Tarbiat Modares University

General English Programs in Tertiary Education in Vietnam

Cuong Huy Pham [1&2] iD

Abstract

With its prevalence as a global language, universities in Vietnam have striven to enhance students' proficiency in English. This endeavor responds to the language requirements set by Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), the prominence of English as a medium of instruction in higher education, and the necessity of preparing students for better employability. This study focuses on General English programs currently deployed in most universities in Vietnam in terms of expected learning outcomes, course design and assessment practices. Drawing on document analysis, it examines the General English program of a public university and a private one in Ho Chi Minh City in relation to these three components. Findings show that these universities conformed to MoET's policy on language education but developed different approaches to language program design and assessment in order to achieve their respective learning outcomes and ensure the quality of language learning and teaching in their own contexts. This study provides course designers, coordinators and language teachers with in-depth understandings of the deployment of General English programs and the theoretical bases underpinning such processes. These insights will enable them to become more aware of the elements constituting such programs and the considerations to be taken in updating and innovating the language curricula.

_____

[1] Corresponding Author: University of Economics and Law, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam;
Email: cuongph@uel.edu.vn, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6876-0493
[2] Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Vietnam's foreign language development was shaped by its history of foreign domination, including languages such as Chinese (over a thousand years of China's invasion), French (France's colonization from 1859 to 1954), English (American domination from 1954 to 1975) and Russian (Vietnam's socio-political alliance with the USSR prior to the 1990s) (Lam & Albright, 2019; Phan, 2009). With the rapid integration of Vietnam into the global economy and its expanding relations with other countries in recent years, Wright (2002) argues that the premise for Vietnam's successful incorporation in the world's economic market consists in the foreign language proficiency of its workforce. In this context, the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (herein referred to as MoET) (MoET, 2008, p. 32) launched a project entitled Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system from 2008 to 2020 (also known as Project 2020) whose primary aims are to ensure that "by 2020, there will have been a dramatically increasing rate of Vietnamese learners who can communicate independently and confidently in foreign languages, study and work in multilingual and multicultural environments". These goals are reinforced in the revised Project 2020 for the period between 2017 and 2020 with its main emphasis on creating a breakthrough in the quality of language education through the mediation of technology, learning environments, reliable and valid assessment, and socialization of language education (MoET, 2017). In this vein, Bui et al. (2019) observe the following trend:

> The global expansion of English has powerfully driven wide-ranging Vietnamese language policy shifts. The current policy promotes English as a competitive edge that supports the nation's socio-economic development. English education is mandated for all students. Since the 2000s, English has been emphasized as the vital skill-set necessary for Vietnamese students to fully participate in the twenty-first century, which will enable them in achieving success, privilege, and high status in regional and global employability. (p. 54)

This established role of English as a dominant language for international communication and socioeconomic development in Vietnam has made it a

prerequisite for employment in both governmental and non-governmental sectors (Bui et al., 2019; Doan & Hamid, 2019; Hayden & Lam, 2010; Lam, 2019). To prepare graduates for better employability and integration in the global labor market, it is stipulated by MoET's (2014) Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDDT that upon their graduation, they must achieve Level 3 in the six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). This ministerial implementation has provoked certain concerns as "it is now applied to contexts different from the originating one of Europe, reflecting both the globalization and the localization trends in the language education industry" (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020, p. 2). However, together with the global status of English, this language exit benchmark has become a major driver for universities to focus more on planning, designing and deploying English programs, formulating learning outcomes as well as opting for assessment practices that foster students' viable development of language skills (Albright, 2019; Harman et al., 2010; Le & Chen, 2019). This study aims to shed light on the ways in which General English programs are designed and operates in the context of language education in Vietnam. Such insights offer a useful frame of reference for program designers, coordinators and teachers in similar contexts in which English is taught as a foreign language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learning Outcomes for General English Programs

Learning outcomes are defined as statements of "what a student knows, understands and is able to do on completion of the program" (The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, 2015, p. 23). In other words, they describe the knowledge and abilities students are expected to develop and can demonstrate such insights and competencies after a program ceases. However, this view of learning outcomes lends its focus to the cognitive dimensions and the skills inculcated through the program, so overlooks learners' attitudinal factors. From a more holistic perspective, Cheng and Fox (2017, p. 36) regard learning outcomes as "explicit statements of expectations (or criteria) that describe the skills, knowledge, attitudes

and capabilities that our students should achieve as a result of our work with them during a course." This conceptualization aligns with Guilbert's (1987) classification of learning outcomes that entails cognitive (or knowledge), psychomotor (skills) and affective (attitudes) components. This categorization not only concerns the cognitive and behavioral aspects of the program but also addresses the psychological domain, thus accounting for the knowledge to be mastered, the practical skills to be developed and the attitudes that are shaped during the course of study. To this end, Beaumont (2005) notes that the process of formulating learning outcomes must take account of other inextricably related elements such as course design and assessment.

