



Original Article

Enhancing the Employability of Students Undertaking English Language and Linguistics Programs in Vietnam

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Abstract: This study addresses the development of employability skills among English-major graduates to facilitate their transition from university to the workplace. Contemporary research has pinpointed that universities fail to provide sufficient professional knowledge and work-related skills for their students. There is also a mismatch between the focus of academic programs and the demands and requirements from potential employers regarding graduates' performance. Drawing on the document analysis and simple descriptive statistics of the undergraduate English language/linguistics program descriptions of six different universities located across Vietnam, this study aims to explore how English-major students are equipped with employability skills and provide recommendations for promoting these skills. Findings show a substantial shift in reconsidering the imbalance between theoretical and practical components in the program design. The programs also exhibit certain degrees of preparation for students' employability through the curricular integration of generic skills such as critical thinking, public speaking, presentation skills, communication skills and research skills. This study demonstrates the significance of promoting work-related skills and strengthening university-industry partnerships in designing academic programs and providing English-major students with hands-on experience.

Keywords: Employability, generic skills, language education, English language, higher education.

1. Introduction

The transition from university to the workplace is a painstaking experience for most university graduates in Vietnam in an intensely competitive labor market [1]. This process

requires a high degree of preparation when they are still undertaking their undergraduate programs and close collaboration among stakeholders, particularly university administrators, students and prospective employers [2, 3]. In other words, multiple parties are involved in easing fresh graduates' access to employment through formulating program goals, designing the curriculum, and conducting various student

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mobility activities. Such cooperative endeavors also entail identifying areas of professional knowledge and work-related skills that need to be incorporated into academic programs [2, 4]. These offer students the opportunities to be psychologically ready for indulging themselves in the work environment and gain hands-on insights into the nature of their future occupations. Students will also become more aware of the requirements in professional knowledge as well as the skill sets that they are expected to possess prior to their departure for employment.

With the escalating role of English as a language for global communication and international business [5], the Vietnam Ministry of Education (MoET) has implemented a number of measures in elevating the level of English language proficiency among university graduates to enhance the competitiveness of the local workforce [6]. In this context, MoET 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 with the ability to communicate independently and confidently in foreign languages, study and work in multilingual and multicultural environments” [7]. These goals are reinforced in the revised Project 2020 for the period between 2017 and 2025 with its main emphasis on creating a breakthrough in the quality of education and socializing language education [8]. This also underlies a high demand for students specializing in English language and linguistics who are not only fluent in English but also capable of performing various professional tasks. This study therefore aims to explore the extent to which universities in Vietnam prepare their English-major students for employability and provide recommendations for promoting employability skills for their graduates.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employability and Employability Skills

Providing students with sufficient professional knowledge and work-related competencies is one of the chief responsibilities of academic institutions [9, 10]. Professional and practical insights into future occupations contribute to maximizing students’ employability upon their graduation. According to Pool and Sewell [11, pp. 280], “Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful”. This view places an emphasis on the cognitive, experiential and personal development of students in relation to their areas of expertise [11]. In other words, students are expected to develop both discipline-specific or professional knowledge as well as generic skills necessary for smooth integration into the work environment. However, contemporary research and practices in curriculum design tend to overlook these elements [1, 4, 9, 10].

According to Clanchy and Ballard [12], generic skills can be classified into three discrete categories of activities including analytical thinking, research skills, and communication. Analytical thinking concerns subskills such as problem solving, decision-making, evaluating, reasoning, questioning, and hypothesizing. The second category requires equipping students with knowledge of methods of research enquiry and the ability to access and manage information. The third category entails conformity to an array of communicative conventions, choice of forms of communication, e.g., verbal, statistical or visual, appropriate styles and relevant structuring of information. These skills serve as the foundations for students to gain in-depth insights into their areas of expertise as well as tackle issues emerging in the work context, thus enabling them to “to fully capitalize on their flexibility, mobility and practicality” [13, pp. 10].

Further, there is a tendency among employers to seek graduates with generic skills rather than academic achievements, sometimes with higher preference for the former than the latter [4, 11]. Generic skill sets partially align with learning and innovation skills for students to thrive in the twenty-first century focusing on creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration [14]. However, as Phuong and Huynh [15, pp. 31] observe, social and cultural skills as well as communication skills “are not commonly included in the university curriculum”. These limitations need to be adequately addressed in order to facilitate graduates’ access to the job market.

