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SOME FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF THE FIRST YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS AT HUNG VUONG UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the factors that affect the first-year students' English proficiency at Hung Vuong University. 48 non-English majored students participating in the study were asked to answer a questionnaire with a focus on learning environment, learning motivation, and learning strategies. The results showed that most students were aware of the importance of learning English, but they did not have a favorable environment or long-term strategies for learning a foreign language. The possible solutions to help students learn English effectively at university were also proposed.

Keywords: *Language proficiency, non-English majored students, English influencing factors.*

1. Introduction

In the era of international integration today, language proficiency is one of the important factors that help students adapt to life and work in the future. So how to improve the language or English proficiency of students in universities and colleges? One of the ways is to find out students' perceptions of English learning, because they are the subject of the learning process, thereby discovering what students think about their own English learning should be taken into consideration. Once they have understood the factors that affect students' English proficiency, teachers

will have supportive solutions to help them learn English effectively.

Currently, most of the students at Hung Vuong university come from mountainous areas in the North of Vietnam, including Phu Tho, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai, Son La, etc. Although having learnt English for 7 to 10 years so far, they just concentrated in learning English grammar for the tests and had little communication skill practice in speaking and listening skills. As a result, they all got average marks in English in the National high school examination. To some extent, these students did not have favorable

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environment and proper strategy for learning English. At the same time, they have never been motivated to pursue a foreign language as a favorite subject or for long-term purposes, but only to pass the exam. That's why the researchers identified environment, strategy and motivation are three important factors affecting English proficiency of the freshmen at Hung Vuong university.

So, what is English proficiency? Researchers has different concepts about English proficiency, according to the definition by University of South Queensland [1], English proficiency is "students' ability to use English to make and communicate meaning verbally and in writing during their program of study".

Regarding to academic environment, teachers who have good knowledge of the subject and devote enough time to teaching, are seen as a key factor in fostering positive learning environments. Teachers are able to create an effective learning environment in the classroom, understand the curriculum and its purpose, make changes in teaching and learning methods [2]. However, learning a foreign language can take place inside or outside of the classroom. Teachers should not limit the teaching of English in the classroom. They should see school, family and society as three mutually supportive aspects. In this way, they can educate students in a holistic manner [3]

Another significant factor in learning a foreign language is learning strategy which refers to the methods students use to learn. Researchers have provided specific examples of language learning strategies,

such as learners may watch TV programs in English and guess the meaning of new phrases or predict what will happen [4, 5]. Effective learners also actively associate new information with existing information in long-term memory, and they tend to apply strategies in accordance with their needs and characteristics of the task [6].

Once students have proper learning strategy and environment, they need to be motivated to achieve their goals. Motivation is defined in different ways, as "an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action" [7]. Motivation helps learners actively participate and self-study a second language. On the contrary, learners who are not motivated will participate passively and therefore cannot develop their potential linguistic skills. Other researchers defined two important motivation types in language learning are integrative and instrumental [8]. Integrative motivation refers to students who wish to integrate into the target culture. Those students tend to learn English as they love this subject and they themselves would like to widen their knowledge in English. If a student is instrumentally motivated, his/her goals are to achieve a certain reward such as promotion or good grades, or sometimes pressure from parents.

A great number of researches have been carried out to find out the factors affecting English proficiency both at home and abroad [9-11]; but none of them was concerned about the non-majored freshmen at Hung Vuong university. That's why we decided to conduct this research in order to figure out

the influencing factors as well as solutions to help them in their English learning process.

2. Methods

2.1. Research subjects

Participants in the study were 48 freshmen at Hung Vuong University who were not majored in English. These students had just taken the National High School Examination in the academic year 2019-2020, and were currently studying in different faculties at HVU. Out of 48 students, 30 were female and 18 were male and all took the KET entrance English proficiency test in 2019.

According to the survey result, the majority of the students (76%) lived in rural areas in the mountainous areas of the Northern Vietnam. Therefore, their English proficiency was generally low (based on the result in the national high school exam). Although having learnt English for a long time (7-10 years so far), they only focused on English grammar for the final tests and had no practice in speaking and listening skills. As a result, they all got low marks in the proficiency test (KET) and shared the similar mark range of 10-15/25 in the KET listening and speaking test.

