



Original Article

Challenges Faced by Non-major Students in Learning English to Achieve the Outcomes at a Vietnam Public University

Nguyen Thuy Linh*, Pham Thuy Hang

*TNU - University of Information and Communication Technology,
Z115, Quyet Thang, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam*

Received 28th May 2024

Revised 24th June 2025; Accepted 03rd July 2025

Abstract: English has long been a subject of academic inquiry, with numerous studies examining the challenges students face in learning the language. This article aims to identify the difficulties encountered by non-English-major students in achieving English learning outcomes at a public university in Vietnam. In addition, the study seeks to propose practical solutions to address these challenges. The research employed a quantitative approach, using questionnaires administered to 300 second-year students. Analysis of the collected data indicates that listening skills present the greatest difficulty for the participants, followed by challenges in writing and speaking. Furthermore, a significant finding is that the majority of respondents reported low confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in English. To address these issues, the study suggests several pedagogical interventions, including the implementation of language workshops, the use of interactive learning tools, and the provision of immersive language experiences. Creating a supportive learning environment that encourages active English language use is essential for enhancing the confidence and communicative competence of non-English-major students at public universities in Vietnam.

Keywords: Challenges, learning outcomes, English, non-English major, students.

1. Introduction

English has become crucial in today's globalized world, essential not only for communicating but also for succeeding at university and in a career. It serves as a universal language for international

communication and is necessary for various fields such as science, technology, business, and medicine. Recognizing its importance, Vietnam public university mandates all students, regardless of their major, to achieve English level B1 which is the third level of English in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). However, non-English major students, especially those at Vietnam public university, face challenges in learning English. They often have limited exposure to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: linhnt@ictu.edu.vn

<https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4978>

the language and may struggle with grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and other language skills. Additionally, the teaching methods used in higher education institutions may not effectively cater to all students, resulting in a lack of motivation and interest in the subject. This study aims to pinpoint the challenges encountered by non-English major students in learning English to achieve the outcomes at Vietnam public university and to suggest effective solutions to address these obstacles. It seeks to offer valuable insights into the specific difficulties faced by non-English major students and to provide recommendations for enhancing the quality of English language education at Vietnam public university. The research will address the following questions:

i) What are the primary challenges encountered by non-English major students when learning English to achieve the outcomes at Vietnam public university?

ii) What are the contributing factors to these challenges faced by non-English major students in learning English to achieve the outcomes at Vietnam public university?

2. Previous Studies on the Difficulties Faced by Non-English Major Students in Learning English to Achieve the Outcomes and Their Solutions

Previous research has extensively explored the challenges encountered by non-English major students when learning English, along with potential solutions. These studies, conducted over many years, have aimed to uncover the primary obstacles faced by students and investigate effective methods to overcome them. Particularly, there has been a significant focus on understanding the difficulties faced by non-English major students in acquiring English proficiency. This literature review will delve into some of the most common challenges experienced by these students. A key hurdle was limited exposure to the English language, which resulted in difficulties in comprehending and applying grammatical rules and expanding

vocabulary [1]. Moreover, these difficulties could range from limited exposure to the language and difficulties with grammar and vocabulary to a lack of motivation and interest in the subject [2]. Additionally, students with less fluency in English could struggle to follow lectures, take notes, and actively participate in class discussions. Another notable challenge was the complexity of English grammar. Errors in grammar could lead to confusion and misinterpretation, emphasizing the importance of mastering fundamental grammar concepts early in the language-learning process [3]. Moreover, anxiety and a lack of confidence could impede students' progress in learning English. Students who lack confidence were able to feel hesitant to participate in class discussions or engage in conversations in English, leading to limited practice opportunities, which further hinder their language development [4]. Research conducted by [5] revealed that students with limited exposure to English outside of the classroom struggle to enhance their language skills. They suggested that students who engaged in real-life situations using the language were more likely to improve compared to those who relied solely on classroom instruction. [6] found that students who lack exposure to English outside of the classroom had lower levels of proficiency in the language. Furthermore, studies have indicated that insufficient practice with test-based exercises could result in lower performance on language assessments. For instance, [7] found that offering more practice opportunities for students with test-based exercises could prepare them for assessments. Additionally, some research suggested that students with limited vocabulary knowledge encountered difficulties with grammar and syntax. Without a robust vocabulary foundation, students could struggle to grasp the context and meaning of words and phrases in complex sentences, leading to grammar and syntax errors, which caused miscommunication [8]. A study by [9] found that students who

were highly motivated to learn English tend to perform better in language proficiency tests. Similarly, [10] found that motivation had a positive impact on language learning outcomes, as it influences the learners' persistence, effort, and willingness to engage in the learning process. A significant challenge faced by non-English major students in Vietnam was limited exposure to English in their daily lives. According to [11], many students from rural areas or provinces lack opportunities to interact with English outside of the classroom, making it difficult to acquire communicative competence. This lack of exposure led to limited vocabulary and low confidence in using the language. [12] also highlighted that students often relied heavily on textbooks, which failed to simulate real-life language use, thereby hindering their practical skills.

