge about things that a cultural group is likely to do and understanding of cultural values by certain ways of acting or beliefs. This view of cultural competence is problematic as the learner observes and interprets an interlocutor’s language and actions from another cultural paradigm. The view of culture in this approach is considered static and homogeneous and easily leads to a possibility of the stereotyping of the target culture (Liddicoat, 2006).

*Culture as practice:* This approach views culture as sets of practices or the lived experience of the individual (Geertz, 1983). This ‘cultural turn’ as a breakthrough in language pedagogy in the 1990s provided a foundation for intercultural language learning (Risager, 2007). In the culture as practice approach, the learners’ cultural

competence is shown in the ability to interact in the target culture in informed ways. This approach to culture engages language learners in developing an intercultural perspective in which their own culture and the target culture are involved. With such a perspective, learners are able to reach an intercultural position where they continuously develop intercultural communicative skills during the process of language learning.

From these four broad approaches to culture, Liddicoat et al. (2003) distinguish two main views of culture: the static view and the dynamic view. The static view of culture assumes that culture contains factual knowledge or cultural artefacts to be observed and learned about. This view of culture does not clearly link language and culture (Liddicoat, 2002) and simply consists of 'information to be transmitted' (Crawford & McLaren, 2003, p. 33). The dynamic view of culture, on the other hand, is emphasized in intercultural language learning. This view of culture requires learners to actively engage in culture learning, have knowledge of their own culture and an understanding of their own culturally shaped behaviours. The culture as practice approach is regarded as a dynamic view of culture as teachers can help learners decentre from their own culture (Kramersch, 1993) with sorts of exposure to the target culture and the skills and knowledge they need to achieve decentring (Liddicoat et al., 2003).

Furthermore, culture teaching in the EFL classroom can be approached from two broad perspectives: teaching culture as information and teaching culture as process (Wright, 2000). Teaching culture as information involves the cultural information that the instructor imparts to students through culture learning devices such as culture capsules, culture clusters, culture incidents and assimilators, and culture mini-dramas (Lange, 1998). However, an emphasis on culture as a dynamic set of practices or the lived experience of individuals (Geertz, 1983) leads to greater emphasis on experience and perceptions of culture as a process. Culture learning as a process provides students with opportunities to explore different cultural aspects, reflect on their cultural explorations and create their own relational meanings between their own culture and the target culture (Holliday, 2009; Kramersch, 1993).

Overall, the approaches to teaching culture in ELT or language education are diverse; and the selection of a specific approach or pedagogy depends on various factors, such as the curriculum, teachers' perception and practice, and available resources (Ho, 2014; Nguyen, 2016). However, the emergence of English as an international language, followed by changes in culture teaching in second language education, learners need to be more engaged in the dynamic view and the process (Doan, 2014; Jon, 2009; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). For this study, the reviewed approaches presented in this section were employed as a theoretical background, on which the study drew to explore the participant teachers' perceptions and practices of culture teaching in a Vietnamese university.

### ***14.2.3 Research on Culture Teaching in Vietnam***

The status of culture in EFL education has recently been given more emphasis in Vietnam. Through a series of research studies on teaching and learning cultures in EFL education in Vietnam, Ho (2009, 2011, 2014) pointed out the perceived importance of cultural and intercultural knowledge in relation to language aspects. However, these studies indicated that the perception and practice of practitioners were greatly influenced by a traditional approach to culture teaching inherent in an emphasis on Anglophone cultures. In spite of this emerging emphasis on culture in the curriculum and an effort to incorporate interculturality into EFL education in Vietnam, culture teaching and learning practices still have a peripheral status (Doan, 2014; Ho, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2016). As in other Asian countries, most Vietnamese EFL teachers were not confident enough about their skills and knowledge for culture teaching and some of them were even sceptical about the necessity and significance of teaching culture in their language classrooms (Tsou, 2005). In addition, there was also a lack of guidelines for culture teaching and empirical research on culture learning, which made teachers less willing to teach culture in the classroom (Tsou, 2005).

Despite the dominance of the traditional approaches to teaching culture and teachers' scant attention to cultural or intercultural content in ELT, researchers have, to some extent, brought the issues into focus. Given the emergence of English as an international language, Doan (2014) investigated the curriculum, lecturers' perceptions, and classroom practices of EFL teacher education programs in four different universities in Vietnam. The findings indicated a tension between monocentric and pluricentric views on culture teaching. In a study that explored EFL teachers' belief of culture teaching in Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2016) found that priority was given to knowledge and skills of English and cultural content played a minor role. However, according to the results of a recent study (Vu & Dinh, 2021), EFL students' perceptions of intercultural communicative competence have become diverse, showing both local features and global trends. In relation to practice, EFL teachers have used their initiative in transforming teaching culture in EFL classes in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016, 2017b, 2018). For example, Truong and Tran (2014) explored the use of film as an innovative approach to enhancing EFL students' intercultural competence. Critical incidents were integrated into English language content in order to help university students develop intercultural competence (Tran et al., 2019). The innovative practices have not resulted in a significant reform, but there is an evidence for initial changes in teachers' perceptions and practice of culture teaching in the ELT context of Vietnam.

## 14.3 Research Methodology

### 14.3.1 *Research Design*

The study investigated Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of culture in language teaching and learning. The study addresses the following research question:

How is culture in language teaching and learning evident in the perceptions and practices of Vietnamese EFL teachers?

A qualitative approach to this study was adopted. By using the qualitative approach, the dynamic nature of events as well as the trends and patterns over time can be better represented (Cohen et al., 2007). The qualitative approach of the study involved classroom observations and teacher interviews.

### 14.3.2 *Participants*

Fourteen Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers/lecturers at a university in Central Vietnam participated in the study. This university was chosen as a research site because both researchers worked here. As both insiders and outsiders, the researchers had advantages in accessing the site and establishing relationships with the participants. The information about the study was spread to all the teachers/lecturers working in the Department of English language. The criteria for selection were as follows: (1) minimum of five years experience in teaching, (2) interest in the topic under investigation, (3) commitment to the study (participating in both interview, classroom observation, and follow-up activities). After the major steps, 14 teachers/lecturers were selected as participants for the study. The participant teachers obtained their Master's Degree in TESOL or Applied Linguistics in Vietnam (8 teachers) or abroad (6 teachers). Their teaching experience ranges from 7 years (the youngest) to 25 years (the oldest). Whether educated in Vietnam or overseas, they all took a course in intercultural communication, which laid the foundation for their culture teaching. The 'overseas' group also had their advantages in culture teaching as they had been exposed to cultural diversity during their postgraduate studies. At the time of data collection, all of them had more than five years of teaching experience. They mainly taught courses related to cultures and language skills to undergraduate students of the TESOL or English language programs. About five teachers also taught general English to undergraduate students of business and engineering programs.

### ***14.3.3 Data Collection Methods***

The study used the following methods of data collection: classroom observations and teacher interviews. As this research was a classroom-based study, classroom observation was used as a research method to examine the teachers' culture teaching practices in the natural-setting EFL classroom. Classroom observation was chosen for the study as it helps to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen et al., 2007). There were twelve classroom observations over two months, including English speaking, General English, and American Culture lessons. Each classroom observation lasted 90 min and was audio-recorded.

Teacher interviews were used to investigate the EFL teachers' perceptions of culture in language teaching. Sercu (2005) argues that the use of teacher interviews has potential to lead to a better understanding of teachers' conceptions of the integration of language and culture teaching. The study used a semi-structured interview with a set of pre-prepared guiding questions to encourage the interviewees to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner (Dornyei, 2007).

### ***14.3.4 Data Analysis Methods***

Thematic analysis was used as the data analysis methods of the study. The qualitative data of the teacher interviews were coded using thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002) in which themes or patterns were derived directly and inductively from the raw data. Classroom observations used coded observation notes from which the themes and patterns across the lessons were finally teased out to provide a picture of the teachers' culture teaching practices. Specifically, in relation to the participant teachers' perceptions of culture in language teaching, three themes were identified from the interview transcripts, including the participants' awareness of the relationship between language and culture, their beliefs about culture in language teaching, and constraints on culture teaching in their context. Classroom observations resulted in two themes, namely the approaches to culture teaching used by the participants and their self-evaluation of culture teaching approaches. The identified themes were analysed and discussed in combination with the literature on culture teaching in language education, especially the approaches to culture teaching suggested by Kramsch (2006) and Liddicoat et al. (2003).

## **14.4 Findings: Teachers' Perceptions of Culture in Language Teaching**

### ***14.4.1 Awareness of the Relationship Between Language and Culture***

Most of the interviewed teachers demonstrated awareness about the relationship between language and culture. They mentioned the inseparability of language and culture in language learning and highlighted the involvement of cultural behaviours in the language learning process. They considered culture learning as a way of behaving in a culturally appropriate manner and a way to learn about people's daily life through the target language. They believed that culture defines language through its links with customs and lifestyles and acknowledged the relationship between language and culture in communication. Such view can be seen in the following example:

Language is a part of culture. Culture and language are closely connected and related. If language is misused, students cannot understand the target culture and they will fail to use the language in communication. (Interview T2)

As in the quote above, the interviewed participant showed a basic understanding of the relationship between language and culture (Baker, 2015; Byram, 1997; Holliday, 2009; Kramsch, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarnio, 2013). A similar way of understanding or interpreting was found in the interviews with all the participants. In this sense, all the teachers perceived the inseparability between language and culture in EFL teaching.

### ***14.4.2 Beliefs About Culture in Language Teaching***

The teachers' beliefs about culture in language teaching can be addressed in the following categories: (a) topical dependence; (b) priority of language over culture in language teaching; and (c) inadequate exposure to culture in language courses.

*Topic dependence.* The teachers stated that topic-based materials tend to involve more culture than skills-based materials that mainly focus on developing language skills. They also mentioned that topic-based materials at low levels tend to be more related to culture than the advanced ones, which usually involve more general knowledge. They argued that it depends on a topic that has culture-embedded meanings or causes culture shock to deal with culture in language teaching such as in the topic 'manners'. However, cultural content was considered minor in language teaching through the provision of additional cultural topics, rather than being integrated with language teaching:

In the language course, cultural topics need to be added as they are both beneficial and interesting and help change students' taste in language learning. For example, reading texts related to culture should be chosen to make students gradually perceive the target culture. (Interview T7)

*Priority of language over culture in language teaching.* The interviewed teachers had different views about culture in language teaching. First, language functions get the priority over culture in language teaching. Some teachers stated that an English speaking material usually focuses on language functions around the types of verbal and non-verbal communication, daily life issues and broader issues such as festivals and traditions, history, geography, and political systems. Therefore, they believed that students need to learn types of communication first before learning about aspects of the target culture as communication is the primary basis and the first goal to achieve in language learning. Secondly, language or culture teaching depends on the goals of the lesson. Some teachers argued that their language teaching did not necessarily involve culture teaching. For example, the lesson on 'TV firsts' (e.g., the inventor of TV, the first TV programmes...) was appropriate in terms of language teaching as the goal of the lesson was the use of simple past tense to talk about the past inventions rather than culture teaching. Thirdly, English major students should learn more about culture than non-English major students. For example, it was considered that cultural situations in a lesson on 'feelings' would be necessary for English major students, but not for non-English major students who need to focus only on accurate language usage. The specific lessons shared by the participants show that cultures were addressed by providing knowledge and factual information. That is, the 'area studies' approach was mainly used and the participant teachers mainly held the static view of culture (Kramsch, 2006; Liddicoat et al., 2003); whereas, the approach of 'cultures as practice' as well as the dynamic view of culture were not attended to. In brief, the above views show the teachers' priority of language over culture in language teaching although they were aware of the relationship between language and culture (Nguyen et al., 2016).

*Inadequate exposure to culture in language courses.* In response to the question of whether the target culture should be incorporated into EFL classes or taught in separate culture courses, the interviewed teachers argued that it was not sufficient to teach culture in language courses. They believed that culture in language courses was too broad, general, and not deep enough and that it was impossible to address all aspects of the target language culture in language courses. In this way, the participant teachers did not show their proactive role or, at a higher level, their agency in making cultural content embedded in language courses specific, relevant, and in-depth. Due to the inadequate exposure to culture in language courses, it was suggested that culture should be taught in culture courses, particularly at a higher level, for comprehensiveness, depth, logicity, and systematicity of culture learning. Such a view can be seen in the following example:

As culture incorporated in language courses is inadequate, culture courses are still needed. Students have to learn more about culture in culture courses for more effective communication. Separate culture courses are more systematic, deeper and offer a better overview of the target culture. (Interview T4)

### 14.4.3 Constraints on Culture Teaching

The teachers' responses in the interviews also revealed a variety of constraints that restricted opportunities for culture teaching. Amongst these constraints, the following ones were the most common concerns of the teachers, including (a) students' cultural background knowledge, (b) students' level of language proficiency, (c) students' degree of receptiveness to culture learning, (d) teachers' cultural background knowledge, (e) time allowance for culture teaching, and (f) curriculum, testing, and education policy constraints.

*Students' cultural background knowledge.* The interviewed teachers expressed their concerns about students' limited cultural background knowledge. Some teachers found it hard to teach culture when students did not have enough cultural background knowledge. For example, students found it difficult to match the word *cereal* with the correct picture of *milk* as they have never had cereal with milk for breakfast. Because of the lack of cultural background knowledge, students may feel reluctant to learn about culture. It was suggested that it would then be important for teachers to equip students with more cultural knowledge for culture learning.

*Students' level of language proficiency.* The interviewed teachers believed that students' level of language proficiency could restrict opportunities for culture teaching. They argued that the incorporation of culture into language courses needed to be appropriate with students' level of language proficiency. There was an argument amongst the teachers about the time for students to engage in culture learning from the beginning of language learning or from a higher level of language proficiency:

For beginners, it is not necessary to teach the cultural element as they cannot understand the nature of vocabulary and it may influence the learning process. Incorporating culture should be done whenever students have attained a considerable level of English, for example from the pre-intermediate level onwards. (Interview T9)

Incorporating culture in language courses is inevitable, right from Year 1, through the whole programme, frequently and continuously, to an extent that depends on each specific lesson. (Interview T5)

*Students' degree of receptiveness to culture learning.* Students' degree of receptiveness to culture learning refers to the extent to which students show their willingness for culture learning. The teachers were concerned about students' degree of receptiveness to culture learning. Some students were interested in culture learning whilst other students were not. Some teachers tried to address culture in the lesson, but some students were only concerned with the language, and did not pay much attention to cultural knowledge. Students' unwillingness to engage in culture learning was also caused when teachers and students have different goals in language learning.