2.2. Data collection tools

To find out the factors affecting English proficiency of non-English majored students, the study used questionnaires designed based on the synthesis and analysis of previous studies.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, divided into two parts; in which

part I explores background information of participants (such as age, gender, origin, input English level, reasons for learning English, etc.). Part II includes 12 questions related to factors affecting English learning, focusing on the learning environment, motivation and learning strategies.

The questionnaire was designed in the google form with a list of multiple-choice questions and delivered to the participants at the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, just before they started joining the English proficiency course. The participants answered the questionnaire on their mobile phone, and after 30 minutes the researchers got the results in the excel form which showed the percentages of choices for each question.

The collected data then was analyzed by using quantitative methods. Firstly, descriptive statistics was utilized to gain the percentage of choices; then the researchers used the inferential statistics to make judgments and reached possible conclusions.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results about the factors affecting students' English proficiency

After the participants answered the survey, the results were synthesized and analyzed on factors that affect English learning as well as language proficiency.

3.1.1. Learning motivation

Concerning about motivation to learn English, participants were asked to select all of the reasons for learning English. As shown in Table 1, there were six reasons respondents chose to study English.

Table 1. Motivation to learn English by non-majored students

Reasons	Number of choices	Percentage (%)
English is my favorite subject	8	16,6%
Expanding understanding	5	10,4%
Achieving high scores in exams	30	62,4%
English is a compulsory subject	37	77%
Finding opportunities to study abroad	0	0
English is essential for a future job	28	57,8%

Most students believed that learning English was very important for their future, as responded in the first question of the questionnaire. However, most of the respondents reported that they studied English as it was a required subject in the university curriculum (77%), followed by a high score on the module exam (62,4%). More than half of the students stated that they hoped that good English skills would help them find a job after graduation as well as useful for their future work (57,8%). Only 8 people (16,6%) studied English because it was their favorite subject. The least choice was to expand knowledge or culture with 10,4% of the total. Noticeably, no one chose to study English with the aim to study abroad. These students did not have strong desire to learn English as the first-year students did not pay much attention to English and it was likely that they would not choose to study English in four years of university if

it was not a compulsory subject. Freshmen mainly identified the motivation to study in short-term goals such as getting scores but not a long-term orientation as English was essential for their future work or studying abroad, etc. In this case, the majority of the students had instrumental motivation in learning English. However, there were still a few students considering English as their favorite subject who got high scores in English entrance exams. Obviously, when learning English is no longer a compulsion but a love and a strengthened motivation, the learning quality of students will surely be improved.

3.1.2. Learning environment

With regards to the student's learning environment inside and outside the classroom, the question related to learning aids at home has revealed a lot of interesting information (Table 2).

Table 2. English learning aids at home

Learning aids	Number of choices	Percentage (%)
Dictionary	45	93,6%
Internet connection	47	97,7%
References	35	72,8%
Educational software	10	20,8%

The data showed that most students had a variety of foreign language learning facilities at home, such as dictionaries (either paper or electronic dictionaries), and had the internet connection, but another question was whether they used the media to support their English learning or not. In addition, three quarters of the respondents said they had reference books and materials to support foreign language learning. Today, there are a great number of applications and software to help students integrate skills and learn by themselves; however, less than a quarter of participants (20.8%) used this medium. It can be seen that once students consciously

use these softwares, they have defined the goal of learning foreign languages as well as have a sense of long-term learning.

When it came to the learning environment in the classroom, the majority of students agreed that learning English required interaction between learners in groups (79%). Additionally, some respondents said that interaction between teachers and students was very important because it would help improve students' foreign language skills; but this was just a few choices, accounting for only 12,5%, maybe they were still shy or afraid of discussing face to face with a teacher (Table 3).

Table 3. English learning environment at school

Type of interaction	Number of choices	Percentage (%)
Practice with the whole class	15	31,2%
Practice in pairs or small groups	38	79%
Independent interaction with a teacher	6	12,5%

Another equally important aspect was to find out information about the time they spent on the subject outside of the classroom

to broaden and deepen the contents of the course. Out-of-class results were also remarkable (Table 4).

