Foreign Language Competence Of Vietnamese Students - A Case Study At The National Academy Of Public Administration

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Abstract

International integration is fast becoming a dominant trend in every country, and foreign languages hold the key to opening the door to integration, offering chances for cultural exchange and promotion, and opening up opportunities for the country's economic development. Therefore, the human resources in any organization must be proficient in both subject-matter expertise and foreign languages to effectively participate in the labor market and successfully integrate. It is also regarded as a challenge encountered by universities when they have to train their students to satisfy the requirements of both professional qualifications and foreign language competence according to the development trend of the labor market. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the university's human resource training quality in terms of their English proficiency. As a result, we, the authors of this research, have focused on two aspects of students' English proficiency both before and after they have finished the university's requireed English courses. These aspects are their level of English proficiency prior to enrolling in the university and their level of English proficiency after finishing those courses at the Academy. With the construction of a research theoretical framework including the above aspects, we conducted a survey of 300 final-year students (the cohort 2019–2023) at the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), which is the one represents a group of Vietnamese universities in the domain of social sciences, with the goal of assessing students' actual foreign language competence in accordance with the prescribed English learning outcomes. We determined the impact of "newly-enrolled students' English competency" and "their

English competency after completing English courses" on the "English learning outcomes" that is a requirement for NAPA undergrads before graduation. The survey findings reveal that the factor "newly-enrolled students' English competency" is assessed at a lower level, which is believed to be the primary factor that significantly affects the quality of foreign language instruction and their actual English proficiency, or rather English learning outcomes specified in the NAPA curriculum. We then draw conclusions from the research and offer workable recommendations for boosting the English proficiency of NAPA undergraduates and those studying at many social science-specialized universities.

Keywords**:** English language proficiency; Input English competence; English learning outcomes; Undergraduates; Vietnam.

1. Introduction

The higher education system in Vietnam is made up of universities, colleges, and academies structured according to their industry of expertise or management hierarchy (local and central). Vietnam now has 224 universities, with over 30% of those specializing in social sciences, according to the statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2023). The National Academy of Public Administration is ranked among the educational institutions with the highest enrollment of social science students, providing a sizable share of the human resources with well-trained professional qualifications for the nation's development. There are currently over 10,000 students enrolled at the National Academy of Public Administration's main campus in Hanoi and other satellite campuses across the nation (NAPA, 2023).

With the characteristics of being a developing country, Vietnamese workers are assessed to have professional qualifications and capabilities that are not yet able to meet the requirements of the international labor market. As of 2022, only 22.6% of Vietnamese workers possess professional and technical qualifications, and just 10% of them satisfy the requirements of businesses in the context of international integration. This is a significant limitation, not only because of some deficiencies in the training program and professional practical skills but also because of their limited proficiency in foreign languages. Even though the Vietnamese education sector has established the foreign language learning outcomes for undergraduates upon graduation, due to the characteristics of each discipline and the newly-enrolled

students' low foreign language competence, it has resulted in distinctions in their actual foreign language competence compared to the foreign language learning outcomes prescribed as well as to those of others in other educational institutions. Therefore, research on the factors "newly-enrolled students' foreign language competence" and "their foreign language competence after the end of on-site English courses" and their impact on "foreign language learning outcomes" is necessary in the context of each country's higher education development.

In this study, based on a research theoretical framework built related to "newly enrolled students' foreign language competence", "their foreign language competence after the end of on-site English courses" and "Foreign language learning outcomes" the authors conducted a survey of 300 non-English major final-year NAPA students about their English competency. It can be said that in the NAPA's training programs, English is a required foreign language course for all specialties.

With the research findings, the authors want to offer empirical data that will allow NAPA officials and numerous Vietnamese universities to have more convincing arguments for future training policy-making.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student's foreign language competence

Many studies define "competency" (also known as ability, capacity, capability, etc.) as the subject's capacity to do a particular task. This capacity manifests in the subject's physical, psychological, knowledge, and skill characteristics. Numerous Vietnamese linguists define 'competence'' as the ability, subjective or natural conditions available to perform a certain activity; it may be also a psychological and physiologic quality that enables a person to perform a certain type of activity with high quality" (Phe, H., 1997). As stated in the Encyclopedia, "competence is the ability to be formed and developed, allowing people to achieve success in a physical, intellectual, or occupational activity; It is expressed in the ability to perform an activity or a task" (EPH, 2000). Lam, N.H. (2007) has the same view, noting that "competency is understood as a set of knowledge, attitudes, skills, or thinking strategies that are core and important for creating important outputs."