2.2. Repositioning the Role of Employability Skills English Language and Linguistics Programs in Vietnam

Contemporary research has shown that industries and students in Vietnam tend to downplay the role of university education in employment preparation to meet the demands of the labor market [4]. The frequently stated reasons entail the mismatch between the curriculum and the skill sets desired by employers [9, 16]. One of the formidable challenges hindering the integration of employability skills in the curriculum lies in the fact that this process requires drastic changes in the way lectures and classroom activities are conducted [17]. The limited preparation for students’ employability existing in Vietnam’s tertiary education has been portrayed by the low employment rate among graduates and the dissatisfaction often lamented among employers [9, 10, 18]. As Nguyen and Tran [13, pp. 5] note, “Universities and colleges are being required to align better with market needs and stakeholder demands; they are seeking to uplift teaching and learning quality, [and] improve graduate employability rates,...”. This calls for immediate changes in designing program objectives, curriculum structures and skill development activities with a more explicit focus on work-related elements as well as closer collaboration between tertiary institutions and industry [16, 19, 20].

Regarding English language and linguistics programs in Vietnam, an array of shortcomings in building up students’ employability have been identified in recent research. An investigation with English-major students regarding their readiness for the job market [21] shows relatively low degrees of confidence in the professional skills developed during their tertiary program. The participants attributed such a lack of occupational insights to the overarching emphasis of the curriculum on theoretical aspects, resulting in limited opportunities for practice and development of work-related skills. In their study with students specializing in translation and interpreting, Phuong and Huynh [15] point to the paramount importance of extending both linguistic and professional knowledge and sociocultural skills such as communication and teamwork. A similar scenario was presented in an investigation into the alignment between the curriculum and learning outcomes in English language teacher education that was carried out at eleven universities across Northern, Central, and Southern regions of Vietnam [22]. This study reveals that the trainee English teachers demonstrated poor practical knowledge of the context of high schools, with courses dedicated to sharpening students’ professional experience only accounting for 4.09% of the total program. Pham’s research with 600 students in broader domains of social sciences and humanities provides corroborating evidence that their ability to respond to job requirements in terms of professional knowledge and competencies remains at an average level despite their demonstration of quick adaptability to the work environment [23]. The overriding weaknesses lie in their limited expertise in the fields they were trained. These constraints in the academic program point to the necessity of empowering university graduates with a solid foundation of professional knowledge and skills as well as hands-on experience in the rapidly changing world and demanding job market.

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials and Instruments

This study draws on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative tools with a primary focus on the former, including document analysis to gain insights into the undergraduate English language/linguistics programs and simple descriptive statistics. Document analysis is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” through which “data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” [24, pp. 27]. It is composed of three stages: superficial examination of the materials collected to determine their relevance, thorough scrutiny of the shortlisted documents, and finally interpretation of the data. This iterative process involves aspects of both content analysis and thematic categorization that will be presented in detail in Section 3.3.

In relation to data collection, this study employed convenience sampling for the ease of access to the desired data sources [25]. However, three criteria were formulated to ensure that sufficient and relevant data were obtained, including: i) The geographical distribution of the universities whose English language/linguistics program was opted for analysis; ii) The availability of the program descriptions for inclusion; and iii) The amount of detail that could be elicited from such descriptions. The universities under investigation should be representative of the three distinct regions of Vietnam. For convenience, only those programs available for public access on the websites of the universities were selected. The program descriptions

considered for inclusion must entail the program objectives, program learning outcomes, curriculum structure and other specifications such as course classifications, course length, and course credits. Each credit is equated to 15 hours of classroom instruction, 30-45 hours of practical training, or 45-60 hours of research and thesis writing; an undergraduate program must consist of at least 120 credits [26]. This study does not aim to address the program discrepancies between public and private institutions, so the types of university was not part of the criteria.