Table 4. The environment for learning English outside the classroom

Activities	Number of choices	Percentage (%)
Watching television, reading on the Internet or listening in English	25	52%
Practice communicating with native speakers	7	14,5%
Joining an English club	22	45,8%
Taking extra classes in after-school classes	15	31,2%
Using software applications to learn English	15	31,2%

It could be seen that many students were aware of the importance of English in modern life, thus giving themselves tasks such as watching television, reading on the internet or listening in English (52%) to practice and

improve listening comprehension skills and to get exposed to various forms of interaction of native speakers. This reality suggests that the school should have self-study spaces, equipped with necessary facilities and

materials to support English learners and to meet the needs of learning English outside of their regular course. Many active students have joined English club, both to study and to make friend relation, to entertain them after stressful lessons. The least commonly used self-study method was communication with native speakers which was selected by only 7 people. Perhaps students were still afraid, not

confident with their English ability, so they did not dare to connect with native speakers.

3.1.3. Learning strategy

One of the important factors in learning a foreign language is that learners need to have the right learning strategies. The results of the participant survey revealed many interesting information.

Table 5. Strategies for learning English

Strategies	Number of choices	Percentage (%)
Practice communication skills in English	30	62,4%
Relating existing knowledge to new concepts / knowledge	23	46,9%
Using different mnemonic techniques	36	74,8%
Asking for clarifying a problem	28	58,2%
Not afraid of making mistakes in the learning process	10	20,8%
Confident speaking English in front of the class	13	27,1%
Seeking information from different sources	18	37,5%

Participants in the study have used various strategies in learning foreign languages, of which the most popular ones were applying memorization techniques (74,8%), English communication practice (62,4%) and clarifying what was not understood (58,2%). This showed that the majority of the students had correct learning methods once they had determined motivation to learn English. However, only a small number of students (10 out of 48 participants) felt confident showing off their abilities in front of the classmates. This has revealed that students needed to have a more practical communication environment in order not to feel shy and embarrassed to communicate in English.

3.2. Suggested solutions to enhance students' English proficiency

3.2.1. Utilizing the materials to raise motivation in learning English

When students are having a good time, they will be more engaged in learning. Their motivation will come from them rather than from teachers. Thus, teachers just have to find the best ways to help their students have a good time while they learn.

One of the effective ways is to use social media in class. Teachers may ask students to write short posts on Facebook or Instagram related to their lessons, or they may start a class blog where they write the posts and respond to comments from their classmates. It is effective as students gain something fun

from their learning and at the same time make language use practical. Currently, Complete Key for Schools is the official textbook in the English proficiency course at HVU. With the first topic about Introduction and Daily life, teachers may ask students to record videos introducing themselves and what they do one day from the morning they wake up until they go to bed in the evening. Then, the classmates will choose Like to vote for the video they enjoy. The video with the most Likes wins the race.

Another example is the topic Food and drink which students work in groups and record videos describing how to prepare their favorite food or going to their favorite restaurant. Also, the teacher can ask students to write a piece of memory related to food, then share it on the facebook group. Another way is to play a quiz, in which students take a video of the ingredients to make a dish and ask the others to guess what dish. For each topic, teachers need to have specific requirements, associated with real life and suitable with students' level so that they can use English. And after each voting test, teachers can add up the scores for the winning students to get motivation for the next time.

Another way to involve students in learning is integrating "pop culture" into class. That means using different types of entertainment in the lesson, such as using songs or movies for listening skill, adapting magazines in reading activities or learning new vocabulary, etc. It is time teachers got out of the textbook and involved in what their students do for entertainment, such as the music they like, the types of movies they watch and what they enjoy on TV, etc.

Then they include these resources whenever possible to guarantee that they're motivated and engaged with the activity.

In addition, students tend to be excited about playing games. So why don't teachers use games for students to review vocabulary or grammatical structures? Popular online games like Quizizz, Kahoot or Scrabble really attracts students. Those games absolutely get students out of boredom when they learn new words or grammar as in traditional ways.

3.2.2. Creating favorable learning environment

A rich English language learning environment can be created through making full use of the time and resources both inside and outside the school. According to the final Report of Language Education Review of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR, 2003), the language curriculum should take into consideration the needs, interests and abilities of students. At the same time, it should be developed to make language learning more related to the daily life of students which is important to raise their motivation in learning in the class.