It is clear from the previous approaches that researchers have emphasized the term "competency" with a broad and practical connotation. The idea that "competency" is the capacity to deliver performance based on specific knowledge, mature abilities, and acceptable attitudes is a common one in the

approach to competence. Therefore, "competency" is defined as the knowledge, skills, and basic values that each individual demonstrates in their actions. In the field of foreign language learning, the competency to use a foreign language well is defined as mastering knowledge of foreign languages (vocabulary, phonetics, grammar), as well as the capability to apply such knowledge to perform communication skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); thereby the core values of learners, who are identified in this study as tertiary students, are formed.

In the field of higher education, students' proficiency in a foreign language is evident in a variety of academic contexts and can be categorized by numerous pertinent factors. In this study, the authors based on the legal status of the higher education program in Vietnam to determine the content relevant to students' foreign language competency. Accordingly, two contents-namely, (1) "newly-enrolled students' foreign language competence" and (2) "their foreign language competence after the end of on-site English courses"- are connected to students' proficiency in foreign languages before graduation and have a significant impact on tertiary training quality standards. Both of these issues were also stated in other research (Loi, N.V.; Hang, C.T.T.; Bang, T.C., 2017), and the authors continued to draw on them when conducting this study.

a) Newly enrolled students' foreign language competence (NE)

The newly enrolled tertiary students' proficiency in a foreign language is evaluated on their knowledge scope (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics), communication skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in a foreign language. These knowledge and skill requirements are set forth under the standards of the high school program for studying a foreign language.

The Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam sets the academic criteria for newly enrolled tertiary students' foreign language competency based on the high school curriculum. On this basis, academies, universities, and colleges set standards for their first-year undergraduates' proficiency in foreign languages in line with the characteristics of their respective training fields. For universities in the field of social sciences, the foreign language competence of such undergraduates is determined to include a number of fundamental characteristics including (1) mastering vocabulary to satisfy basic expression and communication requirements set forth by the academic program at the high school level (NE1); (2) fluently use grammar rules to meet basic expression and communication requirements set forth by the

academic program at the high school level (NE2); and (3) acquiring listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to meet basic expression and communication requirements set forth by the academic program at the high school level (NE3).

Although defined according to the common standard threshold, such students' foreign language competency is affected by many factors, such as cultural, educational, economic, and social characteristics of the region. This causes disparities in levels of foreign language competence among various groups of freshly-enrolled university students. In reality, the quality of training, as evidenced by the foreign language competence they acquire when they graduate, is significantly influenced by the levels of foreign language competence they possess before enrolling in the university.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Newly enrolled students' foreign language competence has an impact on their foreign language learning outcomes before graduation.

b) Students' foreign language competence after completing on-site English courses (EC)

Based on inheriting foreign language knowledge stipulated in the high school program, and that required by the competent educational management agency for tertiary students, universities continue to build the foreign language curriculum through their training programs. This program is governed and carried out uniformly throughout the higher education system in Vietnam by the Ministry of Education and Training. Yet, the substance of tertiary students' foreign language programs varies depending on the type of educational institutions (universities in engineering, universities in social sciences, etc.). In comparison to their previous foreign language competence, tertiary students' new knowledge and skills in foreign languages are produced and further improved with the help of the mentioned curricula.

Thus, their foreign language competence once they have completed foreign language courses at a university is determined as foreign language knowledge and skills according to the requirements for foreign language programs at the university level issued by the Ministry of Education and Training. With this program, universities organize the assessment of students' foreign language competence after completing each module in the curriculum to determine the degree to which the language's knowledge and skills their students have learned. These knowledge and skills are reflected in several criteria including the ability to master vocabulary to satisfy communication and research

requirements (EC1), the ability to use various grammar rules to meet communication and research requirements (EC2), and the ability to employ language skills to communicate and conduct research effectively (EC3).

Foreign language competency acquired after finishing on-site English courses is a crucial requirement for students to be able to participate in study and research. It is also essential for them to feel confident when they enter the labor market upon graduation, particularly given the integration trend. This is another prerequisite for students to reach the foreign language learning outcomes set forth by university academic programs. Whether or not students achieve foreign language learning outcomes before graduation is considered a key factor when assessing the quality of training and a major factor affecting their learning process at the university.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Foreign language competence after completing on-site English courses has an impact on the foreign language learning outcomes before graduation.