3.2. Data Gathering

Initially, I listed universities located across the three geographical regions and browsed their websites for information related to the English language/linguistics programs. From the list of 20 program descriptions and other accompanied documents, I opted for the ones that met the second and third criteria. The shortlist consists of the programs from six universities labelled as University A-F, including four public and two private institutions. For ethical purposes, the identity of the institutions was kept anonymous using pseudonyms; the evaluations made throughout this article were of a general manner and did not intend to undervalue the curriculum design and implementation of any universities concerned. Each program comprises a range of specializations, such as Business English, English Language Teaching, Translation and Interpreting, Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, and International Studies, depending on their faculty and professional capacities. Details related to the universities and the programs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of the six universities and their English language/linguistics programs

Institutions	Types of institution	Location	No. of credits	No. of specializations
University A	Public	Northern	128	4
University B	Public	Northern	154	3
University C	Public	Central	138	1
University D	Public	Southern	145	3
University E	Private	Southern	144	3
University F	Private	Southern	131	4

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through simple descriptive statistics and content analysis of the program descriptions as the primary methods of data analysis. The statistics resulted from the act of counting, e.g., the numbers of theoretical, practical courses, and their corresponding credits, and converting them into percentages. For content analysis, as guided by Mayring [27], I drew on the theoretical overview in Section 2 to classify the data into different themes according to pre-formulated theoretical categories. These categories concern employable attributes, the gap between theoretical and practical components in the curriculum, generic and work-related skills, and

the responsiveness of the programs to market demands and requirements.

4. Results

4.1. Bridging the Theory-practice Gap

Despite the differing labels for knowledge clusters in the program descriptions of these universities, for the purpose of analysis within this study, only courses related to English language and linguistics are considered and classified as “specialized courses”. Courses that provide students with general knowledge and are mainly delivered in Vietnamese are excluded from the data in this section.

Table 2. The weights of practical components in the curriculum

Institutions	No. of specialized courses	No. of courses with practical components	Percentage of courses with practical components
University A	25	25	100
University B	28	18	64.29
University C	32	21	65.63
University D	29	18	62.07
University E	30	18	60.00
University F	31	16	51.61

As can be seen from Table 2, practical components are integrated in the English language/linguistics curricula at the six universities with varying proportions. While 100% specialized courses at University A allocate certain class hours for practice, the weights of practical components in the remaining curricula account for just above half of the courses. There are also significant discrepancies in the amount of time for theory and practice within each course. For courses that aim to develop language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening, the theory-practice ratio ranges from 3:1 to 1:2. For courses on linguistics, culture, literature, or professionally related skills such as translation, interpreting or language teaching methodology, the common ratio is 2:1. An exception could be found in the curriculum at University A in

which courses with high professional concentration, namely Advanced Translation, Advanced Interpretation, or Professional Aspects of Translation and Interpreting, the theory-practice ratio escalates to 1:2. These statistics substantiated the shift towards placing a more pronounced focus on practical components in the curriculum [10, 28]. However, most core courses in English linguistics, e.g., semantics and discourse analysis, still prioritize a substantial amount of class hours for theoretical input, even with no time for practice.

4.2. Development of Generic Skills

Generic skills under Clanchy and Ballard’s categorization [12] are explicitly stated in the program objectives and learning outcomes in all the English language/linguistics program

descriptions at the universities in this study. For example, students are expected to develop or acquire the following skills and attributes:

Having the ability to utilize logical reasoning and problem-solving skills in tackling major-related issues; having logical thinking and systematic thinking in resolving problems concerning their majors and other socio-economic and cultural issues; exercising autonomy in problem-solving; having the ability to identify and solving problems with creativity and confidence; taking initiatives in career development through autonomous learning and life-long learning; working effectively in teams, demonstrating operational and leadership skills; having excellent communicative skills in both spoken and written forms. (University A, Vietnamese in the original, translated by the author)

Having skills for critical thinking, problem-solving, research and innovation; being a change factor in their career; having soft skills, teamwork, management and leadership skills. (University C, Vietnamese in the original, translated by the author)

Applying linguistic skills to synthesize, critique and present issues of their discipline in a clear and correct manner; evaluating the viewpoints, arguments and results of research on professional issues to draw conclusions and propose appropriate and effective solutions. (University E, English in the original)

It is evident that all the English language/linguistics programs strive to

empower students with sufficient generic skills for undertaking their academic studies as well as preparing themselves for future careers. However, the degrees at which these skills are represented in the curriculum vary among the universities. Table 3 lists the courses that align with Clanchy and Ballard's classification of generic skills [12]. While critical thinking skills are taught as a discrete course at University A and University C, the common practice in the rest of the universities is to incorporate them into specialized courses. Courses on research, communication and academic study skills are also delivered at most of the universities under different course titles. Research methodology is taught by all the six universities aiming to help students gain insights into conducting small-scale projects through sub-skills such as identifying the research problem, devising instruments for gathering data, managing, analyzing and presenting the data into a systematic report. With the exception of University B, all other universities offer courses for sharpening communication skills. For instance, the students at University D can take courses on presentation skills and public speaking, whereas students at University F are exposed to a variety of opportunities for improving communication and presentation skills in Public Speaking and Project Design as well as making use of diverse communicative tools in Social Media and Interactive Communications.