In conclusion, non-English major students encounter various challenges in learning English to achieve the outcomes - level B1, including limited exposure, grammatical errors, vocabulary deficits, anxiety, mispronunciation, and lack of motivation. By addressing these challenges and employing effective teaching strategies, instructors can assist students in overcoming obstacles and attaining their language learning objectives.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data Collection Methods

To gather data from 300 second-year students who are non-English majors aged 19-21 years old, studying in the K22 in Faculty of Information, and analyze it to identify common difficulties and potential solutions in learning English to achieve the outcomes - level B1, the researcher designed a questionnaire with closed-ended questions, which included multiple-choice questions to gather data. After that, the questionnaires were distributed to the 300 second-year students at ICTU, ensuring a representative sample and online survey tools

like Google Forms were used for ease of distribution and data collection.

3.2. Data Analysis Methods

The researcher utilized statistical software such as Excel to analyze the quantitative data from the closed-ended questionnaire responses to summarize the data. This analysis focused on pinpointing the challenges encountered by non-English major students in learning English and proposing corresponding solutions. The outcomes of this analysis field prevalent difficulties faced by non-English major students at ICTU and formulate strategies to address these challenges. These findings were presented clearly and succinctly to provide additional context and support for the conclusions drawn. In summary, the data collection and analysis methods utilized in this study could enable a comprehensive exploration of the challenges encountered by non-English major students in learning English at ICTU and the formulation of effective solutions. The insights gleaned from this study could be valuable for educators and policymakers, with the potential to enhance the quality of English language education for non-English major students in higher education institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

This part reports the results of the study and presents a discussion of the major findings.

4.1. Level of Proficiency in English

The data indicated that the majority of surveyed students need more proficiency in English. Specifically, 58.1% of students self-identified as beginners, while 33% reported being at a pre-intermediate level. A smaller portion of students identified themselves as intermediate (5.9%) or advanced (3%). Figure 1 visualized this distribution. These findings highlighted that although there were students with more advanced language skills, they constituted a minority compared to those still in the early stages of English learning.

Overall, the data underscored the necessity for additional English language instruction and support to aid students in improving their language skills and attaining greater academic and professional accomplishments. However, it was essential to acknowledge and provided assistance to students who had already progressed in their language learning journey and were actively working towards higher proficiency levels.

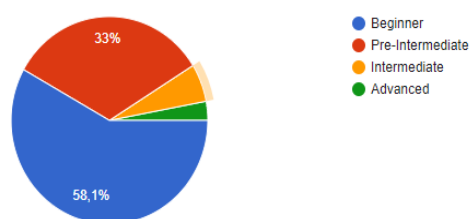


Figure 1. ICTU students' level of proficiency in English.

4.2. The Challenges of Learning English at University

The data gathered in this study provided insight into the numerous challenges encountered by students during English learning at the university level, as illustrated in Figure 2. Among the identified hurdles, the most frequently mentioned difficulty is grammar and sentence structure, with 28.6% of students finding it particularly challenging. This highlighted potential struggles with the technical aspects of English, indicating a need for additional support and instruction to master these skills. Additionally, a considerable percentage of students (25.6%) faced difficulties with listening comprehension. This may result from the prevalence of spoken English in university contexts and the complexities associated with understanding real-time spoken language. Furthermore, a smaller portion of students found speaking (17.2%) and vocabulary (15.3%) challenging, underscoring the potential needed for further support and instruction in these areas. Although a relatively lower percentages of students found reading comprehension (4.9%) and writing (8.4%) challenging, these skills remained

important components of language learning. Some students still benefits from additional support and instruction in these areas. In summary, the data indicated that students encountered a variety of challenges when learning English at the university level, encompassing technical language aspects, comprehension skills, and communication abilities. Effectively addressing these challenges necessitates tailored instruction and support to meet the diverse needs and experiences of the student population.

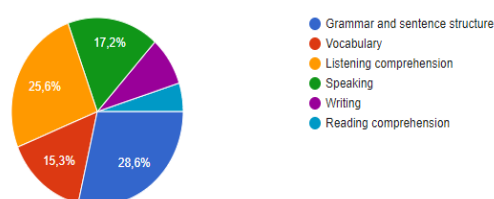


Figure 2. The challenge of learning English at a university.