*Teachers' cultural knowledge.* The teachers highlighted the importance of teachers' cultural knowledge for culture teaching. It was believed that an instructor's cultural knowledge was a pre-condition to teach culture. In other words, language teachers need to be well-informed, have profound cultural background knowledge, and be able to explore the target language culture themselves. The lack of cultural



knowledge could prevent teachers from culture teaching. However, most of the participant teachers argued that the teacher's cultural knowledge was less important than students' active engagement in social interaction with speakers of the target language. The importance of students' intercultural experience in encounters with people from other cultures was emphasized for their culture learning in the classroom.

*Time allowance for culture teaching.* The teachers' views about time allowance for culture teaching can be classified into two different categories: satisfactory and dependent on various factors. Some teachers reported that time allowance for their culture teaching was satisfactory and that they did not need to address more about culture in the lessons. Some other teachers also argued that they would deal with culture whenever the lesson was related to culture or whenever it was necessary as time allowance for culture teaching was dependent on various factors such as the course goals, the lesson topic, the lesson content, the teaching methodology, students' level of language proficiency, students' interests, teachers' choices and experience. However, the importance of students' cultural exploration outside the classroom was highlighted as students could learn more about culture than in the classroom.

*Curriculum, testing, and education policy constraints.* With regard to whether the curriculum, assessment, and education policies have any impact on the teachers' culture teaching practices, the interviewed teachers reported that opportunities for their culture teaching in EFL classes were restricted due to the constraints from these sources. The curriculum has a lack of emphasis on the importance of culture in language learning, the separated status, construct, and treatment of culture learning, and the construct of culture as knowledge about a particular culture.

Regarding the constraints of assessment, some teachers stated that students' cultural knowledge was tested in culture courses rather than in language courses, and therefore, examinations tend to focus on testing students' language skills, language use, and general knowledge rather than cultural competence in language courses. Because of this, it was believed that the native speaker standard of language proficiency was considered to be the main goal in language testing.

Regarding the constraints of education policy, no teachers were aware of any document that emphasized the importance of culture in language teaching and learning. It was believed that the Vietnamese education policy hardly focused on culture teaching and learning in language courses. The teachers were not concerned with any education policy on a large scale and the mechanism of the current education system caused an unfavourable impact on promoting a new component of culture in EFL classes:

Teachers want to introduce intercultural business communication to students but they have to be more concerned about students' marks and the assessment within the whole system. This can limit their creativity and flexibility in culture teaching. (Interview T7)

In summary, the teachers' perceptions and beliefs revealed a predictable priority for language over culture in language teaching. The teachers were also concerned about a wide range of constraints that restricted their opportunities for culture teaching in the classroom.

## 14.5 Teachers' Culture Teaching Practices

### 14.5.1 *Approaches to Teaching Cultures Used by the Participant Teachers*

The teachers' culture teaching practices can be mainly classified into: (a) teaching of culture as information; (b) teaching of cultural awareness, and (c) other ways of teaching.

*Teaching of culture as information.* The teaching of culture as information was the most frequent approach in the observed lessons. For example, facts about famous people in the target culture (e.g., John Lennon, Elvis Presley, William Shakespeare, Princess Diana) and in the learners' home culture (e.g., Ho Chi Minh, Xuan Quynh, Thanh Phuong), or additional cultural knowledge about the target culture (e.g., Union Jack, Boxing Day) were provided in English speaking and General English lessons. In American Culture lessons, students learned facts about American people, languages in the US, and the US geography.

*Teaching of cultural awareness.* The teaching of cultural awareness was done through cultural comparisons in the lessons. For example, differences in working culture between Vietnam and America were discussed in a speaking lesson on workplaces. The classroom observation showed that the students were taught about cultural awareness; however, they tended to talk more about their own culture. Learners' cultural awareness was also raised through the use of personal questions in a first business meeting between a Vietnamese and an American. The classroom observations demonstrated that the students were provided with cultural knowledge rather than opportunities to develop their own cultural awareness about the Vietnamese culture and the target language culture.

*Other ways of culture teaching.* Apart from the most common approaches of culture teaching mentioned above, some less common ways of culture teaching were also mentioned by the teachers in the interviews. These included localization, simulations, and role-plays. Some teachers used a teaching strategy called *the rule of localization* to make an unfamiliar topic familiar with the students. For example, English table manners (e.g., the placement of cutlery) were brought to a discussion on the use of chopsticks in the Vietnamese culture. This rule of localization facilitated the students' culture learning about unfamiliar topics. Another way of culture teaching employed simulations or role-plays to engage learners in culture learning. For example, students played various roles in a multinational company where employees are supposed to have culturally diverse backgrounds. This indicates that it is important to engage students in intercultural, job-oriented situations so they can be ready for working in multicultural contexts. These approaches, to some extent, engage students in cultural practice rather than information or societal norms of the target cultures. Although the practices are basic, they reflect the participant teachers' efforts to teach cultures beyond facts, information, and societal

norms (Liddicoat & Scarnio, 2013; Tran et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2016). However, these approaches were used less frequently than the information approach. As such, culture in the participants' practice is viewed as static rather than dynamic (Liddicoat et al., 2003).

### ***14.5.2 Teachers' Self-Evaluation of Culture Teaching Approaches***

The interviewed teachers considered that the teaching of culture as information was the most appropriate approach. Some teachers said this culture teaching approach was easily applied, time-saving, and was the most efficient way to provide students with knowledge input. This culture teaching approach was also believed to be suitable for students at a low proficiency level. Other ways of culture teaching using techniques such as exploring cultural values and beliefs, sharing intercultural experiences, or engaging in intercultural workplaces were rarely employed by the interviewed teachers. It was argued that engaging students in intercultural workplaces required a lot of additional material and preparation time and that this form of culture teaching could be used for students at a higher proficiency level. It was also stated that this topic was more suitable with business students. Generally, the interviewed teachers believed that their culture teaching methodologies were efficient and appropriate.

In summary, the teaching of culture as information was the most frequent culture teaching practice of Vietnamese EFL teachers, followed by the teaching of cultural awareness. Other ways of culture teaching were much less frequent and tended to depend on each individual teacher's teaching experience. The teachers believed that their culture teaching approaches were appropriate, which reflected their beliefs about culture in language teaching.

## **14.6 Discussion**

### ***14.6.1 Facts-Oriented Approach as a Dominant Culture Teaching Practice***

The teaching of culture as information in the present study was the most frequent approach to culture teaching in the Vietnamese EFL classes. These findings correspond with some previous studies. Sercu et al.'s (2005) survey shows that teachers passed on cultural knowledge rather than providing intercultural skills. Byram and Feng (2004) state that the facts-oriented approach to culture teaching is not entirely abandoned, particularly in language learning situations with limited exposure to otherness such as in the present study. They argue that many critics take this facts-oriented approach to culture as inappropriate as it ignores the fact that culture is 'a

social construct, a product of self and other perceptions' (Kramersch, 1993, p. 205). Byram and Feng (2004) also state that this facts-oriented approach may well lead to the teaching of stereotypes. The teaching of culture as information is contrary to one of the principles of intercultural language teaching, which considers language acquisition as involving much more than the acquisition of only facts/knowledge (Liddicoat et al., 2003). Teachers should move beyond the teaching of cultural facts and engage students in an exploratory and reflective culture learning (Newton & Shearn, 2010). From the perspective of culture teaching for students' employability, an emphasis on factual knowledge and information as in the findings of this study is inadequate for multicultural working environments, which require employees to demonstrate three levels of intercultural competence, including knowledge, perception, and behaviour (Sercu et al., 2005).

The classroom observations indicated that the main role that the teachers played in relation to culture teaching was to provide cultural information. As a result, the students were not given opportunities to take the initiative in culture learning. This approach to culture teaching reflects the Vietnamese influence of Confucianism under which the teachers still act as the expert knower of the target language in the role of providing knowledge and making learning occur rather than engaging the students in a learner-centred approach in which the students actively construct their own cultural knowledge through cultural explorations. This innovative approach to culture teaching is deemed a platform for students to engage in a variety of roles and a diversity of intercultural experiences as required for their future jobs. Compared to other institutions as reported in some studies (Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2016, 2017b; Tran et al., 2019; Truong & Tran, 2014; Vu & Dinh, 2021) the university as research site in this study has, to some extent, not responded to the changes required for culture teaching. That is, teachers at some colleges and schools have introduced and incorporated intercultural components into their EFL teaching. Although reported as not as sophisticated as the approaches that focus on societal norms and practice, culture teaching and learning in those contexts have shown some initial changes. In contrast, the participant teachers in this study mainly used the information approach, which may be explained by many constraints. However, they also started to change as manifested in teachers' and students' involvement in intercultural roles and activities, which showed characteristics of the culture as practice approach (Baker, 2015; Kramersch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Such initial changes in their perceptions and practices show personal efforts rather than a systematic change for new approaches like societal norms or practice.

Given the Vietnamese context and also the understandable reasons, the students mainly learned cultural facts due to the lack of contact with speakers of the target language beyond the classroom (Liddicoat et al., 2003; Nguyen et al., 2016). As a result, they were more likely to experience limited language proficiency as a barrier to communication rather than the cultural barrier. This indicates that a lack of students' awareness of cultural differences in intercultural encounters prevented them from developing intercultural competence. Opportunities to participate in genuine intercultural interactions, therefore, become crucial for students to develop their awareness of cultural differences and consequently intercultural competence (Baker,

2015; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Munezane, 2021; Truong & Tran, 2014; Vieluf & Göbel, 2019). Specifically, to enhance students' employability, intercultural interactions simulated in the classroom should focus on multicultural working environment.

### ***14.6.2 Constraints on Culture Teaching and Learning***

The teachers mentioned a variety of constraints that may restrict culture teaching and learning. Amongst these constraints, the following ones need to be taken into consideration: (a) the students' level of language proficiency, (b) native speaker standard of language proficiency as the goal; (c) little impact of culture on language learning; (d) students' receptiveness to culture learning; and (e) the teacher's expertise in the target language culture.

First, the teachers believed that the students' level of language proficiency restricted opportunities for culture teaching. This belief assumes that students must attain a reasonable level of language proficiency before engaging in culture learning. This point of view violates a major principle of intercultural language teaching, which integrates language and culture from the beginning (Newton & Shearn, 2010). As Liddicoat et al. (2003) argue, 'culture is taught from the beginning of language learning and is not delayed until learners have acquired some of the language' (p. 24). Kramsch (1993) also argues that culture 'is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them' (p. 1). This means that students should start learning the target language culture at the time they start learning the target language so that they will be able to become both linguistically and interculturally competent.

Secondly, the students believed that there should be a primary focus on language over culture in language learning and that the native speaker standard of language proficiency should be considered as the goal of language learning. This belief violates a principle of intercultural language teaching which emphasizes intercultural communicative competence rather than native speaker competence (Baker, 2015; McConachy, 2018; Newton & Shearn, 2010). From this intercultural perspective, native speaker competence has been considered problematic in terms of its conceptualization (Alptekin, 2002; Baker, 2015; Kramsch, 1993) and its applicability as a model for language teachers and learners (Byram, 1997). Native speaker competence is seen as an unrealistic goal for most language learners as they have to ignore their own sociocultural identities and adopt a new one (Byram, 1997; Holliday, 2009; Kramsch, 2006).

Finally, the teachers noted that the lack of the teacher's expertise in the target language culture and their intercultural experience could restrict culture teaching. This does not reflect an intercultural perspective. The role of the teacher as a cultural

expert in the EFL classroom has been reconsidered from an intercultural perspective. Alptekin (2002) argues that the teacher should become a mediator or a ‘gate-keeper’ (p. 58) who gives priority to the development of new attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness in students. Kramsch (2004) also introduces the *go-between* concept that refers to the roles of the teacher as a mediator between languages, learners, and institutions. According to Kramsch, the teacher as a mediator acts in three different roles. The teacher, as a *cultural go-between*, understands language and culture as a social semiotic and is able to use the language like a native and a non-native speaker. The teacher, as a *methodological go-between*, mediates between what can be taught and assessed, and what must be taught, but cannot be tested. The teacher, as a *professional go-between*, mediates between institutional constraints and educational values.

Cultural capital that is partly formed and accumulated during the course of culture teaching prepares students for employability. In this study, the students’ cultural capital was narrowly confined to the knowledge of Anglophone cultures in relation to their own culture. In addition, culture was assumed to have little impact on language learning, so cultural aspects tended to be overlooked, not to say ignored. Instead, both teachers and students adhered to the belief that language competence was sufficient for students to join the workforce. To the teachers, not only was their intercultural expertise adequate but also they did not play three different roles as suggested by Kramsch (2004). As such, culture teaching played a minor role in enriching and diversifying students’ cultural capital and intercultural competence in preparation for employability. The constraints highlighted in this study should be seen as a rationale or motivation for innovations in culture teaching in a way that intercultural competence and cultural capital would make a contribution to students’ employability.

## 14.7 Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter reports a research study exploring how culture teaching was perceived and practiced by teachers in a Vietnamese university. As analysed in the findings, the teachers were aware of the interdependent relationship between language and culture in EFL education. However, their perception was mainly confined to the importance of target cultures, i.e., cultures of English speaking countries. The underlying reason for such a simple perception was the native speaker model in EFL teaching, which posits that instruction needs to adhere to native speaker standards of language proficiency as well as target cultures. The approach to teaching as reported by the participants was fact-oriented rather than intercultural. In addition to providing insights into perception and practice, both groups pointed out a number of constraints on culture teaching in EFL education in their institution. It is apparent that culture teaching in this way is unlikely to develop students’ intercultural competence, which is inclusive of cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects. In the words, the ‘cultural capital’ accumulated by students during their formal education is limited or only on the

surface of culture. As such, there is no surprise that culture teaching as an integral part of EFL education fails to prepare students for employability and other purposes. Based on the findings, we have the following suggestions for transforming culture teaching in EFL education in Vietnam.

Firstly, the EFL curriculum at all levels needs to be revised and innovated in a way that is both congruent with global trends and appropriate for local contexts. In particular, cultural content should be diverse and inclusive rather than dependent on Anglophone cultures. That is, learners are provided with opportunity as well as encouraged to engage with various cultures in relation to their own one. In addition, the cultural content must be expanded to a wide range of issues pertinent to critical thinking and intercultural competence inherent in knowledge, skills, and behaviours rather than simply fact-oriented knowledge.

Secondly, the approaches to culture teaching in general and instructional practices in particular should be intercultural rather than traditional. It is necessary that learners be exposed to various practices of teaching and learning cultures in EFL classes. In order to achieve this objective, teachers must change their perception and practice, followed by a corresponding transformation from students. More specifically, EFL teachers in both initial preparation and continuous professional programs have to be educated to teach culture in accordance with intercultural approaches. Specific guidelines of classroom practices need to be provided for them so that they would have a practical foundation to draw on. For students, teachers have to involve them in a wide range of intercultural practices within and beyond the classroom boundary.