Regarding the formulation of learning outcomes for General English programs in Vietnam, MoET's (2014) circular functions as the guiding principle whereby students are expected to achieve Level 3 which is equivalent to Level B1 in the CEFR (Le, 2018; Le & Pham, 2019). This framework aligns with Guilbert's (1987) cognitive and psychomotor types of learning outcomes highlighting the extent of knowledge and skills that need to be developed for communication. Despite the lack of explicit description of the affective domain as a discrete entity, this element is embedded in the CEFR depiction of learner competencies and characteristics. This entails learners' self-esteem (a positive self-image and lack of inhibition), involvement and motivation, physical and emotional states and attitudes (Council of Europe, 2001). The adoption of the CEFR which originated from Europe to the context of language education in Vietnam may pose certain challenges in the face of the differing socio-economic and educational settings. As Nguyen and Hamid (2020, p. 2) propound, the six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam "was still embryonic in its reference nature with most of the descriptors for language skills and can-do statements for learners' self-assessment being translated from the CEFR English version." One of the prominent features of the CEFR lies in its versatility in drafting learning outcomes for diverse uses and purposes although some degree of adaption of its level descriptors is essential in particular contexts (Figueras, 2012; Harsch, 2018; Read, 2019). The widespread diffusion of the CEFR in Vietnam is viewed by Ngo (2017) as an "innovation" for its contribution to

curriculum development and assessment.

2.2. Language Program Design

The design of a language program is heavily contingent on a number of elements including analysis of learners' needs, formulation of the aims and objectives of the program, syllabus planning, methodology and teaching techniques, and forms of assessing the learning outcomes (Richards, 2001). These processes are also determined by overarching sociocultural factors such as the context of language education, aspects of the target culture, and learners' language backgrounds and characteristics have substantial significance for curriculum design (Graves, 2016; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Richards (2013) describes and compares three approaches to curriculum design, i.e., forward design, central design and backward design, centering on three key components: input, process and learning outcomes. The input refers to the linguistic content of a course that is systematized and sequenced into units constituting a syllabus. The process concerns the activities, procedures, classroom techniques adopted by teachers and the principles behind the design of the activities and tasks in classroom materials. For the forward design, the linguistic content for instruction is decided prior to determining the teaching and learning methodology and the learning outcomes. The central design departs from opting for the appropriate activities, techniques and methods before deciding on the input and outcomes. Finally, in the backward design, statements of the desired learning outcomes are prioritized as the basis for resolving issues related to the language input and formulating the relevant methodology.

One important consideration, as Graves (2016) argues, is that curriculum design and planning must conform with the institutional and national guidelines and requirements. Within the context of language education in Vietnam, the design of a language program is strictly contingent on the curriculum framework prescribed by the MoET for all programs of study that consists of the objectives, the minimun knowlege requirements, structural curriculum components and the time allocation (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Phan et al., 2016). To achieve the expected learning outcomes aligned with the CEFR, time constraint is one of the prominent issues

impeding the effectiveness and efficiency of language courses (Le, 2018; Le & Pham, 2019; Trinh & Mai, 2019) as most General English programs fall short of the guided hours with respect to different levels of the CEFR (Table 1) proposed by Cambridge Assessment English (n.d.).

Table 1
Common European Framework Guided Learning Hours

CEFR level	Number of hours (approximate)
C2	1000 -1200
C1	700 - 800
B2	500 - 600
B1	350 - 400
A2	180 - 200
A1	90 - 100

2.3. Assessment in Language Education

Assessment is an important component in the design of a language program as it provides feedback for both teachers and learners in improving the quality of their teaching and their learning performance respectively, enabling them to sketch areas of improvement, and determining whether the expected learning outcomes are attained (Green, 2014; Richards, 2001). Assessment takes two primary forms with formative assessment evaluating learners' progress in their formation of competencies and skills while summative assessment measuring their achievement upon completion of a course of study (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018). The former is aligned with assessment for learning, i.e., providing teachers and learners with directions for their next stage of teaching and learning; the latter is in line with assessment of learning focusing on learners' mastery of knowledge and skills (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Assessment serves multiple purposes and functions depending on the types of assessment that are employed such as achievement tests, diagnostic tests, placement tests, proficiency tests and aptitude tests. For instance, achievement tests are designed to evaluate learners' ability to acquire certain skills and knowledge relevant to a particular material in the curriculum within a certain period of time whereas proficiency tests aim to measure "global competence" in a

language and are not specific to any course, curriculum or individual skills (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018, p. 11). One prevailing issue confronting current assessment practices in tertiary language education is attributable to "the tension between professionalism and pragmatism" (Elder, 2017, p. 276). In other words, universities tend to place an emphasis on English requirements and overlook the necessity of monitoring and fostering students' language development. Also, there is a relatively loose link between tasks for university assessment purposes and language use in professional settings (Elder, 2017; Forey, 2010; Knoch & Macqueen, 2016).