Mass media, particularly English television and radio programs in English, should be more widely used. Schools should provide more opportunities for the use of English and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning as well as monitor and evaluate their own progress. Students should be encouraged to get involved in peer interaction and get feedback as much as possible. Parents should take up a more active role in helping their children

develop good reading habits and enhancing their interest in extensive reading.

Language proficiency is best raised through active and frequent use. It is important to provide students with maximum English exposure as well as meaningful and purposeful activities through which they can learn and apply the language. One way to achieve it is setting up an English -speaking community. This model can be built into three levels. The first one is the pilot model with the participation of one faculty in which students exchange and study on issues related to their majors. In this pilot model, the Teacher Union will be in charge of the meeting and organize discussion activities. The next level is the English club for English-majored and non-majored students which they themselves are responsible for all the contents and discussion. The third level is sharing learning experiences via Microsoft Teams. In this level, all the students who are interested in, can join the meeting. The online sharing session on Microsoft Teams will be hosted by one English teacher, one group of English-majored students and representatives of other faculties. They will discuss on a number of topics such as how to learn Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills or content that is tailored to students' needs. The English-speaking community is aimed to create a useful playground for students to exchange and learn from each other, and at the same time create an English environment for all teachers and students at school.

3.2.3. *Identifying proper learning strategies*

It is essential to get advice from experienced and qualified educators who will provide instructions and suggestions to define learning strategies for first year students. They will create excitement in learning English for students, thereby stimulating and encouraging them to learn and from achieve good results.

A large number of students have the habit of waiting until the night before a test to study for it; but they cannot afford a great amount of information over time. Thus, teachers should create a studying calendar to plan out how they will review chunks of content, and by carving out small chunks of class time every day for review. Teachers may ask students to practice peer-review and communication in English as much as possible, as they tend to learn more from mistakes and from peers than on their own.

As in the survey, the majority of students use mnemonic techniques as a learning strategy, but how to memorize effectively is much more important. Many students consider "studying" as simply re-reading notes, textbooks, or other materials. But having the information right in front of us doesn't force us to retrieve it from memory. It is said that practice bringing information to mind without the help of materials is among the best choice which means they have to recall information without looking back at any materials. Another effective way for memory is using mind-map for both learning new words or reading comprehension. By this way, students are changing the way that

information is stored so that it's easier for them to get to later on.

These strategies don't necessarily work in isolation but in combination. Students can space out their review practice, and at the same time try to recall concrete examples or sketch out a concept. When doing retrieval practice, they can interleave between different concepts.

4. Conclusions

This article has presented a part of the research result on the factors affecting the proficiency of first-year non-English majored students at Hung Vuong University. The survey has found out that the students have identified the English language motivation, in which the instrumental motivation predominates. The information obtained can be used as reference material for program framework designers, curriculum developers, especially direct instructors, to help them review and refine items in training objectives, time frames, teaching contents and teaching methods to suit the target learners.

However, the study only investigated factors affecting students' English proficiency from the students' self-awareness and assessment of their own foreign language learning, but partly revealed useful information for teaching English for non-majored students in the undergraduate years. With this result, the study has proposed suggestions for those factors to help enhance English learning of non-majored students, with the priority of building English-speaking community for all the students to improve communication skills.

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MỘT SỐ YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN TRÌNH ĐỘ TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC HÙNG VƯƠNG

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Tóm tắt

Bài viết này nhằm mục đích khảo sát một số yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến trình độ tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên năm thứ nhất tại Trường Đại học Hùng Vương. 48 sinh viên không chuyên tham gia nghiên cứu, được yêu cầu trả lời một bảng khảo sát, trong đó tập trung vào các yếu tố như môi trường, động cơ và chiến lược học tập. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết sinh viên đều nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của tiếng Anh, nhưng chưa có môi trường thuận lợi hoặc chiến lược dài hạn để học ngoại ngữ. Nghiên cứu cũng đề xuất một số giải pháp để giúp sinh viên học tiếng Anh hiệu quả trong những năm học sắp tới ở trường đại học.

Từ khóa: *Trình độ ngoại ngữ, sinh viên không chuyên, yếu tố ảnh hưởng việc học tiếng Anh.*