



ANALYZING AN ENGLISH CURRICULUM TOWARDS PROPOSING A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING AN ESP CURRICULUM FOR VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

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Abstract: This study analyzes the current English curriculum to clarify its specific limitations that necessitate an adapted framework for developing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula suitable for vocational students in central Vietnam. The methodology primarily employed a mixed-methods approach, including document analysis of existing English curricula, course materials, placement tests, and relevant educational policies of the investigated vocational institution. This analysis aimed to assess the extent to which the current curriculum aligns with the specific vocational requirements of the learners. The data revealed deficiencies in contextual relevance, integration of vocational English knowledge, instructional materials and teaching methodologies. These findings indicated a significant gap between the current curriculum and the contextual demands of vocational training. The study results signified a critical need for a revised need-focused approach to English curriculum development that better addresses the real-world language needs of vocational students in central Vietnam.

Keywords. English for specific purposes, vocational education and curriculum development.

1. Introduction

English competence is essential not only for general communication but also for acquiring specialized knowledge and professional development. Therefore, the demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has increased dramatically in the globalized and more specialized workforce, especially for vocational students who require specialized English skills for their professional fields. This means that while improving students' basic English proficiency is extremely important, the ESP program should also meet their professional communication demands so that they can stay updated with market and globalization trends (Ho, 2018). Nevertheless, it is evident that most ESP curricula still have a number of drawbacks

and do not meet the expectations of the workplace, despite the fact that higher education in Vietnam has focused on preparing students for globalization and integration (Duong, Bui, & Bui, 2005; Duong, 2018; Huynh, 2022; Nguyen, 2015; Vu, 2015).

As vocational education systems evolve, it becomes necessary to evaluate the current English curricula to make sure they meet the students' needs in their vocational training. For this reason, the current study aims to evaluate the English curriculum of a vocational institution in central Vietnam with the goal to propose a framework that can adapt it in alignment to the students' demands for ESP. While conventional English programs normally tend to focus on general language competence, vocational curricula require a vocation-centered approach that covers technical vocabulary, professional communication skills and contextual learning relevant to students' professions. This research identifies gaps in the current English curriculum and proposes a comprehensive framework to develop an ESP program that aligns with workplace requirements in the era of globalization.

2. Literature review

The current study involves the evaluation of a vocational English curriculum which is a subtype of ESP. Simply speaking, *ESP, like other forms of language instruction, focuses on language learning but with an emphasis on learners' specific professional or academic needs*. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is an approach to teaching languages where all choices about method and content are made with the learners' learning reason. It is clear that the goal of ESP instruction is to help students learn the language. As globalization continues to shape diverse industries, the effectiveness of communication in English cannot be shadowed. Because of this, ESP classes must concentrate on giving students English knowledge and competence relevant to their particular industries, such as technology, business, healthcare, and the like, in addition to language fluency.

Basically, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.65) specifies three primary categories of approaches to course design, including language-centred, skills-centred and learning-centred. The development of an efficient ESP curriculum depends on the use of a systematic model that takes into account students' specific needs. The framework suggested by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) prioritizes learner-centered strategies and active participation in the curriculum development.

The innovation of English curricula to better suit vocational needs has been widely conducted. Recent studies have given clear evidence of successful case applications where general English content has been modified to incorporate technical terminology, industry practices, and real-world scenarios tailored to the students' future careers (Al-Khatib, 2016; Al-Khatib & Al-Rousan, 2017; Karimi & Shahidi, 2013). These studies consistently

emphasize the importance of needs analysis, contextualization, and authentic materials in developing and implementing effective ESP curricula, particularly within vocational and technical education settings. They highlight the need for ESP practitioners to move beyond generic approaches and create learning experiences tailored to the specific language requirements and learning contexts of their students. However, it is noticeable that little research has been conducted to evaluate vocational English programs to specify their limitations. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap in orientation to the suggestion of a more effective framework for developing an ESP curriculum at a vocational institution.

3. Methodology

Since documents provide a wealth of informative material, *the current study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily focusing on document analysis combined with placement test evaluation.* Since documents can give researchers insight into a particular topic or context, encourage theorizing, and contribute to the research components early in the process (Pole & Lampard, 2002), the method for this study consists of a methodical analysis of current English language curricula, with a focus on identifying essential elements and pedagogical strategies pertinent to developing an ESP program for vocational learners.

The researcher specifically studied national and institutional educational documents including HUEIC Project, National Project 2020, reports, English course curriculum, syllabus, teaching materials, test results, etc. To identify relevant target needs for Business Administration (BusiAd) English language training, this study strategically involved eleven corporations located in central Vietnam. Due to their high requirement for English communication in business-related industry, this participant demographic was selected to take part in the study in order to determine the pertinent target needs of English learning for BusiAd. The documents accessible at 11 investigated industries were examined. The researcher analyzed recruitment policy documents to identify English-language workplace requirements in vocational industries. Furthermore, a placement test was carried out to determine the gap between the learners' current proficiency of English and the learning outcomes anticipated by the HUEIC Project (HUEIC, 2012a) and Project 2020 (MOET, 2013). To achieve this, it is necessary to determine the students' current proficiency. Students' language insufficiency will be defined as the difference between their present language competence and the necessary learning outcomes, coupled with which needs and wants make up their target needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The triangulation of the study instruments mainly focusing on document analysis contributed to the identification of key concerns in the proposed framework for developing an ESP curriculum appropriate for vocational students.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The English curriculum for vocational students

All subjects were taught in Vietnamese between 1954 and 1964, with French being taught as a foreign language at all school's education levels. With the exception of mathematics classes (which are comparable to the intermediate level today), where students were required to study two foreign languages beginning in grade 10, they could select either French or English as their foreign language from 1965 to 1975. French would be their second foreign language if they selected English as their first, and vice versa. Prior to the school's 1993 opening of vocational secondary education, which included English instruction, no foreign languages were taught after 1975. The school had an update in 1998 to accommodate technical secondary school students. Later, English became the primary foreign language taught at HUEIC.