Table 3. Courses with explicit consideration of generic skills

Institutions	Courses for generic skills
University A	Scientific Research Methodology, Critical Thinking, Skills for University Success, Intercultural Communication
University B	Research Methodology
University C	College Study Skills, Critical Thinking, Research Methods, Business Communication
University D	Research Methods, Presentation Skills, Public Speaking
University E	Communication Skills, Research Methods,
University F	Research Methodology, Public Speaking, Project Design, Social Media and Interactive Communications

These findings reveal that the English language/linguistics programs at all the six universities take generic skills relatively seriously in their curriculum design. Although they adopt different approaches, either by offering distinct courses or integrating them in specialized courses, whether the learning outcomes could be achieved and the extent of their achievement extend beyond the scope of the present study. However, contemporary research has suggested more stringent implementation of such skill development programs are desired in order to efficiently empower graduates with competencies they need for effectively merging into the work environment [9, 15, 20].

4.3. Elements of Work-integrated Learning

The most conspicuous component that indicates the incorporation of work-related learning in the curricula is the internship. Once fulfilling the requirements of specialized courses, the students at the six universities will spend a certain amount of time as interns in

companies, businesses and educational institutions that have partnerships with the universities. The internship duration ranges from 8 weeks (equivalent to 2 credits) to 16 weeks (4 credits); however, it only accounts for a minor proportion of the whole academic program (see Table 4). Such a low percentage of professional practice found in the present study is consistent with the figure presented by Nguyen and Vu [22].

At University B, the students are exposed to the real-life work environment on two occasions, i.e., pre-internship period of 12 weeks (3 credits) and the formal internship for another 12 weeks (3 credits), constituting a total of 6 credits. The main tasks during the pre-internship period include the students' observation of the workplace and assisting certain professional activities. During the internship, the students can become more involved in professional activities as staff members, enabling them to utilize their professional knowledge and skills.

Table 4. The allocation of internship in the curriculum

Institutions	Total credits	Internship credits	Internship percentage
University A	128	3	2.34
University B	154	6	3.90
University C	138	2	1.45
University D	145	4	2.76
University E	144	3	2.08
University F	131	3	2.29

In addition to the internship, these university also endeavor to create a work-integrated learning environment for their students. The students at University B, for example, are encouraged to participate in diverse career-orientation activities such as career-orientation weeks, job fairs, and job-seeking seminars. Some universities have established connections with industry in introducing service-learning in their program

either formally or informally. While University E offers an elective course entitled "ELT Service Learning" that allows students to deliver lessons in real language classes, University F weaves service learning in certain specialized courses such as Translation and English Language Teaching. These attempts contribute to helping students accumulate hands-on experience prior to their graduation and have been found to be highly beneficial [17, 19, 20, 28].

4.4. Responsiveness to Market Demands and Requirements

In designing English language and linguistics programs, the university claim to have consulted stakeholders for their professional input. It is stated in the program description at University C that “the program is reviewed and updated on a two-year basis based on feedback from stakeholders”. Similarly, the program coordinators at University F conducted formal surveys with a large number of stakeholders who were CEOs, managers, or employees at various businesses and affiliations currently employing graduates in the field of English language and linguistics, experts and experienced teachers working inside and outside the university. The primary goal of these activities is to explore the market demands as well as the professional qualities and competencies graduates are expected to acquire for transition to the workplace.

The course descriptors also illustrate the effort expended by the universities to empower their students with professional knowledge and skills demanded by potential employers. For example, the key aspects of the Interpreting course at University C include increased exposure to tasks of sight and consecutive interpreting, development of learner’s ability to handle interpretation assignments, news writing, editing and presenting as well as refinement of learner’s interpreting skills through consolidated learner repertoire of interpretation. The course also engages students in individual, pair and group work activities through which they can develop themselves as independent and collaborative students. (University C, English in the original).

In the same vein, the course entitled “English Language Teaching 2” at University F is described as follows:

This course enables students to develop language teaching knowledge and skills including language teaching methodology, classroom management and lesson planning. Students can gain insights into language

teachers and learners’ psychology as well as techniques for teaching language skills and language aspects. They are given the opportunities for micro-teaching as well as receiving constructive feedback from lecturers and classmates (University F, Vietnamese in the original, translated by the author).