Last but not least, culture teaching should aim at developing intercultural competence and 'cultural capital' for students so that they would be well prepared for entering the workforce at both domestic and global levels. More specifically, an emphasis should be placed on communicative, intercultural, professional knowledge, skills, and behaviours. For example, classroom activities in culture teaching may simulate an intercultural workplace whereby students are exposed to a shared multicultural working culture.

## **Appendix: Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Questions**

1. How do you perceive culture in language teaching?
2. How do you teach culture in your EFL classes? How appropriate do you think your culture teaching approach is? Are there any constraints in your culture teaching?
3. How much time do you usually spend on culture teaching in your EFL classes? Do you think the time is adequate?
4. Are you aware of any emphasis on culture in the curriculum, educational policy, and assessment in your educational institution? If any, how is that emphasis represented?
5. Do you think the target language culture should be incorporated into EFL classes or should be taught in separate culture courses?

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# Chapter 15

## Vietnamese EFL Learners' Perspectives on Learning English Online and Employability



Ngoc Tai Huynh , Vi Truong, and Tran Le Huu Nghia 

**Abstract** Much has been written about the benefits of online learning; but few studies investigate the perceptions of learners learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) towards online learning and their employability. The current study aims to explore factors influencing foreign language learners' decisions to take English online courses and examine challenges faced by learners and the impact of experiences gained from online courses on their employability competences. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with Vietnamese learners of English who have online English language learning experiences. The obtained data were then analysed and interpreted based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis et al. in *Management Science* 35:982–1003, 1989) and Tomlinson (*Education + Training* 59(4):338–352, 2017) conceptual framework of employability. The results reveal various factors encouraging participants to select online English courses, such as time flexibility, teacher–student interaction, cost-saving, recommendation from friends, teaching materials, and teaching methods. They also face some challenges when studying English online in terms of practicality issues and professional competence of online instructors. Overall, the findings indicate positive influences of taking online English courses on various aspects of learners' employability competences.

**Keywords** English as a foreign language · Online learning · Employability competences · Vietnamese learners of English · Technology Acceptance Model

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## 15.1 Introduction

The advancement of information communications and technology (ICT) has impressively transformed our society (Niebel, 2018). In education, ICT is, and continues to be, a tool that helps to enhance the effectiveness of learning by saving time and money for both learners and educators, promoting lifelong learning and distance learning, enabling self-paced learning as well as improving the accessibility to global knowledge (Haythornthwaite et al., 2016; Munro et al., 2018). Especially, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, online education instantly becomes mainstream worldwide to maintain formal and informal educational activities (Stracke et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2021). Teaching and learning English is no exception.

In recent years, global economic integration has accelerated due to reduced trade barriers, advanced technology, and increased flow of trade, capital, investment, information, and skilled human resources. As the key language of globalisation, proficiency in English is undoubtedly crucial for the employment and career development of individuals nowadays. Indeed, the last few years have experienced tremendous growth and innovation in English language teaching and learning with the support of online technology (Pham et al., 2014). Vietnam, located at the heart of Southeast Asia, attracts foreign investment with its favourable geographic location, open foreign investment policy, political stability, extensive international integration, steady economic growth, a young and abundant workforce, and competitive labour costs (Nguyen, 2021). Intending to become a high-income country by 2045, Vietnam is now amongst the most dynamic emerging countries, with a vibrant labour market (The World Bank, 2021). In Vietnam, besides job-specific technical skills and crucial soft skills in the workplace, English language skills are highly sought after by employers (Le, 2020). However, it is repeatedly reported that Vietnamese employees possess a low English language proficiency compared with other countries in the region (Doan & Hamid, 2019; Huynh, 2020). According to a report published by the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), in 2019, for the first time since 2015, Vietnam's adult English proficiency dropped from "moderate proficiency" to "low proficiency" category. This situation is maintained until 2021 (EF English Proficiency Index, 2021). This low English proficiency level, amongst others, obviously impacts the employability of many Vietnamese employees (Doan & Hamid, 2019; Luong, 2016), especially vulnerable fresh graduates who have not accumulated much work experience and social network that can ensure their employment opportunities.

Given that more and more quality educational resources are available on the Internet nowadays, Vietnamese learners can certainly benefit from these resources, particularly English courses. This research is designed to investigate the perspectives of Vietnamese learners towards learning English online and its impacts on their employability. More specifically, we will report a qualitative study that looks into learners' experience with online English learning and the factors affecting their decision to learn English online, focusing on how this experience contributes to the development of their employability.

## 15.2 Literature Review

### 15.2.1 *English Language Proficiency and Employability*

Within 30 years, there was a rise in the global labour force from 1.2 billion in 1980 to around 2.9 billion in 2010 where most of this growth was in developing countries (Dobbs et al., 2012). In order to stand out in a highly competitive market, job seekers need to develop their employability skills as possessing only a degree is not sufficient to ensure them a competitive advantage in the job market. Generally, employability means.

a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke, 2006, p. 8)

Recent interest in employability research includes research into the nexus between English proficiency and employability as well as the value of English in employment opportunities as one of the most prevalent topics (such as Pandey & Pandey, 2014; Rao, 2019; Zainuddin et al., 2019). In non-native English speaking countries, English proficiency plays a crucial role in facilitating the employability of job applicants (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Doan & Hamid, 2019; Pandey & Pandey, 2014; Wijewardene et al., 2014). Results from a study indicated that the self-perceived employability of Information Technology graduates in Vietnam was determined by their English language skills, soft skills, adaptability skills, the quality of the training program, and job-seeking efforts (Thang & Wongsurawat, 2016). It is reported that the high unemployment rate of technical and vocational education students in Thailand, another country in the area, is due to their lack of English proficiency and communication skills (Sa-Nguanmanasak & Khampirat, 2019). Although usually known as a country with high English proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index, 2021), research in Malaysia has pointed out that lacking English proficiency is amongst the main reasons that led to the high unemployment rate amongst graduates in this country (Ting et al., 2017). The situation is similar in other non-native English speaking nations in other areas. For instance, in Oman, English has been seen as a necessary tool for advancement and the acquisition of knowledge and technology in this Arab nation (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) noted that due to petroleum engineering graduates' poor performance in English, most of them had been rejected when applying to work at the oil companies in Yemen. Erling (2015) claimed that English skills are recognised to improve a person's employability remarkably in the Middle East and North African countries because employers prefer a job applicant who can speak English well. The evidence suggests that English proficiency is a must for those who want to develop their career in an international arena nowadays.

In short, there is a link between employability and English proficiency in our increasingly globalised and internationalised world. Therefore, it is essential to equip

with an adequate level of English, especially those who are about to enter the labour market, to maximise their opportunity to be employed and thrive on the job.

### ***15.2.2 Teaching and Learning English Online***

The term online learning, first introduced in 1995 (Bates, 2014), has been used more and more frequently. Within several decades, it has been defined by many scholars and researchers. Singh and Thurman (2019, p. 302) reviewed the literature on the definitions of online learning within 30 years from 1988 to 2018 and constructed the definition of online learning as

education being delivered in an online environment through the use of the Internet for teaching and learning. This includes online learning on the part of the students that is not dependent on their physical or virtual co-location. The teaching content is delivered online and the instructors develop teaching modules that enhance learning and interactivity in the synchronous or asynchronous environment.

Synchronous learning happens when the learning sessions or tutorials occur on set schedules and time frames. In contrast, in asynchronous classes, students are flexible in completing their learning in their own time (eLearners, n.d.). When it comes to learning a language online, telecommunication applications, mainly Skype and Zoom, support very much for the learning and teaching activities. English has been dominating the internet languages for decades; by 2018, it is estimated that more than fifty per cent of all web content is in English (Bada, 2018). As most resources on the Internet are in English, these resources have thus become valuable educational materials for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to self-direct their learning (McGreal, 2017). In terms of learning resources, researchers (for example, Truong et al., 2021; Yang & Chen, 2007;) have suggested that the accessibility and availability of online resources make the advantages of learning languages online outweigh those of traditional learning. Furthermore, the diversity and high quality of resources available on the Internet can improve learners' satisfaction and performance over time (Yang & Chen, 2007). Sanders and Morrison-Shetlar (2001) claimed that ICTs encourage learners in learning foreign languages and motivate them to learn proactively and creatively. Concerning the learning environment, learners can access online resources to learn English from anywhere at any time, which will lead to their cost, time, and effort-saving (Accredited Online Training, n.d.). In addition, the flexibility of online learning is extremely beneficial for at-risk learners as it contributes to helping them from failing or dropping out of their courses (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). By engaging with online resources for their English self-studies, learners can also develop their employability capital. As explained earlier, a considerable amount of literature has been published in recent years on online learning adoption and employability; however, there is a scarcity of scholarship relating to EFL learners' perspectives on learning English online to improve employability. This study seeks to contribute to the emerging body of research about how online learning can help to improve learners' English proficiency and employability.

### 15.2.3 The Theoretical Frameworks

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis et al., 1989) and the graduate capital model (Tomlinson, 2017) are employed as the theoretical foundations for our study. More specifically, the researchers first use the Technology Acceptance Model, an information system theory developed by three of the world's most influential researchers, Fred Davis, Richard Bagozzi, and Paul Warshaw as one of the theoretical lenses to understand how participants come to accept technology in learning and how they use technology in learning English (Rawls College News, 2015). Then, Tomlinson's (2017) conceptual framework of employability is applied as a theoretical framework to explore participants' perceptions of how online learning English experiences can enhance employability.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) proposed by two professors of social psychology, Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in 1980. By replacing many of TRA's attitude measures with the two technology acceptance measures, namely ease of use, and usefulness, TAM has been extensively employed to investigate users' acceptability of information technology systems. The model proposes that when users are introduced to new technology, their decision of adopting or non-adopting the technology is influenced by two main factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Davis defined the perceived usefulness as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" and the perceived ease of use refers to "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" (Davis, 1989, p. 320). Figure 15.1 illustrates the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis et al., 1989, p. 985).

As depicted in Fig. 15.1, the actual use of a new Information Technology (IT) system is determined by the user's behavioural intention (BI), which is, on the other hand, influenced by their attitude towards the use of that system (A). According to Davis et al. (1989), the attitude towards using the system is based on the impact it may have on user's performance. Despite the hesitation in using the new system, the probability that the user will use it is high if they think that the system can improve their work performance. Moreover, the theorists proposed that the belief in the system's usefulness (U) is somewhat affected by that system's ease of use

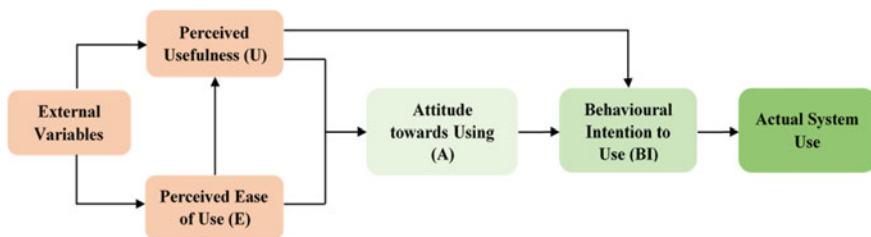


Fig. 15.1 Technology acceptance model (Adapted from Davis et al. [1989])



(E). For instance, given two different new systems with similar functions, the one that is more comfortable to use will likely be more useful to the users. Also, it is suggested by the theorists that perceived usefulness is a factor that exerts a direct influence on the behavioural intention to use the system. Other external variables such as social-cultural factors, political factors, or users' characteristics also impact users' perceived usefulness and ease of using the new technology system.

As one of the most popular theories in the Information System discipline, TAM has been studied and verified by various scholarships to understand the technology acceptance behaviour of individuals in different research contexts. The outcomes of these studies proposed changes by adding more variables to the original model or combining TAM with other models, which led to the development of many new versions of TAM such as Technology Acceptance Model 2 (TAM2) (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), Technology Acceptance Model 3 (TAM3) (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008), and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

TAM has many limitations and received much criticism despite its widespread adoption in different research constructs across time, disciplines, and population. The limitations of TAM in the online learning adoption study summarised by Islam et al. (2014) include the lack of design and implementation constructs, limited understanding of behaviour, and missing adoption outcomes. The phenomenon investigated in this study is the adoption, the decision to take up, follow, or use, and it is thus a psychological process that leads to the decision of acceptance or non-acceptance of learning English online. The researchers were acutely aware of the inherent limitations of TAM; however, we still decided to adopt the original TAM (Davis et al., 1989) as a theoretical framework for this research as the nature of the factors influencing the adoption of learning English online in this research setting fits well with the concept that the theory and model propose and cover.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the adoption of TAM (Davis et al., 1989) as a theoretical framework to understand what makes stakeholders in both developing and developed countries accept educational technologies in learning and teaching (e.g., Ding & Er, 2018; Esteban-Millat et al., 2018; Ji et al., 2019; Martinho et al., 2018; Teo et al., 2019). Šumak et al. (2011) concluded in their review paper in 2011 that TAM is the most applied theory in online learning acceptance literature. Indeed, as online learning is technology-driven and requires at least some computer skills from the user, previous research findings agree with the framework that Perceived Ease of Use of the online learning systems directly influences Perceived Usefulness and Attitude towards using those systems. Although new determinants to online learning acceptance were added by previous research, such as competitive pressure (Namisiko et al., 2014), personal innovativeness (Liu et al., 2010), or system quality (Motaghian et al., 2013), the two central antecedents from TAM: Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness remain the core of the framework (Chang et al., 2012; Elkaseh et al., 2016; Hasan, 2007; Teo et al., 2008). As the focus and context of this study are different from those reported in the literature, the original version of TAM (Davis et al., 1989) is adopted as a theoretical framework

to investigate the factors influencing Vietnamese learners' decision to learn English online.

Tomlinson's (2017) conceptual framework of employability, also called the graduate capital model, is another theoretical framework used to investigate participants' perceptions of how online learning English experiences can enhance employability. Tomlinson (2017) proposed a conceptual framework of employability with five components: human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital. Figure 15.2 presents the graduate capital model adapted from Tomlinson (2017).

Introduced and developed in 1993 by Gary Becker, an economist, human capital consists of a graduate's hard knowledge, skills, and future performance. Social capital is "the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates' existing human capital and bring them closer to the labour market and its opportunity structures" (p. 342). In other words, social capital can facilitate and assist an individual's access and awareness of labour market opportunities. Cultural capital is the "formation of culturally-valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces graduates seek to enter" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 343). This form of capital is composed of cultural knowledge, embodied behaviours, distinction and symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1977). Graduates with well-developed cultural capital will have a good understanding of the culture in their prospective workplaces.