2.2. Students' foreign language learning outcomes (LO)

The foreign language learning outcomes of tertiary students are built based on the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam, which is used to specify the levels of foreign language competence students must attain before graduating. The framework for foreign language competence is also used to gauge learner's progress at various stages of their education and throughout their lives. It is based on the reference and application of the CEFR and a few English competency frameworks from other nations, as well as the actual context and circumstances of teaching, learning, and utilizing foreign languages in Vietnam. The 6 levels of the Foreign Language Competence Framework for Vietnam are similar to levels A1 through C2 in the CEFR and are organized into 3 major levels (Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced). (MOET, 2014).

It is being implemented for all educational institutions' foreign language training programs in the national system. It is regarded as a standard for all foreign language instruction activities and is of major value to teachers and students. Based on the specifications in this foreign language competency framework, teachers can compile and select curricula, syllabi, and lesson plans; design teaching contents; and build criteria for testing and assessing learners' proficiency levels at each studying stage and every level of study. On the contrary, students can judge their degree of foreign language skills by understanding the content and

requirements for each degree. In addition, the foreign language competency framework is also the basis for educational institutions to cooperate, exchange education, and recognize diplomas and certificates with nations that use the European reference framework.

The framework for foreign language competence can be thought of as a general scale designed to guide educational institutions, lecturers, and students in developing programs, plans, and learning and teaching objectives that have been confirmed by numerous research (Tuyet, H.T., 2013). In addition, it offers a basic description of requirements for those who use foreign language certificates (students, employers, etc.). The universality of these levels also enables this foreign language competency framework to be used as a common reference frame for making equivalence conversions between various foreign language certificates. It serves as the foundation for Vietnamese universities in determining the learning outcomes for students' proficiency in a foreign language. For universities in the field of social sciences, undergraduates must gain proficiency in a foreign language at least at level B1 (level 3 of the European Framework of Reference) before graduating, to be specific:

- LO1. Students employ fundamental vocabulary effectively at the pre-intermediate level. Even if they still have trouble communicating or doing their tasks, they will be able to describe ideas, topics, or situations that are challenging or foreign to them thanks to the knowledge they have attained at the threshold B1-level as indicated learning outcomes.

- LO2. Students efficiently communicate in familiar situations by using basic grammar. Students who have obtained foreign language competence at the indicated learning outcomes' threshold B1-level can effectively control communication issues even when their mother tongue has a substantial influence. They are still capable of making errors, but they can communicate clearly. They can use common sentence patterns that refer to familiar situations.

- LO3. Students have the communication skills necessary (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for work communication and research a particular professional subject. For listening skills, they can hear and understand plain facts that are delivered clearly in standard accents or dialects. Concerning their speaking skills, they can exchange information, verify facts, and explain issues as they arise. They don't need to prepare to express their thoughts or take part in dialogues. They may express their individual opinions

and share knowledge. For reading skills, students can read and comprehend texts with obvious content. For writing skills, students can write simple and concise articles, essays, and reports with coherent, cohesive format by linking disparate ideas into well-structured essays.

From the mentioned above research content, the authors build a research theoretical framework on students' foreign language competence. The research model consists of 3 scales: "Newly-enrolled students' foreign language competence", "their foreign language competence after the end of on-site English courses" (two independent variables); and "Actual foreign language competence of final students before graduation when it comes to the prescribed foreign language learning outcomes (01 dependent variable)". The above scales include 9 observed variables, designed by the authors into 9 questions in the survey questionnaire, and are measured by the 5-level Likert scale: 1-Strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3- No comments; 4- Agree: 5-Strongly agree. (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1. Research theoretical framework

No	Scales	Encryption	Rating levels				
			1	2	3	4	5
I	**Newly enrolled students' foreign language competence**	**NE**					
1	Possessing a vocabulary that satisfies fundamental requirements for expression and communication as specified by the high school curriculum.	NE1					
2	Acquiring the grammar rules required to meet the standards for essential expression and communication as outlined by the high school curriculum.	NE2					
3	Utilizing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to satisfy the requirements for fundamental expression and communication as outlined by the high school curriculum	NE3					
II	**Foreign language competence after English courses**	**EC**					
1	Improving the vocabulary to practice effective communication, conduct research, and perform tasks in the future.	EC1					
2	Mastering the grammar rules to practice effective communication, conduct research and perform tasks in the future.	EC2					
3	Utilizing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to practice effective communication, conduct research, and perform tasks in the future.	EC3					

III	Foreign language learning outcomes	LO					
1	Effectively using pre-intermediate vocabulary to convey complicated ideas or unfamiliar topics or situations.	LO1					
2	Effectively using fundamental grammatical rules to communicate pretty well in familiar situations.	LO2					
3	Utilizing the necessary speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills to do research and meet business communication requirements.	LO3					