The process of obtaining stakeholders’ perspectives on program design and delivering the specialized courses based on the given descriptions shows the program responsiveness to the market demands and requirements. However, in real-life work environments, such professional attributes and competencies have been found to inadequately prepare graduates for employability [9, 21, 23], meaning closer collaboration between universities and industry is much needed.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings from the present study provide glimpses of the skills and attributes for employability constituting the design of a number of English language and linguistics programs offered by universities in Vietnam. It is evident that there have been significant and positive shifts in consideration of the amount of practical work compared to the theoretical input. This finding lies in relatively stark contrast with those in other studies on curriculum design that appeal for more appropriate allocation of class hours for practice [9, 22]. Although the universities in the present study have endeavored to integrate generic skills and work-related elements in the program in various ways and modes, namely integrating them in the formal curricula or through extracurricular activities, such implementations show lack of uniformity and vary in intensity. This situation not only exists in these universities but remains a primary concern at most local institutions [10, 20, 28]. Also, there are certain limitations in the extent to which these English language and linguistics programs respond to the expectations of employers

regarding the learning outcomes and the desired qualities of graduates such as the lack of obtaining input from stakeholders, especially graduates and those employers who recruited the students from the universities under investigation [4, 16]. However, the findings reveal increasing awareness of the value of collaborating with industry in curriculum design by adopting a more outcome-based approach that caters for the demands and requirements of the labor market.

To optimize English language/linguistics students' employability and mobility upon their graduation, changes and revisions are essential, not only in the program design but also the ways in which these programs are implemented. Aligned with a number of studies conducted in the context of Vietnam [15, 21, 22], the present study reiterates the need to integrate more practical components in the programs so that English-major students can sharpen professional skills prior to their internship and placement in real-life work environments. In other words, the curriculum should allocate more practice hours for students to utilize work-related skills, such as translation, interpreting or micro-teaching, which would enable them to put the theory they accumulated over the course of their studies into practice [20]. Work-integrated learning and teaching contribute to allowing students to devise plans for improving their areas of weakness in preparation for their transition from university to the workplace [1, 10, 23, 28].

A joint effort among stakeholders, particularly university administrators, course designers and potential employers, is highly needed for planning course contents, career orientation and practical skill development programs [3, 4]. The involvement from multiple parties helps translate industry's demands and requirements into specific learning outcomes and stipulate the areas of focus in the curriculum [28]. These goals could be achieved through different work-integrated activities such as hosting company tours, encouraging

students to participate in optional and mandatory internship programs, and organizing career talks, professional seminars and workshops. Such partnerships and student mobility activities substantially enrich their hands-on experience through the application of the knowledge and skills they master in real-life situations [2]. To this end, universities should devise their own model of work-integrated learning with more serious consideration of professional aspects in the academic program. Concurrently, they can invite guest lecturers who are currently in the profession to join the faculty as a way to expose students to the latest practices in their own field. For English language/linguistics students, the involvement of experienced translators and interpreters or language teachers in the teaching process would benefit them in terms of professional knowledge and skills or strategies for dealing with issues arising in their career.

It is also of great significance to articulately inform students of the program objectives and program learning outcomes right from the beginning of their tertiary education as this activity helps them "become more self-directed in learning, better understand the learning process, and recognize which skills are more important" [10, pp. 580]. Accordingly, students can formulate learning strategies for taking specialized courses as well as developing generic skills. For English-major students, this process involves allocating a certain amount of time and establishing a frequency of language practice and regular interaction with English speakers in addition to acquiring linguistic knowledge and professional skills. Therefore, universities should maximize their learning opportunities through extracurricular activities and social participation [9, 17]. Clubs that orient students toward sharpening particular professionally related skills such as Teaching Assistant Clubs, Translation Clubs, Interpreting Clubs or Community Service Clubs would be useful environments for them to discuss issues

in their specializations and work together in strengthening work-related skills.

One of the limitations of this study is in its focus on analyzing the program descriptions, thus failing to address the views of potential employers and graduates. As it was pointed out in the results and discussion, the universities claimed to have considered the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in designing, implementing, and revising such programs. However, for a more holistic approach to program evaluation as well as validation of the statements made by the universities, future studies may draw on insights from these entities to reflect on the efficiency and practicality of English language/linguistics programs.

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