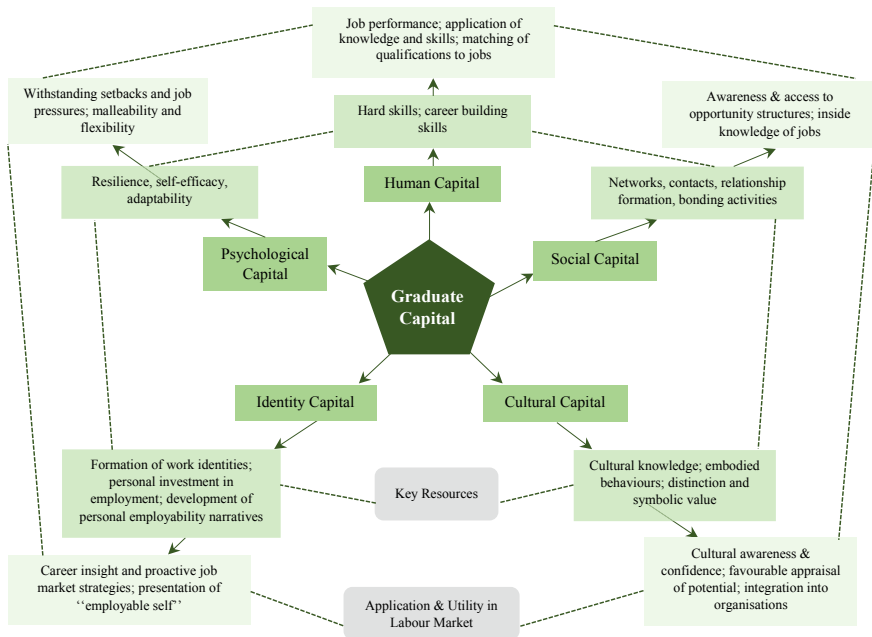


Fig. 15.2 Graduate capital model (Adapted from Tomlinson [2017])

Identity capital is “the level of personal investment graduates make towards the development of their future careers and employability” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 345). In other words, identity capital comprises the formation of work identities, personal investment in employment, and the development of personal employability narratives. The “psychosocial resources, which enable graduates to adapt and respond positively to inevitable career challenges” such as resilience and self-efficacy are considered psychological capital (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 347). Amongst the proposed employability capitals, human capital is considered by Tomlinson (2017) the core component, which consists of knowledge, skills, and future performance possessed by a graduate as it significantly affects other capitals. Within the forms of human capital such as technical expertise, career-building skills, and knowledge, communication ability is likely to be complementary to others (Mavisakalyan, 2017). Communication skills are ranked as the most or second most sought-after baseline skill by employers in all industries (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015).

Overall, the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis et al., 1989) and the graduate capital model (Tomlinson, 2017) are employed as the theoretical frameworks to design and implement this investigation. Details of this study are provided in the next section.

### 15.3 The Current Study

Whilst previous research explores the opportunities for and challenges of learning English online (such as Hidayati & Husna, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2020; Widayanti and Suarnajaya, 2021), they do not investigate the contribution of learning English online experience to students’ development of employability. To partially address this research gap, this study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. *What factors affect Vietnamese EFL learners’ decision to learn English online?*
2. *How does this online learning experience influence their employability development?*

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis et al., 1989) and Tomlinson’s conceptual framework of employability are used to design a set of open-ended interview questions and analyse collected data. Twenty EFL learners from the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam who have different backgrounds, professions as well as English competency levels were interviewed. Impressively, many of them have been learning English on the Internet for more than 10 years. Snowball sampling techniques were used, starting from participants known to the researchers. Information about the interviewed participants is provided in Table 15.1. The participants self-assessed their current English levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

This research was conducted in Vietnam in the third quarter of 2019. Before the interviews started, participants were provided with the project’s explanatory statement and required to sign the consent form. During the semi-structured interviews,

**Table 15.1** A summary of participant information

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Current English level	English learning time (years)
P01	Male	28	Driver	A1	3 years
P02	Female	16	High school student	A2	8 years
P03	Female	21	Fresh graduate in English	B2	>10 years
P04	Male	23	English–Vietnamese interpreter	B2	>10 years
P05	Male	22	Fresh graduate in English	B2	>10 years
P06	Male	29	Banker	B2	20 years
P07	Female		Television editor	B1	>10
P08	Female	23	Undergraduate student in accounting	B1	10 years
P09	Female	21	Beauty salon staff	A2	<10 years
P10	Female	22	Unemployed	A2	<10 years
P11	Female	22	Teacher (Primary level international school)	B2	>10 years
P12	Female	20	Second-year student of University of Foreign Languages	B2	>10
P13	Female	22	Fresh graduate in public finance management	B1	10 years
P14	Female	24	Graduate student in economics	A2	10 years
P15	Female	26	Postgraduate student of Hospitality	B2	>10 years
P16	Female	38	Engineer of organic vegetables	B2	>15 years
P17	Male	30	High school teacher of chemistry	B1	>10 years
P18	Male	34	Civil engineer	B1	5 years
P19	Female	33	Manager (not specified)	A1	<10 years
P20	Female	32	Sales & customer service	B2	>10 years

participants were asked to talk about their experience of learning English online and reflect on how these experiences contribute to improving their employability. Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), a type of qualitative content analysis approach was adopted to classify and analyse the collected data. The data analysis was mainly based on the two theoretical frameworks, namely the TAM (Davis et al., 1989) and Graduate capital model (Tomlinson, 2017), but where applicable, new concepts and categories were added. The findings of the investigation are presented in the following section.

## 15.4 Factors Affecting Learners' Adoption of Online English Learning

### 15.4.1 *Perceived Ease of Use*

When discussing the advantages of learning English online, time flexibility is the most popular benefit which is highly appreciated by 15 over 20 people. The participants revealed that they were able to study at any time they prefer. In addition, they were able to review the lessons of the previous class meetings. One participant who is currently working as a manager of a private company and wanted to upgrade her English competence (from A1 to A2 CEFR) highlighted that:

The first advantageous aspect of learning English online is the timetable. This means there are always slots available within 24 hours every day. Even at 1 am, I could also study English online if I want to. It is really good in terms of time flexibility. (Participant 19)

Similarly, participant 10 perceived her current English competence as at A2 and wanted to take online English courses because she did not have much time to study English at centres. Some other participants said that since they had to take courses at University in the daytime and learning online at their convenience in the evening is the best option. In terms of learning environment, eight learners also highly valued the fact that they could study at any place with an internet connection. This not only encouraged their learning attitude but also saved them time, money, and effort for commuting. These participants mentioned that they could study in their own room in a comfortable environment and they had much privacy when learning via the online mode. A sense of privacy is one of the reasons for making online learning a more comfortable environment for students. For instance, Participant 15 thought that she has more privacy when taking online courses and this makes her feel more confident, easier to communicate with online instructors, and fellow learners. This learner stated that:

One of the good things about online learning is that I have more privacy when learning. With online learning, I can study English in my own room. I feel relaxed and comfortable in comparison to the face-to-face learning environment where there are so many learners. (Participant 15)

A few pointed out that there were certain courses which allowed them to interact one on one with the tutor, which specifically enabled them to correct their common mistakes and progress further. One of them claimed that:

Foreign teachers are more comfortable in terms of psychology. If we make mistakes, they help us correct. And I don't feel ashamed when practicing speaking in English. (Participant 18)

Also, some other participants said that they feel more comfortable when asking questions with online tutors and discussing with classmates (Participants 3, 2, 11, 14, 15, 16). Several participants reported that they can even create various groups between learners when joining an online course from their own accommodation without coming to the real classrooms. This helps them to create a virtual learning environment for practicing English every day (Participants 13, 15, 16).

In addition to the better interactions between learners and teachers, when comparing online learning experiences with face-to-face learning, many participants mentioned that online learning allows them to have more chances to review vocabulary, grammatical structures whenever they have time as Participant 14 contended that:

In comparison to face-to-face learning mode, I feel that learning online helps me understand lessons better. I can review the lessons again and again if I don't understand something when learning online. However, for face-to-face learning at language centres, the chance for reviewing difficult lessons is just once. (Participant 14)

Findings from our interviews revealed that cost-saving is the second most popular advantage of online learning, with 11 people mentioning it as their favourite point. For example, Participant 3, who is a fresh graduate student in English major and wanted to upgrade his English competence, mentioned that:

One of the obvious benefits of learning English online is the low cost. I can take inexpensive and even free courses at various levels while I only need to pay for the Internet fees. (Participant 3)

Cost-saving is also the reason for participants to select online English courses. Participant 1, for instance, is working as a driver and wanted to study English for communicative purposes. He asserted that his income is not high, and he made use of internet connection to learn English with a lot of free courses and flexible schedules.

In our findings, recommendation from friends is an external factor that makes learners select online learning mode rather than registering a face-to-face course at language learning centres. For example, participant 19, who is currently working as manager recalled:

I took an online course because I was recommended by a friend. She said that it takes only about one or two courses for me to be confident in communicating in English. Therefore, I registered for an online course. (Participant 19)

In sum, flexibility (in terms of learning schedules, learning environment, interaction with instructors), cost-saving, and recommendation from friends are amongst the factors provoking learners' perceptions of the ease of use when taking online

English courses, which make them select online English courses instead of face-to-face courses. Some of these factors also contribute to learners' engagement with the knowledge taught in the lessons.

### 15.4.2 *Perceived Usefulness*

When being asked about the usefulness of online English courses, the majority of the participants admitted that teaching materials and teaching methods are the essential factors that make them consider online English courses useful for improving their English competence. Both positive and negative statements were found in participants' responses to the quality of online learning courses, which consist of teaching materials and teaching methods of online English courses.

There are various positive comments about the *teaching materials*. Most of them are mentioned by the participants in terms of qualities and quantities. Amongst these, being rich and diversified in content is the most popular praise. Below is one of the complements with respect to the suitable level of teaching materials of online courses:

I think the materials they use are quite good as I just mentioned. And they are not too many, too high in comparison with the English level of the learners. This makes us understand the content easier. (Participant 19)

Similarly, some other learners such as Participants 5 and 6 thought that the materials are more diverse, accessible, and good quality in comparison to those used in the classrooms. One participant highlighted the convenience of being able to search for the materials at any time (Participant 10). Other participant (Participant 7) offered positive comments on the quality of learning materials:

I really like the way teaching materials are developed in terms of designs. For example, there are many beautiful images and slides in each lesson. (Participant 7)

The second well-recognised feature of teaching materials is that the quality was high and practical (Participants 2, 5, 6, 11, 19, 20). Participant 2, for instance, stated that the provided materials are quite appropriate for the lessons. Other learners thought the materials provided good lessons for practicing pronunciation from beginner to advanced levels. For any word that they don't know, they can look it up in the dictionary. For some sentences they even learn by heart (Participant 1 & Participant 16). This good feature of online teaching materials makes them enjoy learning pronunciation from online resources. The content designs were highly praised by some learners (Participants 3, 7), in which Participant 3 mentioned that it was easier for her to remember the lesson thanks to lots of illustrations and beautiful images the instructors used for their lessons.

For teaching methods, more than half of the interviewed participants responded positively to the teaching methods applied by online English instructors. Firstly, the ease to interact in class was appreciated by four participants (Participants 5, 11, 15, & 16). They felt open to interacting with their classmates, and the software used by the

provider is helpful to their English pronunciation. For instance, one of these learners highlighted:

I felt comfortable when learning English online in my private room. Moreover, the provider created groups for us to talk to each other every day in English. This creates a good learning environment. The software provided by the course helped to standardize my English. (Participant 16)

In short, various factors were found to be influential in learners' perceptions of usefulness of online English courses. Amongst these factors, teaching materials and online instructors' teaching methods were reported as the decisive factors making learners feel that online English courses are useful for improving their learning of English via the Internet.

## 15.5 Challenges of Online English Learning

Besides advantages, the participants also mentioned several drawbacks of online English courses which come from three main sources: teachers, learners, and practicality issues.

The first source of challenge of online learning is related to teachers/tutors. More specifically, teaching methods used by teachers and tutors were mentioned the most by participants of this study when complaining about the disadvantages of online English courses. For example, Participant 1 thought that the lessons had no systematic flow, and this makes it hard for him to follow. This learner complained that:

The lessons have limited timelines. They are divided into too many smaller parts, without a curriculum. They are not as systematic as those taught in classrooms. (Participant 1)

Poor professional quality and class size were other weak points of online English courses. Some learners complained about teachers' English competence that:

There are both good and bad online teachers in terms of their professional skills. Some teachers taught us the wrong content (something not certified). For instance, one teacher who is not an American or English native teacher uploaded a video about pronunciation on YouTube. There were some words pronounced wrongly in this video. (Participant 4)

Some other learners were not happy because the courses had too many students, making the tutor unable to correct the mistakes of each individually as Participant 19 complained:

The tutor didn't have much time to correct our tasks. He just wrapped up the lesson of the day. There were about 5 to 6 learners in each lesson whereas there was only one tutor. (Participant 19).

The lack of face-to-face interactions was identified as another major challenge for online English courses. More than half of participants said that they were not able to clarify their concerns during the course because they did not have a chance to talk directly to the tutors. Participant 20 complained that the effectiveness of online



learning is not perfect since this mode of learning can only satisfy part of learners' demands. This learner said:

Because there was no direct interaction with teachers and tutors, I wasn't corrected for mistakes in pronunciation effectively when in need. Moreover, I couldn't immediately ask more questions about what I don't understand relating to the lessons. (Participant 20)

The second challenge of online English courses comes from the learners themselves. In particular, the lack of learners' self-discipline was the runner-up in terms of factors causing challenges to online English courses. This issue was perceived and admitted by 12 over 20 people. Since there were not any strict disciplines, learners either had no motivation to attend the class or were distracted by unwanted types of online entertainment. Most of the participants claimed that this is one of the key factors making them give up learning online courses. One of them, Participant 7 addressed this issue:

At first, I had a very strong motivation, then this motivation became gradually low because there was no one encouraging me. It seemed that I needed someone to inspire and encourage me to go on with the learning process to achieve my goals. (Participant 7)

Another participant reported that it is easy for her to quit the online lessons since there is no requirement for attendance of learners (Participant 10). Therefore, it can be suggested that the easy-going nature of online English courses can bring about both the strength and weakness of this learning mode. Whereas the lack of discipline can make learners feel relaxed, comfortable without being forced to attend online courses as strictly as those in the classrooms, this can also demotivate learners.