Source: Compiled by the authors from the literature review

Research models
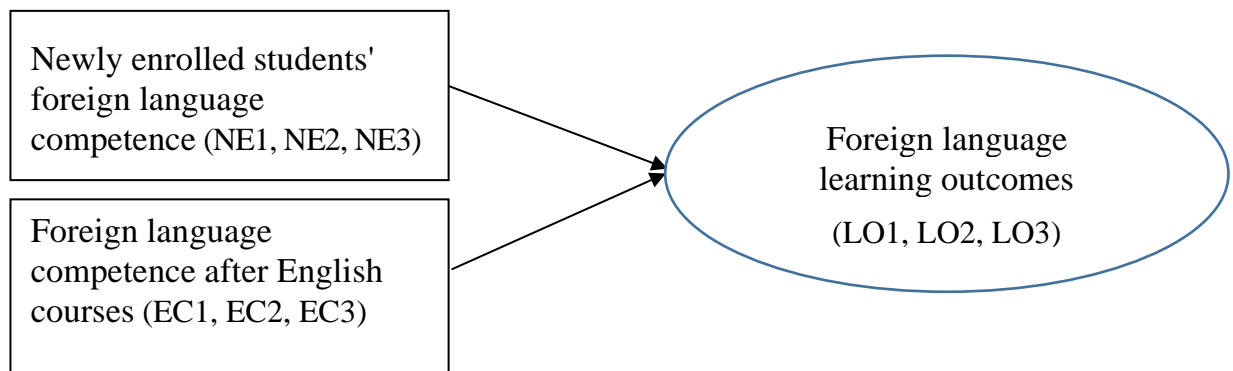
Figure 1. Research model

3. Research methods

In this study, the authors used qualitative and quantitative methods to approach and deploy the research content on the foreign language proficiency of Vietnamese tertiary students. The research sample for this study was conducted at the National Institute of Public Administration, where the writers are employed.

- Qualitative approach: The authors gather and analyze secondary data and then form preliminary conclusions regarding the theoretical and practical research on students' foreign language competence. Next, the authors conduct in-depth interviews, gather viewpoints on the original research topic to complete the research theoretical framework, and draw reasonable research conclusions.

- Quantitative approach: We directly surveyed 300 final students (cohort 201-2023) at the National Academy of Public Administration to gather and evaluate primary data under the developed theoretical framework. We used the survey results to perform a correlation analysis to examine the link between the

scales and the proposed research hypothesis. The minimum sample size for the 3-scale and 9-observed model of this study, according to Hai, D.H. (2019), is N = 9*5 = 45.

We carried out a survey of NAPA students' opinions with a sample size of N = 300 > 45 to guarantee the reliability of the data collection. The survey's findings show that 300 out of 300 students agreed to respond, and 300 out of 300 answer sheets were acceptable, yielding a 100% valid response rate. With the data gathered from survey activities, we examined the scale's validity and observed variables and used correlation analysis to evaluate research hypotheses and draw logical conclusions.

4. Research results

4.1. Assessment of the training institution on students' foreign language competence

The newly enrolled students' English language proficiency in the cohort 2019–2023 was evaluated at a low level but increased after completing foreign language courses at the academy, according to the figures given the Vietnam National Academy of Public Administration. Yet, it still has not to meet the requirements for the expected learning outcomes for foreign languages, specifically:

Firstly, the English proficiency of the newly enrolled students is evaluated based on the marks they gained on the English subject graduation examination. The current law mandates that high school graduates have a foreign language proficiency of at least A1 (level 1) or higher, as measured by the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam. The English proficiency of the students in the cohort 2019-2023, nevertheless, is extremely low with up to 471 students (representing 47.6%) not having attained the A1 level (level 1); there are 347 students (accounting for 35.1%) achieved the A1 level; a relatively large number (about 20%) of students registered for the entrance exam in such subjects as literature, history and geography so there was no data on English marks.

- Secondly, students in the cohort 2019-2023 have completed on-site English courses and have taken English proficiency exams that measure their abilities in 4 listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Their knowledge scope is regulated in the syllabi and covered in the teaching materials "Face2Face (Pre-intermediate)" by Chris Redston and Gillie Cunningham. The test results demonstrate that the students' proficiency in the English language has significantly increased throughout each period of the course since it began. Although the knowledge scope is deemed to be similar to A2 (level 2) in the 6-

level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam, only 15% of students approached B1 or higher, while up to 28.2% of students are almost at A2, and 48.6% reached the level A2.