MoET's (2014) adoption of the CEFR in the context of Vietnam was an endeavor to respond to such a mismatch between language assessment in higher education and workplace communication needs to meet potential employers' expectations (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). It is essential to note that the CEFR level descriptors are not statements of learning objectives or outcomes but rather the observable abilities a learner develops at a specific level, so "shifting from observable behavior to achievable and identifiable targets is not always straightforward" (Figueras, 2012, p. 481). In addition, the CEFR was not designed for any given settings making it necessary to define the context and purpose(s) of assessment when it comes to aligning language proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEIC or Cambridge English Exams (e.g., KET, PET, FCE, CAE and CPE) to the CEFR levels (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2011). According to Le and Pham (2019), the CEFR contributes to "renew[ing]" assessment practices in Vietnam by addressing the connection among learning outcomes, assessment, materials and pedagogy. In the same vein, it is noticed that Vietnamese teachers of English have started to utilize teaching materials associated with CEFR-aligned tests, draw on the can-do statement checklist in designing classroom tasks and activities, and provide students with opportunities for self- and peer assessment (Le, 2018; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Settings

3.1.1. University A

University A is a public university with over 20 years of operation and a member of the Vietnam National University system. This label of national university distinguishes itself from the rest of public universities in Vietnam in the level of state investment, educational service, teaching quality, and research achievement. In its statement of vision, the university strives to become a research-oriented institution of an international standard that equips students with the capability of working in the global context. University A is committed to fulfilling its mission of augmenting social development through education, research and services in the realm of economics, law and management. One of the aims of the university is to prepare students for global employability through its focus on promoting English as a language of communication on campus and a medium of instruction.

The university has two entities in charge of language education: the Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) and the Center for Foreign Languages and Informatics Science (CFIS). The former is a not-for-profit body whose primary responsibilities involve designing, deploying and managing the GEP as well as counseling all activities concerning the use of English at the university such as seminars on language learning strategies and staff language training. DFL has a faculty of 14 full-time teachers of English and a regular batch of about 10 part-time teachers. The latter runs as an independent business under the management of the university and offers short-term courses in English and information technology. One of its chief roles includes providing language support for students who fail to meet the language entry requirement through the English Consolidation program. CFIS also offers students extra language courses in preparation for international English language proficiency tests, particularly TOEIC.

3.1.2. University B

University B is a multidisciplinary private university established for over 12 years. It aims to provide education at an international academic standard with the

philosophy of quality, efficiency and global integration. The university's mission is to empower students with academic knowledge, professional skills, a global mindset and readiness for viable labor markets within and outside Vietnam as well as strengthen international partnerships in higher education. It has connected with a wide network of universities around the world through student exchanges and collaborative programs. To these ends, the university considers developing the students' English language proficiency and confidence in language use its top priority through the implementation of an intensive GEP, supporting activities and language resources.

The sole body in charge of English language education and language-related activities at University B is the Faculty of English (FE). The faculty hosts approximately 30 full-time Vietnamese teachers, 50 part-time Vietnamese teachers and 25 part-time foreign teachers. FE is responsible for two main programs: the English language program for students specializing in English linguistics and the GEP for students in other disciplines. It offers informal learning spaces for students through frequent seminars on language learning strategies and test-taking skills, mock tests, diverse out-of-class learning activities and interaction with invited English-speaking guests.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study drew on document analysis of the General English program descriptions currently in circulation at the two respective universitities and their statements of expected learning outcomes issued publicly. According to Bowen (2009, pp. 27-28), "Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents … The analytic procedure entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents." In this analytical approach, data can be derived from a wide range of sources and cultural materials in both printed and electronic or textual and visual forms such as books, journals, minutes of meetings, reports and charts archived in libraries or organizational files. It offers synthetic and holistic insights into the actual operations and practices of a particular institution. The main emphasis is laid on "discovery and description" that

involves accounting for contextual elements, seeking the underlying messages, features and processes exhibited in the documents under scrutiny (Altheide et al., 2008, p. 128). The process of analysis thus allows a certain degree of flexibility in interpreting the data and taking into consideration any emerging elements (Love, 2003). The data from document analysis were then compared and contrasted with those identified in other studies on English language education in Vietnam as well as those informed by current practices locally and internationally. Such a comparative approach aimed to validate and consolidate the findings of the present study.

Following Bowen's (2009) four stages, I contacted the two academic institutions to request the descriptions and related documents on the General English program and elicited their permission for utilizing them as data for the present study. I then classified and highlighted the pieces of documents concerning the statements of learning outcomes, program design, syllabi, and assessment materials and only retained the latest information. I then appraised the selected textual contents in light of the literature on program design and assessment to understand the principles and approaches underpinning their institutional practices. Finally, I assembled all related data under three broad themes of learning outcomes, program design and assessment as they are the main concerns in this study.

4. Results

4.1. The General English Program at University A

4.1.1. Learning outcomes

Students completing the GEP are expected to achieve Level B1.4 based on the adapted Common European Framework of Reference illustrated in Table 2. This modified version divided each level of the CEFR into more specific sub-levels that aim to facilitate course design and measurement of students' learning outcomes at the end of each course.