The third major source of challenges for online English courses comes from practicality issues. One of them is the technical process when taking an online English course. Participants said that some online learning platforms are quite difficult for them to stay focused. Participant 3 provided further explanation:

It is easy for me to be distracted when searching for online learning materials, especially when I use YouTube to search for online learning videos. There are too many videos available, and I have to try my best to overcome my habits of using entraining videos while learning. (Participant 3)

Three learners (Participants 4, 9, & 12) complained about the user-friendliness of online materials. Some of the learners said it was harder to read online than to scan through a book, and they felt it troublesome when they had to install software to do homework (Participants 4, 12).

In sum, issues associated with teachers, learners, and practicality were identified by participants of our study. These problems come from either the online English course providers in terms of professional competence of their instructors or the ways online courses are organised.

## 15.6 The Contribution of Online English Learning to Students' Employability

Overall, regarding the effectiveness of learning English online, most students stated that online learning was an effective method (15 out of 20 participants). Based on Tomlinson's (2017) conceptual framework of employability, the participants' perceived positive contribution of online English learning to their employability was categorised in terms of human capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, and identity capital.

### 15.6.1 Contribution to Students' Human Capital

With regard to the positive influences of online English learning to human capital, many participants believed that learning English online has helped them work effectively. In particular, seven students could apply what they learned into daily life and professional activities. For example, Participant 7 is working as an editor of a TV channel and she confirmed that she could make use of English language channels to expand knowledge in various fields. This participant said that she could use her English knowledge to search for relevant information when writing news and searching for cultural knowledge when making programmes about international cultures. This participant highlighted that:

There are many programs which require me to read the original contents in English then make the news in Vietnamese. The world news, for instance, if I didn't improve my English via online courses, I would have to use Google translation and other translation tools. This consumes much of my time. However, since I learnt English online, my English skills support me very much in these tasks. (Participant 7)

Similarly, Participant 12 who is working as a teacher of an international kindergarten centre confirmed that the skills that she learnt from online English courses help her teach more effectively. This participant asserted that:

Thanks to the online English courses, I have the skills of evaluating the information and teaching methods of native speakers. Then, I apply them in my work as a teacher. Moreover, I learned from the teaching methods of American teachers which have a clear focus, logic to help my students understand the lessons more easily. These sources of knowledge have orientated my teaching methods as well. (Participant 12)

The above findings indicate that online learning English offers learners with opportunities to enhance their professional skills and knowledge. They could directly apply the knowledge gained through online English courses to enhance the effectiveness and productivity of their jobs. This is supported by the fact that the majority of the participants said that better English communication skills helped them gain more respect from their customers or colleagues. They could enhance their knowledge about foreign cultures and could sometimes talk to their foreign customers more

easily. In particular, amongst 20 online learners taking part in the interviews, six people (Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, & 11) admitted that online learning significantly supported their employability. More specifically, Participant 1 is working as a driver and he said that:

Now I can communicate with foreign customers in English when I deliver goods to them. This helps me earn respect from my colleagues and customers. (Participant 1)

Although being a high school student, Participant 2 is more satisfied with cultural knowledge when learning online English courses. This participant strongly believes that such knowledge will be helpful when applying for a job in a foreign company or communicating with foreigners. Besides, good English proficiency also creates a good impression with potential employers, hence improving their career prospects. Eleven people believed that online learning somehow supported their career development and that they can have more opportunities to be promoted to a higher position.

### ***15.6.2 Contribution to Students' Cultural Capital***

In terms of cultural capital, most of the participants admitted that online English courses enrich their knowledge of other countries. This enables them to communicate with foreign customers more effectively. For instance, Participant 5 believed that being able to use English would be essential for her job especially when working with people from other countries. This participant explained that:

Learning English online helps me keep using English after finishing high school. Especially when I have to communicate with international customers, and English is very necessary in these situations. (Participant 5)

Also, Participant 1 shared that by taking online English courses, he was able to communicate with various international customers. This participant said:

Now I can communicate with foreign customers in English when I deliver goods to them. This helps me earn respect from my colleagues and customers. (Participant 1)

### ***15.6.3 Contribution to Students' Psychological Capital***

With respect to psychological capital, most of the participants asserted that good English proficiency also created a good impression with potential employers, hence improving their career prospects. Eleven people believed that the knowledge of English language and cultures of other countries somehow supported their career development and that they could have more opportunity to be promoted to a higher position. Participant 2, for instance, although being a high school student, she is more satisfied with cultural knowledge of other countries when learning online English courses. This participant claimed that:

I strongly believe that the intercultural knowledge I gain from such courses will be helpful when applying for a job in a foreign company or communicating with foreigners. (Participant 2)

### ***15.6.4 Contribution to Students' Identity Capital***

In terms of identity capital, our findings indicate a positive contribution of online English courses to learners' professional identity as well. More specifically, learners become more open-minded and they value the differences in the profession. For example, Participant 3 believed that online English courses help her become a more flexible teacher in terms of using appropriate teaching methods. This participant highlighted:

As a teacher, taking online English courses for professional development like those helped me to become more open-minded and flexible in my teaching methods. I had chances to learn about and adapt up-to-date teaching methods. For instance, I am interested in using Learner-centered education to encourage students to develop their abilities instead of using traditional methods of Teacher-centered education which lack interactions between teachers and students. (Participant 3)

Additionally, possessing better English communication skills after taking online courses helped participants gain more respect from their customers or colleagues. In particular, Participant 1 is working as a driver and he stated that:

Now I can communicate with foreign customers in English when I deliver goods to them. This helps me earn respect from my colleagues and customers. (Participant 1)

However, three participants confessed that they found online learning had not much impact on their employability because what they learned was far different from their profession, thus they could not apply to their daily job (Participants 13, 17, 19). Participant 19, for instance, admitted that the language knowledge she learnt from online course is not directly applicable to her profession as a manager:

There is no connection between what I learnt and my current job. I only learn English online to be more confident in case I meet a foreigner so that I can communicate with them. Or I can use my knowledge of English to help my children at home with their lessons. (Participant 19)

Similarly, Participants 12 (a fresh graduate) and 17 (a teacher of Chemistry) thought that they still haven't applied much the English skills they learnt from online courses in their jobs although they learnt a bit about foreign cultures through these courses.

To sum up, by analysing interview data obtained from our conversations with 20 Vietnamese EFL learners, various factors influencing their perceptions of online English learning were identified. Also, the relationship between taking online English courses and learners' employability was also revealed. In the following section, we will discuss the significance of our findings as well as implications for stakeholders.

## 15.7 Discussions and Conclusion

The significant driver of this chapter is to explore Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions about online English learning by means of the Internet and its impacts on learners' employability. This section will discuss findings of these research aims and provide implications for future research on online English learning and teaching, for learners of English who wish to take online courses, and for employers who wish to improve their employees' professional competence via developing English competence.

With respect to findings, several significant findings were identified through our analysis of participants' responses. For the first research question, our findings revealed major factors propelling learners towards studying English online. These factors were categorised in two major groups, namely *perceived ease of use* and *perceived usefulness*. Amongst them, flexibility (in terms of schedules, learning environments and forms of interactions), rich learning resources and well-designed lessons, effective teaching methods and cost-saving were reported as the most significant factors influencing learners' choices of online studying courses. However, the interview data revealed that there are also factors causing learners' dissatisfaction when taking online courses such as teachers' poor professional skills and knowledge, low-quality teaching materials, learners' self-discipline, and technical issues. These findings are aligned with other studies related to the implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Efriana, 2021; Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020). Demuyakor (2020), for instance, asserted that course contents, teaching materials and teachers' professional skills are decisive factors for successful and effective online learning.

One of our findings which is different from that of previous studies on the usefulness of online learning is in terms of learners' self-discipline. More precisely, unlike recent researchers who found that ICTs can motivate students to learn proactively and creatively (Azmi, 2017; Yang & Chen, 2007), in this chapter, however, most of the participants revealed that the longer they take an online learning course, the less motivated they become. The reasons for such a decrease in learners' motivation are distractions caused by other resources available on the Internet such as music, movies, news, and so on. Moreover, there are no strict rules established by the instructors of online English courses. This also makes learners feel less motivated after a few weeks of learning English online. Additionally, we found that poor performance of online tutors is another source making learners feel demotivated. Learners who participated in our study stated that they felt as if their tutors just wanted to get the lessons completed as quickly as possible whereas they need their tutors to be someone who can inspire them on the journey of learning a foreign language.

For the second research aim, findings of this chapter are aligned with previous studies on the usefulness of ICTs for employability (Aini et al., 2021; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Thang & Wongsurawat, 2016; Vu et al., 2022). More specifically, the majority of participants find learning English online more effective than other modes of learning since it brings about positive impacts on learners' employability.

In particular, favourable results from taking online English enable the participants to perform better in their profession in terms of human capital, psychological capital, cultural capital, and identity capital. Many of the participants in our study admitted that learning online is an appropriate mode for them to maintain lifelong learning and promote professional development. Most of the participants found that the knowledge acquired from their online courses are especially helpful to expand their knowledge since they can use English to search for information on the Internet, to successfully communicate with clients in their jobs and to earn respect from colleagues when showing that they can speak English with foreigners.

Findings from our studies indicate that online learning has a lot of potential benefits for learners of English in particular, and for foreign language educators, employers, and online education providers in general. Therefore, it is very likely that online learning will become one of the most efficient and popular tools for foreign language education in the near future. More importantly, during the uncertain time of COVID-19 pandemic when the world has to practice social distancing, it seems that online English learning is an ideal tool for the teaching and learning of English (Demuyakor, 2020). Thus, there is an urgent need to make online English learning become a convenient and helpful tool for learners to use. For this goal to be achieved, online English teachers should have an awareness of the promising future of online English learning and a profound understanding of learners' perceptions on this teaching tool. Based on such an understanding, teachers of English should continuously develop their professional skills and knowledge associated with teaching English online so as to deliver the most efficient and interesting lessons possible when teaching English online. As for learners, they also need to be informed about the benefits alongside the challenges of learning English online. As pointed out in our findings, when learners possess practical skills of the English language through online English courses, they have more opportunities to stand out in the labour market. Therefore, learners of English should also be aware of the potential benefits of online English language learning which may either support their current careers or provide them with chances to secure a better job in the future. Once learners have a better understanding about the crucial role of the English language in their employability, they will become more engaged and more self-disciplined when learning English online. For course designers or online English providers, they should develop online English courses that have a focus on helping learners to achieve practical linguistic skills which can be applied in various professional and social situations. It should be noticed that most learners selected online courses in hope to turn the English language knowledge into their soft skills which enable learners to seize the opportunity of work promotion or to further their professional skills and knowledge. This means that learners do not expect to take online English courses as a mode of entertainment or merely to gain knowledge about an extra language.

In sum, this chapter was set out with aims of investigating Vietnamese EFL's perceptions of learning English online and the influences of learning English online on their employability. Although there exist issues in taking online courses, the overall finding was that learning English online appears to be an ideal choice for

adult learners of English in Vietnamese especially those who are already having a job and want to improve their professional knowledge by means of developing their English competence. One limitation of this study was the relatively small samples of participants (20 participants) who have various backgrounds in terms of ages, genders, educations, and jobs. Therefore, future studies should have a larger sample of participants to have more representative data.

The findings reported in this study are significant in the context of Vietnam where the high English competence of prospects and current staff is highly demanded by employers. However, it is repeatedly reported that Vietnamese employees possess a low level of English language proficiency. As reported, findings from our study indicate positive impacts of learning English online on learners' English competence and employability. This means this mode of learning and teaching English should be considered by Vietnamese learners and employers, especially in the time of global pandemic when the practice of social distances is required to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, for this mode of learning to have ultimate results, all reported challenges should be addressed by course providers, teachers, and learners.

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**Part IV**  
**English Language Education for Graduate**  
**Employability: What's Next?**

# Chapter 16

## Repositioning and Modifying the Contemporary Approach to English Language Education for Vietnamese Graduate Employability Enhancement



Tran Le Huu Nghia , Mai Tuyet Ngo , and Ly Thi Tran 

**Abstract** This chapter summarizes the main findings of the previous chapters to tease out the key messages of the whole book project. We note down the contribution of English language education to the development of Vietnamese students' employability and its influence on their career prospects. We also provide a clearer picture of how English language education has been conducted in Vietnamese higher education institutions, amidst the vigorous English language teaching and learning reforms in the country. Identifying the limitations of English language education in preparing students for the world of work, we argue that there is a pressing need to consider changing the approach to English language education, focusing more on the use of the language at the workplace and moving away from testing students' acquisition of linguistic abilities or introducing cultural snap-shot of English speaking countries. Extending Kumaravadivelu's (*Beyond methods*, Yale University Press, 2003) macro-strategic framework, we propose a new approach to English language teaching and learning that can better foster the development of Vietnamese graduates' employability.

**Keywords** English language education · New approach to English language education · Vietnamese higher education institutions · Macro-strategic framework · Graduates' employability

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## 16.1 Introduction

This book aims to explore stakeholders' perspectives about the role of English language education in enhancing graduates' employability and their experiences with the current practices of English language education in Vietnam, with a focus on its preparation of students for work. As presented in the previous chapters, we found a positive relationship between English language education and students' development of graduate employability as well as some evidence of its contribution to Vietnamese graduates' employment and career outcomes. We also identified a couple of issues that are hindering the effectiveness of English language education in the country in focus—Vietnam. In this chapter, we will summarize the main findings of this book project and propose a new approach to English language education to make it more effective in regard to preparing students for work and life; this proposed approach can be applicable in Vietnam and beyond.

## 16.2 English Language Education and Its Impact on Graduates' Employability Development and Outcomes

In Part II of this book, we presented five empirical studies that looked into how students' employability capital can be developed via learning English. Drawing on students' and graduates' perspectives, we found that English language education generally fosters the growth of students' employability capital. According to Tomlinson (2017), employability capitals include human capital (technical knowledge and skills, soft skills, accrual work experiences), social capital (social network within and beyond a work sector), cultural capital (knowledge about how an industry works), psychological capital (attributes that help graduates to be more agile in their career development), and identity capital (a sense of belonging to an industry, professional field or work role).

In Chapter 5, the authors examine how English language education assists with students' development of general knowledge and skills, as part of human capital, necessary for their future employment in the fields of Hospitality and Tourism and Information Technology graduates. Using data collected from 16 interviews and a survey with 200 students/graduates, the authors show that English language education enhances students' access to the latest learning resources in English, contributing to advancing their professional knowledge and skills. English language education also helps develop their communication, work-related and people skills. Based on such evidence, the authors conclude that English language education can greatly help develop human capital for students.

In Chapter 6, the authors report a mixed method case study about how different forms of English language education foster the development of social relationships

that can enhance employability, using the experiences of undergraduates and graduates of Information Technology and Tourism Management. The results showed that formal English language education received the highest rate of participation amongst participants. However, non-formal and informal English language education was reported to assist them with developing social relationships. Likewise, social relationships established from English learning activities outside the formal system were found to contribute to graduate employability more than that of the formal one.