- Thirdly, even though the English language learning outcomes for NAPA students are set at level B1 (level 3), the results of the English tests, which evaluated students' proficiency in four different skill areas—listening, speaking, reading, and writing, held in 2023 for the cohort 2019–2023, showed that only 556 students (71.6%) passed and 220 students (28.4%) failed.

In light of the fact that 28.4% of NAPA students in the cohort 2019–2023 did not achieve the required learning outcomes, it may be argued that the foreign language proficiency of these students is assessed at a low level. There are various causes for this, but the primary one is the limited English proficiency of newly enrolled students. It is regarded as a factual issue that has to do with the policies of Vietnam's Education and Training Ministry on foreign language instruction in high schools.

4.2. The survey findings about students' proficiency in foreign languages

After developing a theoretical framework for their study, the authors polled 300 National Academy of Public Administration final-year students (the cohort 2019-2023). With the data collected from survey activities, the authors conducted Cronbach's Alpha test to identify the reliability of the scales and observed variables in the study model. According to Hai, D.H. (2019), Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 and Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3 are the requirements for the reliabilities of the scales and the observed variables, respectively. The test results show that all 3 scales and 9 observed variables are reliable (Table 2).

Table 2. The results of the scale testing

No	Scales	Observed variables	Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha)	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
1	Newly-enrolled students' foreign language competence (NE)	NE1, NE2, NE3	.643	NE1 = .548 NE2 = .557 NE3 = .546
2	Foreign language competence after English courses (EC)	EC1, EC2, EC3	.671	EC1 = .579 EC2 = .611 EC3 = .549

| 3 | Foreign language learning outcomes (LO) | LO1, LO2, LO3 | .657 | LO1 = .569 LO2 = .562 LO3 = .556 |

Source: Authors' survey results

All three scales and the nine observed variables in the research model have standard test values, as shown by the results in Table 3 (Cronbach'alpha > 0.6; Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3). We used this test result as a foundation for dependability as we carried out correlation analysis to take the association of variables in the study model into consideration (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation analysis results of the scales

Correlations		NE	EC	LO
NE	Pearson Correlation	1	.657**	.445**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	300	300	300
EC	Pearson Correlation	.657**	1	.692**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	300	300	300
LO	Pearson Correlation	.445**	.692**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	300	300	300
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: Authors' survey results

The data in Table 3 shows:

+ Correlation coefficients of the scales reach $0 < r < 1$, indicating that there is a positive relationship between the two independent variables "Newly enrolled students' foreign language competence" (NE), "Foreign language competence after English courses" (EC) and 01 dependent variable "Foreign language learning outcomes" (LO).

+ Based on the values of r [r (NE) = .445 and r (EC) = .692], it can be confirmed that the correlation level between the independent variables and the dependent variable in ascending order, that is: "Newly enrolled students' foreign language competence" (NE), "Foreign language competence after English courses" (EC).

5. Conclusion

The research findings are affirmed by the aforementioned analysis and testing results, which demonstrate that the proficiency of newly enrolled students in a foreign language affects their English learning outcomes at the academy and has a detrimental effect on their foreign language learning outcomes before graduation. It is regarded as among the factors affecting the overall training quality at the National Academy of Public Administration. The findings of this survey mirror those of the evaluation and statistics at the training institutions examined above. The author discusses related information based on the study's findings, which is the National Academy of Public Administration and many universities in the social sciences should organize tests to ascertain the level of newly enrolled students' proficiency in foreign languages before arranging them in on-site English classes to have appropriate training policies.

Although English is currently a compulsory subject primarily at the high school level in Vietnam, depending on the region (mountains, islands, rural areas, urban areas), the amount of time it takes to learn the language also varies, which causes a significant disparity in the English proficiency of newly enrolled students. There are students from urban and city areas who have been studying English for many years, but many students from rural, mountainous, and island areas have only recently begun learning English, while a small number of students have never studied English before or have learned another foreign language. The disparity in competency caused by geographical variations is a great challenge for students and lecturers. The NAPA students' actual learning process reveals that their language abilities particularly listening and speaking skills, are still relatively weak. The majority of their capacity to listen to English and master vocabulary and grammar rules is still constrained.

The classification of newly enrolled students' English competency will help universities take the initiative in their training. This will excite lecturers and students in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, thereby improving the quality of instruction and providing well-rounded human resources to meet the demands of the labor market in the integration trend. In light of this, this study has aided the authors and managers of the National Academy of Public Administration and numerous other Vietnamese universities in better comprehending the actual state of their students' English language proficiency. This has allowed them to propose suitable solutions in their training policies that will enhance their students' foreign language competency levels.

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