Table 2

The CERF versus the Modified CEFR

CEFR	A1		A2		B1				B2		C1		C2	
Modified CEFR	A1.1	A1.2	A2.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.2	B1.3	B1.4	B2.1	B2.2	C1.1	C1.2	C2.1	C2.2

An internationally recognized English language certificate equivalent to Level B1.4 is required for graduation. The university encourages the students to take TOEIC as it is one of the most desirable language certificates among potential employers and has a business orientation that aligns with the areas of expertise of the students. The university issued a table of score equivalence as in the following:

Table 3
Score Equivalence among Internationally Recognized Language Tests - University A

Modified CEFR	IELTS	TOEFL iBT	TOEIC		Cambridge English	Institutional test
			Listening & Reading	Speaking & Writing		
B1.4	5.0	46	500	221	154 (PET)	226

As can be seen from Table 3, in addition to internationally recognized language certificate, University A also accepts the results of an institutional test specifically designed for students within the national university system to which the university belongs. The practice of using the results of this test as a language exit benchmark has provoked much controversy as its validity and reliability has not been externally verified.

4.1.2. The GEP design

The GEP at University A comprises four levels with the duration and number of credits (each credit includes 15 fifty-minute classroom contact hours) detailed in Table 4. To be eligible for taking EN01, students must achieve Level A2.2 in the modified CEFR (see Table 4.1.1). Otherwise, they have to take courses offered by CFIS and pass a qualifying test equivalent to Level A2.2.

Table 4
The Design of the GEP - University A

Course titles	Duration (hours)	No. of credits	Language contents
English 1 (EN01)	62.5	5	Business-oriented English
English 2 (EN02)	62.5	5	Business-oriented English
English 3 (EN03)	62.5	5	Business-oriented English
English 4 (EN04)	62.5	5	Business-oriented English
Total	250	20	

The courses adopt a backward design (Richards, 2013) with the specifications of learning outcomes functioning as the basis for developing instructional processes and language contents. This design complies with the university's language exit benchmark of Level B1.4 and the allotted credits for language education within the curriculum (i.e., 20 credits). The amount of time for classroom delivery of language contents is also contingent on the assumption that the students are to expend their personal effort to learn English outside classrooms that is equivalent to the duration of each course. One important note is that the final score for each level of the GEP does not contribute to students' grade point average (GPA) but serves as a prerequisite for the next level and a condition for internal scholarship applications. The students work with only teachers of Vietnamese nationality during the whole program.

4.1.3. Assessment

Language assessment at University A comprises three components: ongoing assessment, online language practice and a final exam (see Table 5). Despite the label of "ongoing assessment", it is undertaken only once in the middle of the course with a weight of 10% for each skill. The teacher in charge of each class designs the listening and reading test items and receives the speaking and writing test sets from the DFL. The students are also required to conduct regular language practice using an online interface associated with the English textbook. The score for online practice is recorded automatically by the system. The final exam is

achievement-based involving reading, vocabulary, grammar and elements of pronunciation such as distinguishing discrete sounds and identifying the stress patterns of the vocabulary covered in the textbook. The final exam items are designed by the DFL with validation from the head or deputy head of the department. Although the university encourages the students to take TOEIC to be qualified for graduation, the exam item types bear little resemblance to this test.

Table 5
Assessment Categories, Areas of Assessment and Weights for EN01 – EN06

Assessment categories	Areas of assessment	Weights	Notes
Ongoing assessment	speaking, listening, reading and writing	40% (10% for each skill)	The speaking and writing tests are designed by the DFL. The reading and listening tests are designed by the teachers in charge. All test items simulate TOEIC.
Online language practice	vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading and writing	10% (online tasks)	Rated automatically
Final exam	sounds, stress patterns, vocabulary, grammar and reading	50%	Designed by DFL. Test items do not resemble those in TOEIC.

4.2. The General English Program at University B

4.1.1. Learning outcomes

The language requirement for graduation at University B is equivalent to Level B1 in the CEFR. The university also developed a score equivalence table across internationally recognized language test as follows:

Table 6
Score Equivalence among Internationally Recognized Language Tests - University B

CEFR	IELTS	TOEFL	TOEIC	Cambridge	Aptis

		iBT	Listening & Reading	English	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
B1	5.5	65	605	162 (FCE)	36	30	38	38

With its aims to promote English as a medium of classroom communication and interaction on campus as well as to enhance students' employability in the global market, University B sets a relatively high language exit benchmark equivalent to IELTS 5.5. Despite the wide range of choices of language certificates, the university favors IELTS over the others in the belief that it better prepares students for postgraduate studies or overseas job applications. Meeting this language requirement is a formidable challenge for the students given the variations in their levels of language proficiency upon entry into the university.

4.1.2. The GEP design

The GEP at University B consists of seven levels with the duration and number of credits detailed in Table 7. There is no language entry requirement to enter the GEP but each level is a prerequisite for the next.