The study reported in Chapter 7 investigates the development of cultural capital through learning English language and how such cultural capital contributes to English language learners' employability. Using semi-structured interviews with 11 participants from eight academic disciplines, the authors found that cultural capital could be developed through formal, non-formal, and informal forms of English language learning. They also found that cultural capital also fosters the growth of human, social, psychological, and career identity capital.

Some personal attributes and soft skills such as self-efficacy, adaptability, resilience, and flexibility are considered psychological capital by Tomlinson (2017). They help graduates adapt and respond proactively to career challenges. Chapter 8 explores how English language education contributes to the development of students' soft skills and personal attributes. Using 30 small focus groups with students, the author found that amongst the thirty-two listed soft skills and attributes, oral communication, self-efficacy/confidence, teamwork ability, problem-solving skills, proactiveness, and information management skills were voted as the most developed via English language education. This study also found that different types of classroom tasks and a certain kind of extra-curricular activities—such as the English speaking club—contributed to undergraduates' development of particular soft skills and personal attributes.

Finally, in Chapter 9, the authors explore how career identity can be developed via learning English. Using a narrative research design, the authors interviewed two preservice teachers of English to explore the research issue. The study identified the preservice teachers' levels of investment made towards English language learning, abilities to draw on English language learning experiences to articulate a narrative of career identity, and self-concepts relating to their future role as teachers of English. These findings show that the participants' longitudinal English language learning experiences essentially contribute to the development of their identity capital, which they could use to develop and project themselves as employable graduate teachers.

As such, our book confirms previous studies about the contribution of English language education to the development of human capital (Aclan et al., 2016; Doan & Hamid, 2019; Kostikova et al., 2021; Tevdovska, 2015), and career identity (Gao et al., 2015; Yihong et al., 2005). It further provides empirical evidence about the connections between learning English and the development of social networks, understanding of work culture, and the growth of psychological attributes and personal qualities. Such findings are distinctive contribution of our book project as there have virtually been no studies about such connections. Future studies, conducted in different contexts, need to continue to explore and measure the contribution of



English language education to students' development of different types of employability capital so that our insights in these respects can be confirmed with adequate evidence.

### **16.3 Current Challenges of English Language Education in Vietnam**

In Part III of this book, we presented six empirical studies that explored the effectiveness of different English courses in terms of developing graduate employability. Whilst these studies suggest some positive results, they also identified several inhibitors to English language education in the current context of Vietnamese higher education.

Both Chapters 10 and 11 investigate the effectiveness of General English courses offered in Vietnamese universities, with a focus on how it contributes to students'/ graduates' employability. In Chapter 10, the authors obtained the feedback of the currently-employed graduates on their experiences with the General English courses and how such courses benefited their work performance. The analysis revealed that overall the employees found that the English courses equipped them with good English knowledge and skills that could support their communication at work. However, in their views, several aspects of the English courses could be further improved to better prepare students for the world of work: (i) theory-based curriculum, (ii) unauthenticity of teaching activities, learning materials, and assessment tasks, (iii) a lack of ongoing feedback from using formative assessment so that students can improve their weaknesses, and (iv) students' inability to self-regulate their learning. The authors discuss measures to improve such inhibitors so that the General English courses offered by Vietnamese universities can be more effective in preparing their students' English skills for employability.

In Chapter 11, the authors report a case study about teachers' perspectives on (i) the effectiveness of a General English program in a Vietnamese university with regard to enhancing students' employability and (ii) factors influencing the effectiveness of the program. The authors found that in teachers' perspectives, the General English program helped strengthen students' employability mainly through the development of English receptive skills, soft skills, and intercultural competence. They found that (i) students' motivation and shyness, (ii) teachers' English proficiency, teaching quality, and commitment, and (iii) administration and management issues inhibited the effectiveness of the program.

Chapter 12 moves forward to investigate the effectiveness of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs offered in Vietnamese higher education institutions. The study reported in this chapter used graduates' self-reflected experiences to examine the contribution of ESP courses to Vietnamese graduates' employability. The analysis showed that these ESP courses contributed to the development of specialized English language, knowledge, and generic skills that enhance graduates' employability. The

authors also identified limitations of ESP courses in terms of the course designs and teaching practices.

Chapter 13 explores the implementation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), one of whose purposes is to enhance graduates' employment prospects, in Vietnamese universities. Using the experiences of teachers and current students, the authors found that for teachers, the program required them to possess a good command of English and innovative pedagogical skills that they are unfamiliar with, resulting in lowered teaching quality. Students faced difficulties in understanding the lessons and learning tensions most likely caused by the language barriers, long-standing question-suppressing teaching culture, and mismatches between academic expectations and students' dependent learning habits. These issues, in turn, appeared to hinder the development of students' employability. The good news was that the authors found that the situation improved from the first to the final year, with students being extensively exposed to English and constantly exercising their personal agency to improve their English and enrich their learning.

Chapter 14 explores teacher perceptions and practices of culture teaching in English classes at a Vietnamese university. Data for the study were collected from classroom observations and interviews with fourteen teachers of English language in a Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that although the participants were aware of the inextricable relationship between language and culture, their perceptions of culture teaching centred around topical dependence, priority of language over culture in language teaching, inadequate exposure to culture in language courses, and other constraints on culture teaching. Their teaching practices were dictated by traditional approaches to culture teaching, which focused on cultural knowledge about English speaking countries.

In this increasingly digitalized world, it is insufficient to investigate English language education without taking into account online English courses. These courses are often taken out of the formal English language education offered by Vietnamese higher education institutions. Chapter 15 reports a study that explored factors influencing foreign language learners' decision to take English online courses, challenges associated with pursuing online learning, and the impact of such learning experiences on their employability. The authors used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 20 Vietnamese online learners of English. The authors found several factors encouraging participants to select online English courses, including time flexibility, teacher–student interaction, cost-saving, recommendations from friends, teaching and learning materials, and teaching methods. They also identified issues encountered by learners when taking these online English courses in terms of practicality issues and professional competence of online instructors.

As such, stakeholders involved in this book project confirmed that the current English language education in Vietnam, mostly at the higher education level, enhanced the development of students' employability capital and graduates' work-readiness to some extents. They also helped identify different blockages of the effectiveness of such English language education. These include management and administrative practices as well as issues associated with curriculum design and content. These issues have been identified in previous studies (e.g., Nhung et al., 2020; Tran,

2018a), and yet they have not been adequately addressed. In addition, several student-related factors also inhibited English language education from effectively equipping them with capital for their employment and career prospects. The most critical issue from the student part is their dependent learning behaviours and inability to self-direct their learning, which have been a concern in the process of English language education reforms in Vietnam (Dang, 2010; Ton & Pham, 2010; Tran & Tran, 2020a, 2020b; Tran et al., 2014). Most importantly, six studies in Part II of this book consistently revealed that the main obstacle of English language education in Vietnam is related to teachers, with their perspectives and beliefs towards an appropriate way to teach English, the particular pedagogical practices they adopt, their commitment to teaching, and their teaching experiences. Such teacher-related factors can be associated with some practicality issues that their institutions fail to afford, such as large class sizes, time constraints due to inadequate time allocated to each English class, a lack of teaching–learning resources, a heavy teaching workload, insufficient teacher professional development, etc. (Le, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nhung, 2019). In short, it is important to tackle these challenges so that English language education reforms in Vietnam can progress and better help develop employability for students, contributing to their employment and career outcomes.

## **16.4 Introducing a New Approach to English Language Education: A Macro-Strategic Framework**

The previous two sections have summarized the main findings reported in the previous chapters. Whilst stakeholders pointed a positive relationship between English language learning and graduate employability, they suggested that the current English language programs in Vietnamese higher education have failed to prepare their students for employability and employment purposes. This highlights the urgent need for English language educators in the Vietnamese higher education context to search for new teaching practices, taking into account the role of English as a key component in enhancing graduate employability, not solely for linguistic or cultural understanding. This section will propose a new approach to English language education. It will start with a comparison between the traditional and contemporary pedagogical approaches to English language education, and then introduce the macro-strategic framework for English language teaching for employability (Kumaravadevelu, 2003). It is then followed by some ideas about how to make good use of learning opportunities beyond the classroom-based activities.

### 16.4.1 *Traditional vs. Contemporary Pedagogical Approaches*

From a broad perspective, English language teacher educators and teachers themselves should balance traditional teaching and learning approaches and the contemporary ones, based on the demands of the Twenty-First Century (Triling & Fadel, 2009). To strike such a balance, Triling and Fadel (2009) represent two ends of a continuum between more traditional versus more contemporary pedagogical approaches. From the traditional end, pedagogical approaches focus much on the teacher's role, seeing the learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, theory, and basic skills. Knowledge is defined as students' knowledge of facts and principles. In terms of design, a course is curriculum-based with fixed time allocation and one-size-fits-all. The course is often delivered inside a classroom where students interact with the text as the learning materials and use competing amongst students are used as learning motivations. Traditional approaches often place much importance on summative tests at the end of the course; thus, it serves students' learning for school purposes only. On the other end, contemporary pedagogical approaches promote the role of the learner in their learning processes. They emphasize practice and prepare students for life, and as such, learning outcomes focus much on skills, the ability to apply the skills, and competence development. Courses are personalized to the needs of the students. They are project-based and delivered on demand instead of fixed, placing importance on student collaboration. Courses are often designed to allow learning to occur in the global community. They may also expand to the virtual world, where students can work on web-based content. Various formative assessment forms are used in the course for the learners to identify and improve weaknesses. Commenting on these two ends, Triling and Fadel (2009) noted, "Clearly it will take the best from the entire range of learning practices represented to successfully prepare our students for their [employability] future, with the approaches on the right side of the chart becoming more and more important as we move through our century" (p. 40).

With specific reference to pedagogical approaches to English language teaching and learning, in a recently published book titled *Contemporary Foundations for Teaching English as an Additional Language: Pedagogical Approaches and Classroom Applications*, Vinogradova and Shin (2020) asserted that approaches to teaching and learning English are not binary categorizations. They pointed out the global shift from the one-size-fits-all, knowledge-based and text-based approaches (the hallmark of traditional approaches) to more contemporary ones that put English language learners, the English skills, and web-based learning at the centre of our educational goals. In light of this, new practices for English language education in the Vietnamese higher education contexts need to consider this global shift and incorporate all the increasingly important characteristics of the contemporary approaches to teaching and learning (Triling & Fadel, 2009). However, it does not mean that traditional approaches should be avoided at all costs, but they can be used in appropriate situations and when they suit learners' needs.

### ***16.4.2 A Method(s) or a Pedagogical Framework for English Language Classroom Applications***

A review of the literature on how to teach English in actual classrooms indicates that there has been a debate with contrasting views over which “method” is the best to teach English for more than half of a century. In 1990, Prabhu wrote an influential paper called “*There is no best method - why?*”, and in the following year, Allwright published another called “*The Death of Method*”. In an attempt to summarize methods of English language teaching, Thornbury (2017), an internationally recognized academic and teacher trainer in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) published a book on *30 Methods of Language Teaching* in 2017. These 30 methods are grouped into five categories, namely, natural methods, linguistic methods, communicative methods, visionaries, and self-study methods. In terms of what happens in actual classrooms, according to Thornbury (2017, p. ix), language teachers “seem to be aware of both the usefulness of methods and the need to go beyond them”. Thornbury (2017) commented that though most training courses and methodology texts include a section on “the history of methods” and this typically takes the form of a “modernist” narrative, i.e., one of uninterrupted progress from “darkness into light”, language teaching methods not only co-exist, often for long periods of time, but also are continuously re-invented out of the same basic ingredients.

To reinvent new practices of teaching and learning in actual classrooms, it is essential for English language teachers, both novice and experienced ones in Vietnam, to be aware of and equipped with a systematic framework of the basic ingredients. With this in mind, rather than advocating for a particular “method” or “methods”, this book follows Kumaravadivelu (2003), a seminal researcher in the field of English language teacher education, who highlights a need for a *macro-strategic* framework in English language education. This framework can enable English language teachers to develop the knowledge, skill, attitudes, and autonomy necessary to devise for themselves a systematic, coherent, and relevant personal theory of English language teaching practice for employability.

### ***16.4.3 A Macro-Strategic Framework for English Language Education***

Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) macro-strategic framework is an alternative to method where language teachers have complete autonomy to choose and develop teaching strategies suitable for their classroom with the guidance of principled pragmatism. The macro-strategic framework for English language teaching consists of macro-strategies and micro-strategies. A macro-strategy, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003), is a general plan, or a broad guideline based on which teachers will be able to generate their own situation-specific, need-based micro-strategies or classroom techniques. Macro-strategies are defined as guiding principles derived from

historical, theoretical, empirical, and experiential insights grounded in L2 classroom-oriented research and are made operational in the classroom through micro-strategies (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006). In other words, macro-strategies in Kumaravadivelu's proposed framework serve as the basic ingredients for language teachers to develop their own classroom teaching techniques as they see fit for their own classrooms.

The macro-strategic framework, as Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 43) puts it, "seeks to transform classroom practitioners into strategic thinkers, strategic teachers, and strategic explorers who are recommended channelling their time and effort in order to:

- Reflect on the specific needs, wants, situations, and processes of learning and teaching;
- Stretch their knowledge, skill, and attitude to stay informed and involved;
- Design and use appropriate micro-strategies to maximize learning potential in the classroom; and
- Monitor and evaluate their ability to react to myriad situations in meaningful ways".

It includes ten macro-strategies:

1. Maximizing learning opportunities both inside and outside the language classroom
2. Minimizing perceptual mismatches between the learners' interpretations, teachers', and teacher educators' intentions
3. Facilitating negotiated interactions
4. Promoting learner autonomy
5. Fostering general and critical language awareness
6. Activating intuitive heuristics
7. Contextualizing linguistic input
8. Integrating language skills
9. Ensuring social relevance
10. Raising cultural consciousness

Along with the ten macro-strategies, this framework is founded on the three parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility, which "constitute the operating principles that can guide practicing teachers in their efforts to construct their own situation-specific pedagogic knowledge in the emerging post-method era" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 40). These three parameters make the macro-strategic framework a three-dimensional one. Each of these three parameters will be discussed below.