4.3. The Frequency of English Language use Outside of Class

The study also sought to determine the frequency at which ICTU students use English outside of class in Figure 3. The data indicated that a considerable percentage (nearly 60%) of respondents did not use English frequently in their daily lives. This suggested that they could have limited opportunities to use English outside of academic settings.

Furthermore, the data revealed a gradual increase in the frequency of English language usage outside of class. The most significant proportion of respondents (40.4%) reported occasionally using English. Comparatively, a lower percentage of respondents (8.4%) reported often using English, while the lowest percentage (1.5%) indicated always using English.

In conclusion, the data implied that although a significant proportion of respondents did not use English frequently outside of the class, there was still a notable number of individuals who used English occasionally or regularly in their daily lives.

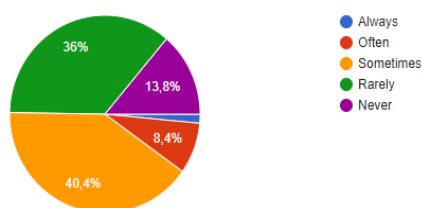


Figure 3. The frequency of English language use outside of class.

4.4. Students' Confidence in English Communication Skills

Upon examining the data on students' confidence in communicating effectively in English, a notable trend emerges. The majority of respondents, accounting for 77.8%, expressed low levels of confidence. Among them, 54.2% stated they were "Not very confident," while 23.6% indicated they were "Not at all confident." In contrast, only a small percentage of respondents, 22.1%, reported higher confidence levels. Among these, 16.3% felt "Somewhat confident," while a mere 5.9% expressed confidence in their English communication skills. Figure 4 visually represents these results.

These findings underscored a significant portion of learners who lack confidence in their English communication abilities and could benefit from additional support. To better address this issue, it would be advantageous to delve deeper into the underlying reasons for their lack of confidence. This could involve identifying specific areas of difficulty contributing to their insecurity and devising targeted interventions or providing resources tailored to address these areas.

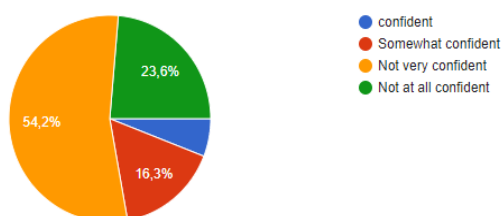


Figure 4. Students' confidence in English communication skills.

4.5. The Goals for Improving English Language Skills

A notable portion of participants in the study outlined specific objectives for improving their English language proficiency. The predominant goal identified by respondents was enhancing job prospects, selected by 37.9% of participants. This illustrated a widespread acknowledgment of the importance of English proficiency for career advancement and expanding employment opportunities. Additionally, 26.1% of respondents cited a goal of improving communication skills to interact more effectively with others, underscoring the significance of language ability in social contexts and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the survey uncovered other objectives for enhancing English language skills among respondents. For instance, 20.7% aim to meet the learning objectives of their courses, indicating a desire for academic success. Furthermore, 5.9% expressed a goal of utilizing language skills for travel and cultural exploration, while 9.4% aspire to excel academically.

These findings suggested a diverse array of motivations driving individuals to enhance their English language proficiency, encompassing both personal and professional aspirations. Conducting further analysis to explore factors influencing these motivations, such as cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as career aspirations, could yield valuable insights. By tailoring language learning programs and resources to align with individuals' specific goals, educators and language learning providers could facilitate more effective language acquisition and support learners in achieving their desired outcomes. Figure 4 visually represented these identified goals from the study.

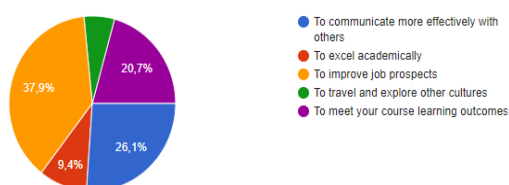


Figure 5. The goals for improving English language skills.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the study are presented based on the thorough analysis and interpretation of the results.

The findings of this study aligned with previous research on challenges faced by non-English major students in learning English. The low confidence level reported by students (77.8%) corroborated the anxiety and lack of confidence issues identified by Gross (2019) as significant barriers in second language acquisition.

The primary challenge of listening skills found in this study corresponds with Abu-Rabia's (2011) findings that limited exposure to English outside the classroom significantly hindered language development. Our data showing nearly 60% of students rarely using English outside class supported McDonough & Chaikitmongkol's (2007) observation about the restricted opportunities for authentic language practice among Vietnamese students.