Table 7
The Design of the GEP - University B

Course titles	Duration (hours)	No. of credits	Language contents
GEP 1	50	4	English for classroom and workplace communication
GEP 2	50	4	English for classroom and workplace communication
GEP 3	50	4	English for classroom and workplace communication
GEP 4	50	4	English for classroom and workplace communication
GEP 5	50	4	English for classroom and workplace communication IELTS test-taking strategies
GEP 6	50	4	English for classroom and workplace

Course titles	Duration (hours)	No. of credits	Language contents
			communication
			IELTS test-taking strategies
GEP 7	50	4	English for IELTS preparation
Total	350	28	

A backward design with the expected language output equivalent to Level B1 in the CEFR underpins the overall design of the GEP. The first four levels place an emphasis on developing students' language skills for classroom and workplace communication while the last three levels integrate IELTS test-taking elements to ensure that the students can satisfy the language exit requirement. The course length was designed with reference to the guided learning hours from Cambridge Assessment English (n.d.). The GEP scores contribute significantly to students' GPA and determine their eligibility for a tuition fee waiver or deduction for the next academic year. This policy serves a source of motivation for the students to expend effort to learn English. There is a combination of teachers of Vietnamese nationality and those from English-speaking countries as a way to create an international environment at the university. The foreign teachers are in charge of speaking skills and pronunciation, and their classroom contact time accounts for 30% of the total duration of the GEP. After completing the GEP, students will continue to enhance their language skills in courses with English as a medium of instruction (EMI courses) constituting 30% of all courses in their respective disciplines.

4.1.3. Assessment

The GEP at University B entails both formative and summative assessment. The tests for GEP1 to GEP6 aim to measure the students' achievements in four language skills, vocabulary and grammar from GEP 1 to GEP 6 (see Table 8) while GEP7 assists the students in preparing for the IELTS test through IELTS-simulated items (Table 9). There are four categories of assessment within each course including (1) attendance which requires students to be present in class and involved in classroom activities, (2) ongoing assessment with a variety of classroom-based tasks, quizzes and quick tests throughout the course, (3) a mid-term test focusing on speaking skills administered by

a native English-speaking teacher, and (4) a computer-based final exam. All tests and activities and the final exam are based on the contents covered in class with the aim of evaluating the students' progress throughout the course and their achievement at the end of the course. The ongoing tasks and activities are designed by the teachers in charge of each class resulting in certain variations in the form and format of assessment while the final exam is extracted from a set of test items readily designed and validated by FE. For the final exam, each student has their own test which follows the same structure and item types but varies in terms of contents.

Table 8
Assessment Categories, Areas of Assessment and Weights for GEP1 - GEP6

Assessment categories	Areas of assessment		Weights	Notes
Attendance	classroom participation		10%	Attendance checking per class meeting
Ongoing assessment	vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening and writing		20%	Varied & decided by teachers in charge
Mid-term test	speaking	GEP1-GEP4	20%	Individual or pair work designed by FE
		GEP5-GEP6	20%	Designed by FE Simulating IELTS items
Final exam	listening, vocabulary, grammar and reading		50%	Designed by FE

Table 9
Assessment Categories, Areas of Assessment and Weights for GEP7

Assessment categories	Areas of assessment	Weights	Notes
Attendance	classroom participation	10%	Attendance checking per class meeting
Ongoing assessment	writing	20%	Designed by the FE
Mid-term test	speaking	20%	Simulating IELTS items
Final exam	listening & reading	50%	

5. Discussion

This study examines general English programs in terms of learning outcomes,

program design and assessment from a comparative perspective. It is evident from the case studies of the two universities presented in this study that there is little congruence in the design and deployment of the GEP. While MoET establishes the curriculum framework with the minimum number of credits for undergraduate level (MoET, 2007) and the language exit benchmarks based on the CEFR-aligned framework (MoET, 2014), no specific guidelines for the GEP have been issued. Both University A and University B adhere to such policies with certain adaptation in their approaches to program design, language requirements and assessment practices depending on their own context, the students' levels of language proficiency upon university entrance and their anticipated labor market needs. They both adopt a backward design in the GEP which is essentially outcome-oriented (Richards, 2013), aiming to empower students with language skills for their academic studies, preparation for global integration, and enhanced employability by setting relatively high language exit standards, i.e., the higher end of the CEFR B1 spectrum. Whereas University A places a language entry requirement equivalent to A2.2 due to its prestige as a public university in the national university system and the superior quality of student intake, University B does not impose such conditions. This accounts for the discrepancies in the amount of time for English education in the program design. Both universities endeavor to allocate sufficient time for English lessons to ensure students can achieve the expected learning outcomes according to guided learning hours recommended by Cambridge Assessment English (n.d.).

With regard to the scores mapped to the corresponding CEFR levels among international language certificates, there is a considerable variation in the test score alignments mandated by the two universities and the types of language certificate accepted. Along with internationally recognized tests, University A endorses an institutional language proficiency test valid within its national university system. This practice is problematic as this test is not accredited by any external organizations and holds rather limited credentials in the labor market in Vietnam. Such policies are attributable to the differing approaches to setting learning outcomes. One prominent shortcoming in formulating the learning outcomes is that both universities tend to underscore the cognitive and psychomotor components by

stipulating the knowledge and skills aligned with the CEFR that the students are obligated to achieve upon graduation, thus overlooking the roles of affective elements. Given the overwhelming body of research on the significance of affective factors to learners of English in the context of language education in Vietnam, such as attitudes (Phan, 2009), motivation (Coyle, 2014; Pham, 2016; Truong, 2017), learner agency (Felix, 2019; White & Pham, 2017) and autonomy (Dang, 2010; Le, 2009), the GEP needs to take them into serious consideration.