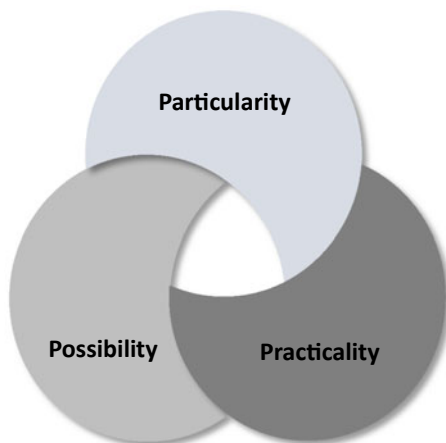
- *The parameter of particularity*: It requires that any language pedagogy, to be relevant, must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a set of specific goals within an institutional context. This parameter of particularity then is opposed to the notion that there can be an established method with a generic set of theoretical principles and a generic set of classroom practices. It starts with practicing teachers, either individually or collectively, observing their teaching acts, evaluating their outcomes, identifying

problems, finding solutions, and trying them out to see once again what works and what doesn't in particular contexts. Such a continual cycle of observation, reflection, and action is a prerequisite for the development of context-sensitive pedagogic theory and practice of English language teaching for employability. Following the requirement of the parameter of particularity, English language teachers in Vietnam need to develop their ability to be sensitive to the local Vietnamese educational, institutional, and social contexts in which English language learning and teaching take place.

- *The parameter of practicality*: It relates to a much larger issue that directly impacts on the practice of classroom teaching, namely, the relationship between theory and practice. The parameter of practicality entails a teacher-generated theory of practice and recognizes that no theory of practice can be fully useful and usable unless it is generated through practice. The intellectual exercise of attempting to derive a theory of practice enables teachers to understand and identify problems, analyse and assess information, consider and evaluate alternatives, and then choose the best available alternative that is then subjected to further critical appraisal. In this sense, a theory of practice involves language teachers' continual reflection and action, together with their insights and intuitions. The parameter of practicality, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 36), requires that teachers view pedagogy not merely as a mechanism for maximizing learning opportunities in the classroom but also as a means for understanding and transforming possibilities inside and outside the classroom. Following the requirement of the parameter of particularity, English language teachers in Vietnam need to develop abilities to reflect and embark on continuous reflection on their classroom teaching practices.
- *The parameter of possibility*: It is derived mainly from the works of critical pedagogists who take the position that any pedagogy is implicated in relations of power and dominance, and is implemented to create and sustain social inequalities. They call for recognition of learners' and teachers' subject-positions, that is, their class, race, gender, and ethnicity, and for sensitivity towards their impact on education. In the process of sensitizing itself to the prevailing socio-political reality, the parameter of possibility is also concerned with individual identity.

One way to conceptualize this macro-strategic framework is to look at it three-dimensionally as a pedagogy of particularity, practicality, and possibility. The parameter of particularity seeks to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities. The parameter of practicality seeks to enable and encourage teachers to theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize. The parameter of possibility seeks to tap the socio-political consciousness that participants bring with them to the classroom so that it can also function as a catalyst for a continual quest for identity formation and social transformation. Inevitably, the boundaries of the particular, the practical, and the possible are blurred. As Fig. 16.1 shows, the characteristics of these parameters overlap. Each one shapes and is shaped by the other. According to Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003), they interweave and interact with each other in a synergic relationship where the whole is

**Fig. 16.1** Parameters of a macro-strategic framework  
(Adapted from Kumaravadivelu [2003])



greater than the sum of its parts. The result of such a relationship will vary from context to context, depending on what the teachers bring to bear on it.

This macro-strategic framework is “a set of tools” to be creatively used to develop English language teachers’ own theory of teaching practice and has its strengths. Institutions and teachers can be used it as a checklist to critically review the current practices of English language teaching and learning in a particular context to see which macro-strategies are being well implemented and which ones are missing or not doing well. One strength of adopting these macro-strategies is language teachers’ and learners’ collaborative roles in the actual classroom, which are of importance for building social capitals. Another strength is that this framework seeks to inform English language classroom teachers’ day-to-day teaching, providing them with a possible support mechanism, which can “be used by teachers to self-observe, self-analyse, and self-evaluate their own teaching acts” to “begin to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 43). In addition, to actualize this framework, language teachers can use the ten suggested macro-strategies to design their own situated micro-strategies. Such a strategic activity, if carried out seriously and systematically, has the potential to transform teachers into strategic thinkers, teachers and explorers. Whilst the purpose of such a framework is to help teachers become autonomous decision-makers, it should, without denying the value of individual autonomy, provide adequate conceptual underpinnings based on current rhetorical, empirical, and experiential insights so that their teaching act may come about in a principled action. Last but not least, through the use of the framework, developing graduates’ English language proficiency to effectively communicate, engage, and perform in a globalized and multilingual world, has intersected with all the five kinds of human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity capitals which, as the previous chapters reveal, are essential for employability.

However, this macro-strategic framework does present challenges for English language teachers and teacher educators as many of them might not be well equipped



with knowledge and skills needed to use these ten macro-strategies to design their own situated framework and to meet the three parameters of practicality, particularity, and possibility. Thus, this highlights the need for Vietnamese teacher education universities to revisit and re-evaluate their current English language teacher education practices. They should take into account the role of macro-strategy applications in actual English language classrooms as a key component in equipping preservice English language teachers with the needed skills, expertise, and capacity to assist their future students with the development of employability capital, not solely for linguistic, cultural, or methodological understanding.

## 16.5 Applying the Macro-Strategic Framework for English Language Education in Vietnam

Kumaravadivelu's (2003) macro-strategic framework, with ten macro-strategies, is useful for implementing English language education in Vietnamese universities in regard to developing employability capital for students. It can be a reference point, not for teachers but also for institutional leaders, students, and other stakeholders in the process of reforming English language education for enhancing students'/ graduates' employability.

### 16.5.1 Teacher Roles

It is essential for English language teachers in Vietnamese universities to be aware of and have the abilities to creatively apply all these ten macro-strategies as the basic ingredients for an integrated pedagogical framework for Vietnamese graduates' employability.

1. *Maximizing learning opportunities both inside and outside the language classroom:* In Vietnamese universities, most English language learners are unfortunately passive (see Chapters 10, 11, 13, and 14 of this book) and learning opportunities outside the language classroom are still limited, except if students pay to go to private commercial English language centres (Tran, 2018b). This macro-strategy, in Kumaravadivelu (2003)'s view, envisages language teaching as a process in which classroom teachers strike a balance between their role as managers of teaching acts and their role as mediators of learning acts whilst learners playing roles as *partners*, rather than passive ones, in the joint production of English language classroom discourse. For Vietnamese graduates' employability prospects, classroom teachers should have a responsibility to create and utilize opportunities, for example, through learner involvement and teacher questioning inside the classroom, or connecting with the local and global community outside the classroom, thus helping learners capitalize on English

learning to build their technical knowledge through Content and Language Integrated Learning—CLIL (i.e., human capital), knowledge about how a particular industry or industries work through English for Specific Purposes—ESP (i.e., cultural capital), and attributes that help graduates to be more resilient in their career development (i.e., psychological capital).

2. *Minimizing perceptual mismatches between the learners' interpretations, teachers', and teacher educators' intentions:* In Vietnam, both learner training and the use of formal and informal questionnaire surveys for students' evaluation of teaching have not yet been used as frequently as they should be, as revealed in Le et al. (2019). It may result in perceptual mismatches between learners' interpretations, teachers', and teacher educators' intentions. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), this macro-strategy emphasizes the recognition of potential conceptual mismatches between intentions and interpretations of the learner, the teacher, and the teacher educator. Adopting this macro-strategy, teachers in Vietnamese universities could train their learners to identify and express their thoughts on such potential mismatches. Learner training strategies can be followed by using an appropriate formal/informal questionnaire survey to get learners' evaluative perceptions of a selected lesson, helping them be willing to raise their voices to communicate their formal/informal evaluation of teaching so that they would be more proactive in their future career development (i.e., psychological capital).
3. *Facilitating negotiated interactions:* This macro-strategy refers to meaningful learner–learner and learner–teacher classroom interactions in which learners are entitled and encouraged to initiate topic and talk to produce language outputs, not just react and respond (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Such interactions are essential for developing more human and social capitals than psychological, cultural, and identity capitals. To facilitate negotiated interactions in the classroom, the teachers need to be able to manage how learners talk (i.e., talk management) as well as what they talk about (i.e., topic management). Indeed, this macro-strategy can help tackle the issue that Vietnamese teachers of English seemed to focus more on topic management, and undue attention has not yet been paid to talk management (Dang, 2010).
4. *Promoting learner autonomy:* Vietnamese students are notorious for being dependent in their learning (Dang, 2010; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Tran et al., 2014; Tran & Tran, 2020a, 2020b), and thus fail to direct their learning to achieve their learning goals (see Chapters 10 and 13). This macro-strategy involves helping learners learn how to learn, equipping them with the means (e.g., the learners' awareness of learning strategies and the teachers' effectiveness of learner training) necessary to self-direct and self-monitor their own learning. This could help produce autonomous learners who could learn how to build their own human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity capitals needed for employability purposes.
5. *Fostering general and critical language awareness:* This macro-strategy refers to teachers' attempts to draw learners' attention to the formal and functional properties of their L2 (e.g., formal–informal language use or the development of

- advanced skills in critical thinking, reading, and writing) in order to increase the degree of explicitness required to promote L2 learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Doing so, teachers may better facilitate the process of noticing or consciously raising learners' language awareness, developing their linguistic and cultural knowledge (Nunan, 2001) which could serve as tools for developing their human and identity capital. Using this macro-strategy may help reduce the limited general and critical language awareness remains currently existing in English language classrooms in Vietnamese higher education institutions (Phan, 2020).
6. *Activating intuitive heuristics*: This macro-strategy highlights the importance of providing textual data, such as the activities and tasks in grammar-based books, so that learners can infer and internalize underlying rules governing grammatical and communicative usage (i.e., form, meaning, and use) (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). It lays a foundation for their further development of human and psychological capital. Unfortunately, Vietnamese teachers of English have been found to popularly direct teaching and rote learning as well as use exam-oriented pedagogies in Vietnamese universities (Phan, 2020; Tran, 2007; and Chapter 10 of this book). As such, this macro-strategy needs to be applied more intentionally to gradually remove the inertia of using traditional teaching and assessment methods in English classrooms.
  7. *Contextualizing linguistic input*: It is observed that although linguistic input has been provided in English classrooms, not many teachers have paid due attention to contextualizing such linguistic inputs (see Chapter 10 of this book). This macro-strategy highlights how language usage and use are shaped by linguistic, extra-linguistic, situational, and extra-situational contexts (i.e., the contexts of culture) (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The implementation of this macro-strategy could help the language learners realize that an appropriate and coherent text—whether spoken or written—can be created only if the realities are taken into consideration, facilitating the learners' development of all the five capitals for employability, especially, the human and social capital.
  8. *Integrating language skills*: In Vietnam, English language teachers still experience challenges in integrating skills in their classrooms due to personal and contextual constraints (Le et al., 2019). This macro-strategy refers to the need to holistically integrate language skills traditionally separated and sequenced as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). An integration of all these four English language skills in classrooms, through teachers' exploitation of various teaching and learning resources, other than commercially available textbooks, could get learners engaged in classroom activities and thus be equipped with social capital.
  9. *Ensuring social relevance*: It is observed that teachers are still excessively dependent on the prescribed curriculum and commercial textbooks (Phan, 2020; Tran et al., 2014) and appear not to pay adequate attention to sociocultural, political, and economic aspects that learners bring to the class (see Chapters 10 and 13 of this book). This macro-strategy refers to the need for English language teachers to be sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment that shapes the lives of their learners and their linguistic and cultural

identity, in which L2 learning and teaching take place, developing learners' cultural, social, and identity capital. Aiming to be socially relevant, English language teachers in Vietnam must critically consider, amongst other things, the use of English language proficiency standardization (e.g., CEFR), the role of the home language, and the use of appropriate teaching materials.

10. *Raising cultural consciousness*: This is not an option but an obligation (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This macro-strategy emphasizes the need to treat learners as cultural informants so that they are encouraged to engage in a process of classroom participation. It not only creates in the L2 learner an empathy towards and an appreciation for the culture of the English language speaking community but also puts a premium on their own Vietnamese cultural knowledge and values, laying the foundation for developing all the five capitals, especially, the cultural capital. It is also important to articulate culture in terms of understanding of work practices and work culture to fit with the language of employability (see Tomlinson, 2017). The use of this macro-strategy can result in Vietnamese learners' meaningful cultural growth, through a meaningful negotiation of differences between the inherited Vietnamese cultures and the learned cultures of other countries as well as what is expected of them in the workplace of a certain labour market. It will help reduce the existing undue attention being paid to the language-culture connection strategy in English language classrooms in Vietnamese tertiary institutions (see Chapter 14 of this book).

### 16.5.2 *Student Roles*

The effectiveness of English language education in terms of preparing students'/ graduates' employability should not rely solely on the work of the teachers. Students are key agents of their learning process and collaborators of the teachers; together they create meaningful learning experiences (Nel, 2017). Kumaravadivelu's (2003) macro-strategic framework can be further developed for students to plan and execute their personal project of becoming more employable via learning English.

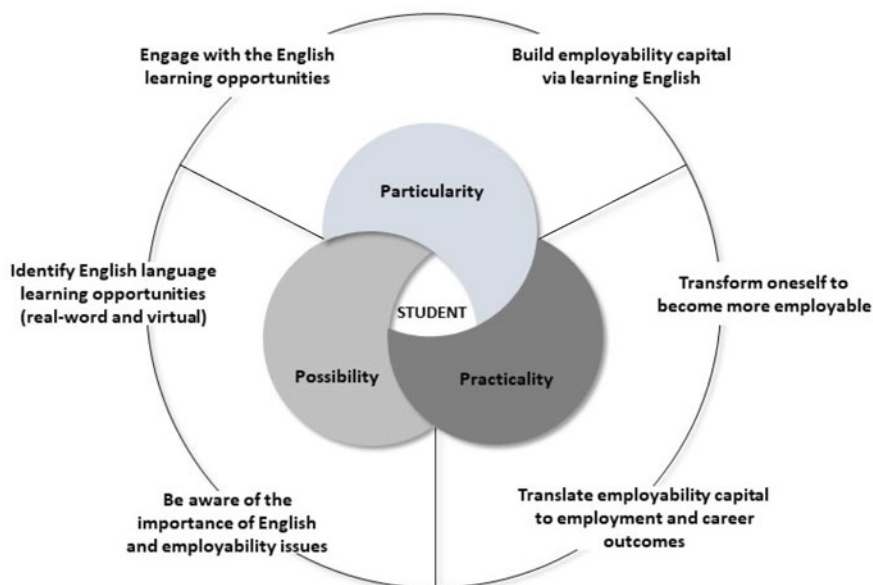
Parallel with teachers' putting the possibility parameter into practice, students need to build an awareness about the importance of English for their future careers and identify English learning opportunities to help them achieve their career goals. Such learning opportunities can be within the classroom; or they can be out there in the communities such as volunteer work, or part-time job, which are often referred to as work-integrated learning profoundly applied for its conduciveness to students' employability development (Jackson, 2015). It can be any events that students can participate to use and learn English by which they can connect with people, understand more about what is needed in the workplace. Having such an awareness and identification of learning opportunities function as a catalyst for students to construct their desired professional identity, which will direct them to proactively build up other employability capital so that the desired professional identity can be realized.