The difficulties with grammar and sentence structure (28.6%) refrefled similar findings by Sulaiman (2016) regarding Arab students' struggles with English grammar. Interestingly, our study revealed relatively lower difficulties with reading comprehension (4.9%) compared to other skills, contrasting with Hu & Nation's (2000) emphasis on vocabulary density's impact on reading comprehension.

The diverse motivations for improving English proficiency identified in our study, particularly career advancement (37.9%), echo Jiang & Dewaele's (2019) findings on the complex relationship between motivation and

language proficiency. This suggested that aligning language programs with students' personal and professional goals could enhance motivation, supporting Lamb's (2007) observations about the impact of institutional environment on EFL learning motivation.

These connections with existing literature validated our findings while also highlighting context-specific challenges at this Vietnamese university. The discussion pointed to the need for tailored approaches addressing both universal and local aspects of English language learning difficulties.

6. Conclusion

The data revealed a significant lack of confidence among respondents in their ability to effectively communicate in English, emphasizing the necessity for interventions geared towards boosting confidence and tackling specific areas of difficulty. Listening skills were identified as the primary challenge in English language learning, closely followed by writing and speaking abilities, indicating the need for targeted strategies and resources to address these hurdles. Additionally, a considerable number of respondents admitted to spending limited time practicing English outside of class, suggesting the importance of promoting and facilitating regular practice through accessible resources and activities to improve language acquisition and proficiency. Furthermore, respondents expressed diverse goals for enhancing their English language skills, ranging from career advancement to effective communication, and meeting learning outcomes, cultural exploration, and academic excellence. It was imperative for language learning programs to align with these multifaceted goals to enhance learner motivation and engagement effectively.

7. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

Targeted interventions: Design and implement interventions addressing specific

areas of difficulty, such as listening, writing, and speaking skills. These interventions should offer structured practice, individualized feedback, and additional support to improve learners' proficiency.

Build confidence through supportive activities: Implement activities like role-playing, group discussions, and public speaking exercises in a low-pressure environment to boost students' confidence in communication skills.

Test preparation support: Provide comprehensive test preparation resources, including workbooks and practice materials aligned with common test formats. These resources should focus on enhancing test-taking skills and offer ample opportunities for practice and feedback.

Align curriculum with career and personal goals: Design English learning programs that integrate career-specific vocabulary and scenarios, academic requirements, and intercultural communication skills to motivate students and meet their aspirations.

Promote real-life language practice: Create opportunities for students to use English in real-life contexts through conversational clubs, language exchange programs, or online speaking platforms, enhancing their exposure and practical skills.

By implementing these recommendations, language learning providers and educators can enhance the effectiveness of English language learning programs, address the specific needs and preferences of learners, and promote greater confidence and proficiency in English communication skills.

References

- [1] A. Rabia, The Influence of the Home Environment on Young EFL Learners, *Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2011, pp. 447-457.
- [2] Brown, Overcoming Grammar and Vocabulary Challenges in English Language Learning: A Pedagogical Approach, *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2019, pp. 221-237.
- [3] C. Sulaiman, Grammatical Errors in English Writing Made by Arab Students: The Causes and the Effect on Their English Writing Skill, *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 8, 2016, pp. 122-129.
- [4] Gross, Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course. Routledge, 2019.
- [5] McDonough, W. Chaikitmongkol, Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives on English Language Teaching and Learning in Secondary Classrooms in Three Provinces in Thailand, *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2007, pp. 1-33.
- [6] Nitta, M. Takiura, The Effects of Extracurricular Activities on the English Proficiency of Japanese University Students, *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2015, pp. 49-64.
- [7] Zhang, C. Elder, The Relationship Between Language Test Experience and Test Performance: A Study of the TOEFL Internet-Based Test, *Language Testing*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2011, pp. 349-366.
- [8] Hu, I. S. P. Nation, Vocabulary Density and Reading Comprehension, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2000, pp. 403-430.
- [9] Jiang, J. M. Dewaele, The Complex Relationship Between Classroom Motivation and Second Language Proficiency in China: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach, *Language Learning*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2019, pp. 534-572.
- [10] M. Lamb, The Impact of Schools on EFL Learning Motivation: An Indonesian Case Study, *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2007, pp. 757-780.
- [11] H. T. Le, Barriers to Communicative Competence Among Rural Students in Vietnam: A Case Study, *Journal of Language and Education*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2019, pp. 45-52.
- [12] T. Tran, The Limitations of Textbook-Based English Learning in Vietnamese Universities, *Asian Journal of Education and Development*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2021, pp. 23-35.