The employment of native English-speaking teachers in the GEP at University B is also a distinguishing feature from those in most universities in Vietnam. As a private university, University B has an advantage in setting a tuition fee higher than those of public universities, allowing it to allocate budget for hiring foreign teachers. This is also part of its strategies for creating an image of an international university. With the growing popularity of information communication technology language learning and teaching (Liu & Chao, 2018; Reinders & Stockwell, 2017), University B fails to integrate technological elements in their program design whereas University A provides online resources accompanied with the textbook for students to practice English outside classrooms.

The two universities adopt quite similar forms of assessment with both formative and summative components. However, there are certain differences in the assessment categories. All language skills are evaluated by Vietnamese teachers of English at University A and carry the same weights whereas speaking accounts for a higher percentage than other categories in the ongoing assessment at University B and is rated by native-English speaking teachers. Despite having the same weights of 50%, the final exam focuses on relatively dissimilar language skills, aspects and item types. A striking difference is that University B tends to take more cautious steps in preparing students for its target language proficiency test by integrating components of the IELTS test in its assessment.

6. Conclusion

This study provides glimpses of the design and deployment of General English programs in Vietnam and the theoretical bases underpinning such processes. These

insights contribute significantly to understandings of the elements constituting these programs and the considerations to be taken in updating and innovating language curricula as well as enhancing the quality of language education. The case studies of the GEP at the two universities point to certain inconsistencies existing in implementing MoET's policies and the degree of conformity with the CEFR descriptors and guidelines in the formulation of learning outcomes, program design and assessment.

There seems to be a loose link between foreign language policies and realities concerning the practicality of implementing language exit benchmarks for university graduates. In other words, different fields of academic studies and industries may require graduates' English language proficiency at different levels, calling for the necessity of investigating market needs in devising the CEFR-aligned learning outcomes specific to each major rather than imposing the same language standards for students from different disciplines. Such a market needs analysis is also crucial for designing the relevant GEP in response to learners' idiosyncrasies, employers' expectations and teachers' understandings of the context of language education to optimize quality, efficiency and employability for graduates. This is important because "any failure to adequately address the English language needs of the student population during the course of the academic study cycle in turn creates pressure when students transition from the university to the workplace" (Elder, 2017, p. 281).

Despite the fact that the GEP outcomes and design are informed by MoET's policies and framework, each university sets its own language benchmark and shows preferences for a particular CEFR-aligned language test based on its specific context and educational strategies. This allows them to focus more on preparing students for the target test in terms of providing relevant language input, practice and test-taking skills. However, this practice illustrates a test-oriented approach to language education rather than empowers students with linguistic knowledge and skills for academic studies and employability when it comes to workplace communication and language use in real life. Doan and Hamid (2019, p. 13) point out that "employers do not demand specific grades in English; they are after the

actual ability to use language communicatively so that employees can fulfil the English language demands of the jobs." This is an important element in determining the learning outcomes, the language input and the integration of such contents in the program in the way that creates environments and opportunities for students' authentic language use.

Another issue arises from the program design and assessment of the GEP which are supposedly reliant on the CEFR can-do statements and guidelines. However, the choice of contents and assessment practices through the cases of University A and University B tend to diverge significantly from this framework and is still heavily impacted by an achievement-based approach. It is necessary that each course within the GEP be mapped to relevant CEFR levels with specific descriptions of the extent of alignment. Language assessment should also aim for students' ongoing development of linguistic knowledge and skills, i.e., assessment for learning (Cheng & Fox, 2017), by giving timely feedback and pinpointing areas for improvement with the support of teachers and the mediation of learning tools and resources.

The GEP in most universities in Vietnam tends to center around achieving the learning outcomes measured by students' scores in language proficiency tests such as TOEIC and IELTS, thus downplaying the roles of affective factors. More awareness-raising activities are recommended in order to foster students' positive attitudes towards language learning and the rewards from acquiring a high level of proficiency. These activities can take place within each lesson through simulation of scenarios of actual language use and role-plays, or outside classrooms through seminars, guest speakers, role models of successful language learners, job fairs or mock interviews where English is the language of communication (Benson, 2011; Murphey & Arao, 2001; Richards, 2015). This contributes to enhancing students' perceptions of the value of English for their personal, academic and professional development as well as the feasibility of acquiring the language through examples of their peer learners.

In the face of the constraints of language education in Vietnam, especially the time and environments for language practice, it is important to inculcate a habit of regular language practice outside classrooms by making use of virtual platforms,

technologies and online resources (Chun et al., 2016; Hampel & Hauck, 2006). A common practice employed by most universities is making use of the digital materials and tasks associated with textbooks. Although this provides students with a wealth of homework assignments, managing their performance on this platform requires more stringent measures. In addition, Egbert (2018, p. 1) notes that "while computer use in language teaching and rapid developments of new technologies have increased the access that students have to language and content, there has not been a radical change in language teaching methods." Teacher training as well as their personal efforts to adapt to innovations in educational technology would immensely benefit language teaching and enhance the quality of the GEP.