To align their learning with their teachers' use of particularity parameter, students should engage with the identified learning activities to build up English competence and associated employability capital. With the support of the teacher's pedagogical practices, or the affordances of real-world or virtual learning environment, students can construct their understanding of linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities, which will foster the development of their sensitiveness of contexts. This is extremely important for them to develop cultural capital, i.e., understanding of the work practices or culture associated with a role or industry (Tomlinson, 2017), and soft skills, which are found to closely related to culture (Tran, 2019). It is also noted that teachers should focus on enhancing students' autonomous learning ability so that they can perform well the learning tasks under this particularity parameter.

Parallel with the teachers' ability to theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize (i.e., practicality parameter), students should be able to practice what they believe to be important for their future careers and life. In this case, as students have already engaged with building employability capital that affords them to enter a target industry, they should actively transform themselves to become more employable, as acknowledged by others. High scores for English tests, English certificates, teachers' compliments, awards, evidence of volunteer activity participation in which English is used, referees that they were connected with community-based English learning activities, etc. are examples that students can use for the purpose of transforming their employability. Without such evidence, the development of their employability is invisible. Finally, when the time is right, students can translate their English competence and associated employability capital into employment and career outcomes via job application processes. It is when students/graduates need to demonstrate their employability to prospective employers using the acquired skills and evidence pieces of their employability capital (Fig. 16.2).

### ***16.5.3 Institutional Roles***

Any English language courses will not optimize their effectiveness without the support from the institution. Our book has identified that English courses offered by Vietnamese universities were not so effective in helping students develop employability capital via learning English due to a lack of management and administrative support; thus, teachers were disengaged and showed low levels of commitment with their role (Chapter 11). Institutions also appeared not to provide adequate resources for teaching and learning activities (Chapter 10). This is also related to curriculum design (Chapter 12) as this task in Vietnamese higher education institutions is mostly decided by institutional leaders (Phan, 2020; Tran et al, 2019). A lack of institutional support is also associated with teachers' inability to use innovative teaching approach as they are insufficiently prepared for it (Chapters 10, 12, and 13) or the inertia in their perspectives about what and how to teach in their English courses (Chapter 14). Therefore, it is important that leaders of Vietnamese higher education institutions pay



**Fig. 16.2** Students' macro-strategic employability-enhanced framework via English learning

due attention to making English language courses a channel for students to capitalize on their English language competence and associated employability capital.

In particular, they need to firstly adopt an approach to English language education that can allow teachers to employ different teaching methods flexibly to suit the needs of developing English competence for a cohort of students with diverse learning styles and English backgrounds. Such an approach also fosters the growth of employability capital via learning English. As presented earlier, Kumaravadivelu's (2003) macro-strategic framework can be a great starting point. In our view, curricula for English language programs may not be so important for the adoption of Kumaravadivelu's (2003) macro-strategic framework, but there should be a common reference point for both teachers and students about what will be taught/learned and the expected learning outcomes. They are also important for quality assurance purposes, an increasingly influential practice in higher education (Do et al., 2017), and for standardization of English language achievements currently in use in Vietnam (Prime Minister, 2008).

Secondly, once the approach to English language education is selected, institutions need to articulate it clearly in policies, and even in implementation guidelines as research has consistently reported that in Vietnamese higher education, stakeholders often relied on leadership direction for the implementation of a policy instead of taking initiatives (Ngo, 2019; Tran & Tran, 2020a, 2020b). One of the most influential policies for English language education may be policies related to standardization of students' learning outcomes, such as attainment of an English proficiency of Level 3 in the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework for Vietnam or get an

overall score of 4.5 in the IELTS (The Government of Vietnam, 2014). Such a policy can importantly drive both teachers' and students' behaviours to achieve the learning outcomes specified for a course/program because they know that if students fail to meet such learning outcomes, they cannot graduate. Likewise, management tools, with incentives for excellent performers, should accompany the policy to ensure that everyone involved in executing the policy engage, or at least comply, with the objectives envisioned in the policy (Nguyen & Tran, 2019).

Thirdly, any successful implementation needs adequate resources (Ngo, 2019). To execute the policy of developing employability capital via English language education, it is important to invest in building or buying new teaching–learning materials that are work-focused instead of English textbooks aiming to provide students with English linguistic knowledge and skills via general contents. To catch up with the needs and lifestyles of the young generations, it is also important to have online learning resources that students can access for learning at their own pace and time. Setting up learning groups in Facebook or similar media channels can be alternative options (Kabilan et al., 2010); sharing YouTube learning resources may be helpful and inspiring, such as videos sharing learning experiences from successful English language learners or free lessons from private English language teachers or tutors around the world (Wang & Chen, 2020). However, online English learning can only be effective if students have already been able to study autonomously and developed online learning skills (Kuama, 2016; Wang & Chen, 2020); thus institutions also need to have an academic support unit to equip students with such skills as well (Tran & Tran, 2020a, 2020b).

Last but not least, building teacher capability is the central task of institutional leaders in implementing any teaching-related policies (Barrie et al., 2009; Tran, 2017a), not just with re-approaching English language education for embedment of developing graduate employability. As suggested consistently by the studies in Part III of this book, teachers appeared not to have successfully integrated the development of graduate employability in their English classes, mostly because of their lack of experiences in using innovative teaching methods, formative assessment practices, providing authentic teaching activities, and assessment tasks, etc. Therefore, it is imperative that institutional leaders impact on teachers' beliefs about what, why, and how they should change their approach to English language teaching because their beliefs will powerfully influence their actual practices in the classroom (e.g., see Tran, 2017a). They should invest in building teacher capability appropriately so that they can be confident using teaching approaches or methods strategically to meet the three parameters—particularity, practicality, and possibility—which may not only benefit students' acquisition of the language but also their development of employability capital. One of the most affective pedagogical approaches that has been found to positively enhance students'/graduates' employability is work-integrated learning (Jackson, 2015). It may not be so unfamiliar in several disciplines, but it may be difficult to put into use in English courses for non-English majored students. Yet, we do not mean that it is impossible, as to be elaborated in the next section.



### 16.5.4 *Community Roles*

The society at large is also responsible for training a quality workforce, especially from the part of industry stakeholders who have complained about the lack of employability skills in fresh graduates. These stakeholders can support the implementation of the new approach to English language education by providing work-integrated learning opportunities, either in the community or in the classroom. Work-integrated learning has been found to positively enhance students'/graduates' employability (Jackson, 2015). It can be done via two directions. On the one hand, institutions send students to the workplace, with such initiatives as student internships, work placements, field trips, service learning, to name a few (e.g., see Valencia-Forrester, 2020). On the other hand, institutions can bring the workplace into the classroom by adopting pedagogical practices imitating the work environment (e.g., project-based learning), using authentic learning materials (e.g., data, case studies, etc.) or inviting industry professionals or experts to act as a visiting/guest teacher (Doan, 2021; Hart, 2019; Rizvi & Aggarwal, 2005).

In the first instance, it may be difficult for English language teachers to organize the former for all students, especially concerning the large class sizes often seen in Vietnamese higher education institutions (Trinh & Mai, 2019). Therefore, such work-based or community-based work-integrated English learning may be limited to students that industry partner selected via competition. For example, Tourism and Hospitality students can apply for a short-term internship position at an international travel agency who only picked the most suitable ones for them. Other similar activities that can host more students include but are not limited to part-time jobs at an international fair, volunteer activities to welcome international tourists or for an international event, community development campaign, etc.

In the second instance, English language teaching–learning activities that simulate workplace activities or authentic materials can be used. For example, teaching students about the use of the modal verb “can” using a mock job interview is great as it helps students pick up the language use in a particular context. It will be greater if a real HR manager comes to interview students so that students not only learn the language, but also feel inspired by the professional, learn something useful from his/her advice and feedback, or simply learning from observing the way he/she talks and self-presents. Another example is to use project-based activities where students are asked to work in a team to solve an authentic work situation then present their solution in English. By that way, students can develop teamwork, analytical, and communication skills along the way executing that project and simultaneously develop their English competence.

Another activity that community members and industry partners can support the employability-focus English language education program is organizing free English speaking clubs, a type of extra-curricular activity (Tran, 2017b). Experienced professionals or senior students who speak fluent English can lead the club to discuss work-related topics in English. Participants can develop their English speaking skills and network with others who may give them relevant advice about



the future careers. Similarly, such an activity can be organized virtually with Facebook groups that frequently post self-study English learning materials or organize virtual catch-ups between group members. Such activities may increase students’ openness, confidence, adaptability, and interpersonal skills, which are all important assets for employability.

### 16.5.5 A New Approach to English Language Education

The discussion up to now has pointed out that in order to successfully develop employability for students via English language education, it is important to adopt a new approach to English language education. We propose a macro-strategic employability-enhanced framework for English language education (Fig. 16.3). It is developed based on Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) ideas about a macro-strategic framework and our understanding about the process to develop employability capital, English language teaching–learning principles, and policy implementation.

Under this framework, English language teachers adopt a macro-strategic framework that enables them to organize teaching–learning activities in the classroom, focusing on three parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Specific strategies with recommended activities for English language teachers to consider have been discussed above. Students are placed in the

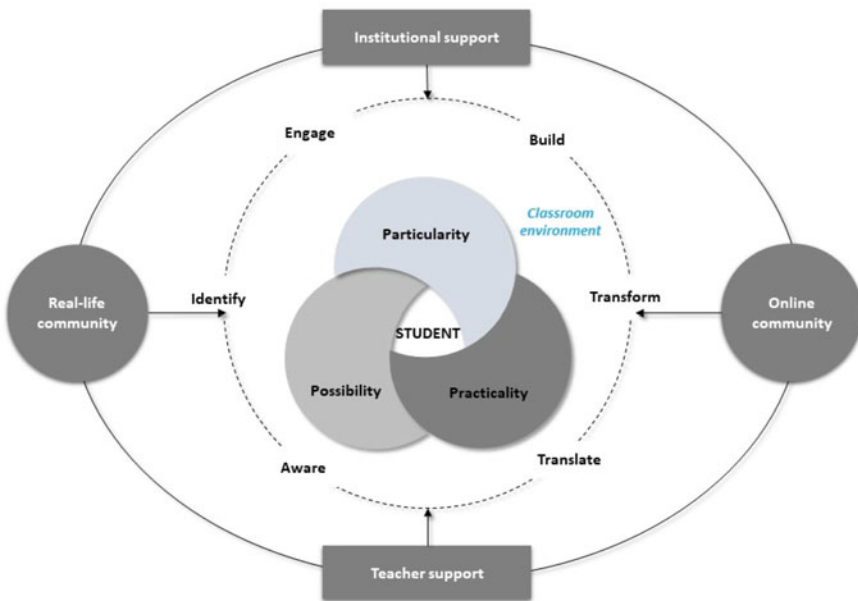


Fig. 16.3 A macro-strategic employability-enhanced framework for English language education

centre of classroom activities, collaborating with their teachers to develop employability capital via English language learning. It is crucial to enhance students' awareness of the importance of English and identify English language learning opportunities, both in and outside the classroom. Both tasks are parallel with the possibility parameter that the teachers implement. They need to engage with English language learning activities and proactively seize opportunities to develop employability capital via such English language learning activities where possible. These tasks are connected to their teachers' practices that rely on the particularity parameter. Finally, students need to transform what they have learned or experienced into concrete evidence for employability capital: test scores, certificates, awards, positive feedback from the teacher or a stakeholder, etc. They can use such evidence to demonstrate their employability to prospective employers and convert such capital into employment and career outcomes. Such processes are parallel with their teachers' practice of the practicality parameter.

To assist students, teachers need to adopt the ten macro-strategies discussed earlier to make their class more flexible, meet learning objectives, and enhance students' autonomy in learning, as discussed earlier. Institutional leaders can support the implementation of employability-enhanced English language courses by developing teachers' expertise and create institutional conditions that can enable them to use the macro-strategies. It is also vital that they provide clearly-articulated policies, incentivize and employ management tools to ensure that the implementation can progress and achieve the intended students' learning outcomes. Real-world community and online community can also be of great resources for such a teaching-learning process, with the provision of work-integrated learning opportunities, extra-curricular or online learning resources. These resources are meaningful for the practice of English language skills and authentic development of employability capital outside the classroom environment.

## 16.6 Conclusion

This edited book aimed to explore key stakeholders' perspectives about the role of English language education in enhancing graduates' employability and their experiences with the current practices of English language education in Vietnam, with a focus on its preparation of students for work. Empirical findings revealed a positive relationship between English language education and students' development of human, social, cultural, psychological, and career identity capital, all of which constitute graduate employability. There was also some evidence of the contribution of English language education to graduates' employment and career outcomes. Our studies presented in this book also identified a couple of issues that are hindering the effectiveness of English language education in Vietnam. These issues stemmed from leadership and management, curriculum design, and foremost from teacher and

student factors. Teachers appear not to have embraced the idea of developing employability for students in their English courses. Instead, they were largely used traditional teaching methods, which are blamed to hinder the development of skills and employability capital (Tran, 2018a). Where they used innovative teaching methods which are found to be conducive for skills development in the classroom (e.g., Hart, 2019; Jackson, 2015), they found difficulties associated with personal and contextual constraints. Their teaching activities and assessment tasks lacked authenticity, which created a gap between what being taught and how it can be used in the workplace. This resulted in a reduction in students' motivation and engagement with learning as well as poor-quality learning experiences. From the part of students, the majority of them were aware of the importance of English in enhancing their future career prospects and attempted to learn the language. Unfortunately, the traditional teaching culture together with their inexperience in autonomous learning prevented them from effectively developing English language competence and associated employability capital.

Based on the findings, we proposed a macro-strategic employability-enhanced framework for English language education. This framework allows teachers to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy (particularity), encourage teachers to theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize (practicality), and tap into the students' socio-political consciousness to help students construct their identity formation and ambition to contribute to social transformation (possibility). This framework also attempts to help students develop their metacognition of what, why, and how they should act within English courses so that students can make good use of learning opportunities for the purposes of developing English language proficiency and employability capital useful for their future careers. The framework also denotes the collaboration between key stakeholders involved in training the future workforce, either face-to-face or virtual. Overall, it is a macro-strategy framework that aims to harness the potential of English language education in developing essential employability capital for graduates' employment and career outcomes; this proposed framework, if carefully implemented, serves as a new approach to English language education that can be applicable in Vietnam and beyond.

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