The present study provides signification implications for program designers, administrators and other stakeholders within and beyond the context of English language education in Vietnam. First, it offers a theoretical perspective on setting learning outcomes, formulating a framework for program design and opting for forms of assessment that best suit the local policies and practices in English language education. Second, the limitations and challenges in implementing the GEPs, and the ways in which the two universities in the present study deployed their programs can function as a frame of reference for tackling contingent issues in similar contexts. Particularly, with the popularity of the CEFR as a guideline for program design and deployment, and the practice of setting language entry/exit benchmarks based on internationally recognized language certificates such as IELTS and TOEIC, it is advisable that stakeholders consider the current situation and conditions of language education in their own institutions and the feasibility of adopting them in their respective contexts. Third, this study also addresses the salience of aligning the learning outcomes, program deployment and assessment in response to learners' needs, institutional requirements and social demands. To this end, either formal or informal research with concerned parties including learners, teachers, language experts, and potential employers would be useful in devising achievable learning outcomes, language benchmarks and assessment approaches. Finally, the established role of English as a medium of communication and instruction globally and the current internationalization of education call for the compatibility among language curricula (Albright, 2019; Forey, 2010). This study

thus contributes to facilitating understandings of program design currently adopted in a specific EFL country for such process of program mapping and alignment.

References

Albright, J. (Ed.). (2019). *English tertiary education in Vietnam*. Routledge.

Altheide, D., Coyle, M., DeVriese, K., & Schneider, C. (2008). Emergent qualitative document analysis. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 127–151). The Guilford Press.

Beaumont, R. (2005). *Learning outcomes: A practical guide*. University of Newcastle.

Benson, P. (2011). Language learning and teaching beyond the classroom. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom* (pp. 7–16). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Brown, H. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2018). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (3rd ed.). Pearson.

Bui, T., Nguyen, T. T. T., & Nguyen, D. A. (2019). Vietnamese higher education language planning and university students' career development. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (pp. 54–67). Routledge.

Cambridge Assessment English. (n.d.). *Guided learning hours*. https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours

Cheng, L., & Fox, J. (2017). *Assessment in the language classroom*. Palgrave.

Chun, D., Smith, B., & Kern, R. (2016). Technology in language use, language teaching, and language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, *100*, 64–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12302

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge. http://www.coe.int/t/Dg4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

Coyle, D. (2014). Motivating teachers and learners as researchers. In D. Lasagabaster, A. Doiz, & J. M. Sierra (Eds.), *Motivation and foreign language learning: From theory to practice* (pp. 51–69). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Dang, T. T. (2010). Learner autonomy in EFL studies in Vietnam: A discussion from sociocultural perspective. *English Language Teaching*, *3*(2), 3–9.

Doan, L. D., & Hamid, M. O. (2019). Economics of English: Examining the demand for English proficiency in the Vietnamese job market. *RELC Journal*, 1-17. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0033688219863166

Egbert, J. (2018). CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) methodology. In *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Elder, C. (2017). Language assessment in higher education. In E. Shohamy, I. G. Or, & S. May (Eds.), *Language testing and assessment* (3rd ed., pp. 271–286). Spinger.

Felix, J. J. (2019). Agency as culture: Learner autonomy and motivation as ordinary. International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning Today 2019: Autonomy and Motivation for Language Learning in the Interconnected World, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Figueras, N. (2012). The impact of the CEFR. *ELT Journal*, *66*(4), 477–485. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccs037

Forey, G. (2010). Language globalization and the workplace: Education and social implications. In G. Forey & J. Lockwood (Eds.), *Globalization, communication and the workplace: Talking across the world* (pp. 251–270). Continuum.

Graves, K. (2016). Language curruculum design: Possibilities and realities. In G. Hall (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 79–94). Routledge.

Green, A. (2014). *Exploring language assessment and testing: Language in action*. Routledge.

Guilbert, J.-J. (1987). *Educational handbook for health personnel* (6th ed.). WHO.

Hampel, R., & Hauck, M. (2006). Computer-mediated language learning: Making meaning in multimodal virtual learning spaces. *The JALT CALL Journal*, *2*(2), 3–18.

Harman, G., Hayden, M., & Pham, N. T. (Eds.). (2010). *Reforming higher education in Vietnam: Challenges and priorities*. Springer.

Harsch, C. (2018). How suitable is the CEFR for setting university entrance standards? *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *15*(1), 102–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2017.1420793

Hayden, M., & Lam, Q. T. (2010). Vietnam's higher education system. In G. Harman, M. Hayden, & N. T. Pham (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in Vietnam: Challenges and priorities* (pp. 15–30). Springer.

Knoch, U., & Macqueen, S. (2016). Language assessment for the workplace. In D. Tsagari & J. Banerjee (Eds.), *Handbook of second language assessment* (pp. 291-308). De Gruyter Mouton.

Lam, L. T. (2019). General English for non-majors in higher education. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (pp. 86–101). Routledge.

Lam, T. L. H., & Albright, J. (2019). Vietnamese foreign language policy in higher education. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (pp. 1–15). Routledge.

Le, N. T. C. (2009). *Learner autonomy and EFL learning at the tertiary level in Vietnam* (PhD dissertation), Victoria University of Wellington,

Le, T. T., & Chen, S. (2019). Globalization and Vietnamese foreign language education. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (pp. 16–27). Routledge.

Le, T. T. H. (2018). Impacts of CEFR-aligned learning outcome implementation on assessment practice at tertiary level education in Vietnam: An exploratory study. *Hue University Journal of Science: Social Sciences and Humanities*, *127*(6B),

87–99. https://doi.org/10.26459/hueuni-jssh.v127i6B.4899

Le, T. T. H., & Pham, T. H. N. (2019). Implementing the CEFR at a Vietnamese university - General English language teachers' perceptions. *CEFR Journal - Research and Practice*, *1*, 41–57.

Liu, Q., & Chao, C.-C. (2018). CALL from an ecological perspective: How a teacher perceives affordance and fosters learner agency in a technology-mediated language classroom. *ReCALL*, *30*(1), 68–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344017000222

Love, P. (2003). Document analysis. In F. K. Stage & K. Manning (Eds.), *Research in the college context: Approaches and methods* (1st ed.). Routledge.

MoET. (2007). *Decision on the promulgation of the regulation on formal undergraduate education using the academic credit system*. Hanoi, Vietnam: MoET

MoET. (2008). *Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system from 2008 to 2020*. Hanoi, Vietnam Retrieved from http://tailieu.vn/doc/de-an-day-va-hoc-ngoai-ngu-trong-he-thong-giao-duc-quoc-dan-1331102.html

MoET. (2014). *Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDDT dated January 24, 2014 of the Ministry of Education and Training on promulgating the six-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam*. Hanoi, Vietnam: MoET

MoET. (2017). *Decision No. 2080/QD-TTg on the approval, adjustment and supplement of the project "Teaching and learning foreign language in the national education system in the period 2017-2025"*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Vietnam National Politic Publications

Murphey, T., & Arao, H. (2001). Reported belief changes through near peer role modelling. *TESL-EJ*, *5*(3). http://tesl-ej.org/ej19/a1.html

Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. Routledge.

Ngo, X. M. (2017). Diffusion of the CEFR among Vietnamese teachers: A mixed methods investigation. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, *19*(1).

Nguyen, V. H., & Hamid, M. O. (2015). Educational policy borrowing in a globalized world: A case study of Common European Framework of Reference for languages in a Vietnamese University. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, *14*(1), 60–74.

Nguyen, V. H., & Hamid, M. O. (2020). The CEFR as a national language policy in Vietnam: Insights from a sociogenetic analysis. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–13. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1715416

Pham, H. C. (2016). *An ecological perspective on the motivational trajectories of high school students learning English in rural areas in Vietnam* (Doctoral dissertation), Massey University.

Phan, T. N., Lupton, M., & Watters, J. J. (2016). Understandings of the higher education curriculum in Vietnam. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *35*(6), 1256–1268. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1149693

Phan, T. T. H. (2009). Impacts of Vietnam's social context on learners' attitudes towards foreign languages and English language learning: Implications for teaching and learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, *11*(4), 169–188.

Read, J. (2019). The influence of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the Asia-Pacific region. *Language Education and Acquisition Research Network Journal*, *12*(1), 12–18.

Reinders, H., & Stockwell, G. (2017). Computer-assisted SLA. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (pp. 361–375). Taylor and Francis Inc.

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C. (2013). Curriculum approaches in language teaching: Forward, central, and backward design. *RELC Journal*, *44*(1), 5–33. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0033688212473293

Richards, J. C. (2015). The changing face of language learning: Learning beyond

the classroom. *RELC Journal*, *46*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688214561621

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. (2015). *ECTS users' guide*. Erasmus+ Publications Office. https://doi.org/doi:10.2766/87592

Trinh, T. T. H., & Mai, T. L. (2019). Current challenges in the teaching of tertiary English in Vietnam. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (pp. 40–53). Routledge.

Truong, C. B. (2017). *The motivation of Vietnamese university students to learn English: A study using the expectancy-value model of academic motivation* The University of Newcastle]. New South Wales, Australia.

University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. (2011). *Using the CEFR: Principles of good practice*. Cambridge ESOL. https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/126011-using-cefr-principles-of-good-practice.pdf

White, C., & Pham, C. (2017). Time in the experience of agency and emotion in English language learning in rural Vietnam. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *11*(3), 207–218. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2017.1317256

Wright, S. (2002). Language education and foreign relations in Vietnam. In J. W. Tollefson (Ed.), *Language policies in education: Critical issues* (pp. 225–244). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

About the Author

Dr. Cuong Huy Pham is deputy head of the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Economics and Law, Vietnam National University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He obtained his Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Massey University, New Zealand. He has a wide range of teaching and research experience in both EAP and ESP contexts in New Zealand and Vietnam. His research interests include language learning motivation and emotion, language learners' agency, and English language education in rural settings.