According to the HUEIC Project (HUEIC, 2012a), English has been chosen as the college's unique foreign language and is now a compulsory subject to students of all disciplines, with the exception of English majors who are learning French as a second language. Level 3 (CEFR-B1) was established by the HUEIC Project as the English proficiency outcome for college graduates.

The administration place the highest priority on the quality of English lecturers while setting up the college's language policy. The instructors at HUEIC possess different qualifications, including eight MAs and one Ph.D. In addition to teaching, two of the nine teachers also serve as department and English group managers. The others are in charge of teaching general English courses and ESP courses such as English for information technology, English for construction English for accounting, English for electronic engineering, English for thermal engineering and English for mechanical engineering. The HUEIC Project set level 5 (C1 of CEFR) as a required English proficiency to all English teachers, with 60% of them achieving level 6 (C2) by 2025 and all teachers reaching level 6 by 2030. Through national and international seminars, workshops, or conferences, the college urges teachers to expand their teaching experience and improve their English competence. Additionally, the college offers financial assistance to lecturers who wish to pursue post-graduate studies in order to get higher qualifications. In this way, HUEIC language instructors have a strong advantage in developing their careers to keep up with the latest and upcoming innovations at the university. Given that Vietnamese English instructors' proficiency is significantly below the required level (Nguyen & Phung, 2015), it is intriguing that HUEIC teachers indicate a willingness to improve their EFL proficiency and their own English methodology.

The HUEIC Project facilitated significant enhancements to the educational infrastructure. The college implemented a network system incorporating both wireless and fiber optic cabling, ensuring high-speed internet connection. Furthermore, training management software was installed, alongside a synchronization system for staff access. Notably, the rector prioritized the development of language teaching resources, focusing on improvements in classroom facilities, library resources, and teaching manuals. Most classrooms and the language laboratory

underwent several audio-visual upgrades, including computers, LCD displays, and projectors. The high-speed network supported online language instruction, assessments, and evaluations at all time. Language lecturers received regular training to effectively make use of the college's advanced teaching technologies. Additionally, in order to support the lecturer training and learner learning, the library was upgraded to 940m², currently housing 13,000 books and an electronic library system, alongside computer rooms equipped with high-speed internet access.

The college also purchased the Office 365 toolkit from Microsoft, featuring a range of impressive functionalities, including classroom management, class notebooks, Teams, and planners. This platform has proven to be highly effective in supporting online English instruction and learning which has been conducted successfully during the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Ho, 2024). Moreover, the institution has subscribed to an online referencing service, namely *tailieu.vn*, which enables HUEIC teachers and students to efficiently search for and download materials using their individual accounts. These initiatives aim to facilitate students in attaining their expected EFL learning outcomes overall. It can be said that the college has made considerable efforts to enhance teaching facilities, thereby effectively supporting the innovation of English education at the institution. In a word, although HUEIC possesses distinct advantages regarding English language educators and teaching resources, there remain various limitations that will be addressed in the following discussion.

First, it is important to consider the English teaching curricula. In recent years, HUEIC's English program has adopted a semester-based system, consisting of three fifteen-week semesters with eleven English credits. One credit is equal to 15 in-person teacher-led hours. The time distribution is illustrated in the below table.

Table 1. Time distribution in English Courses at HUEIC

Semester	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	Total
Credits	3	5	3	11
Hours	45	75	45	165

It is evident that there exists a mismatch between HUEIC and MOET regulation regarding time prescription for English programs. For tertiary education, HUEIC reduced the time allotment for EFL instruction to 165 hours, divided into two phases, whereas the MOET specifies 180 contact hours of instruction spread over three semesters. Students gain understanding of English for General Purposes (General English) in the first level, which lasts 120 hours. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the focus of the second (45-hour) course. While the online teaching engine has not been able to replace perfectly the lost in-person education, the contact hours of instruction are significantly reduced in this regard.

Next, the testing and assessment also have certain shortcomings. To evaluate the learning processes at HUEIC, the average points obtained from two regular assignments, a midterm exam, and a final exam at the end of each semester are used. Throughout the semesters, there are no speaking tests. Each student has to reach a weighted average of 6/10 in order to advance from the first semester to the second. The average scores on the midterm and regular assignments account for 40% of the final grade, with the remaining 60% coming from the final exam. Students who fail must retake English classes and take examinations until they pass each semester. After completing each semester, the students take an achievement test. The results are used to determine whether or not the students can complete the English program. The lack of speaking assessments likely results in the low speaking proficiency of numerous HUEIC students (Ho, 2018).

In addition, there remains some inefficacy in the college's English curriculum and syllabus development. The HUEIC language education program was developed using a backward design approach, starting with a predetermined methodology and learning outcome specification. The learning outcomes worked as the basis for constructing the course syllabus (Richards, 2013). The head of the Training Department, the head of the Foreign Language Department, and English teachers are among the program designers and administrators who decide on the curriculum and syllabus in relation to the attainment of the objective learning outcomes. Notably, the curriculum lacked any phases of needs analysis and was developed via top-down decisions. The analysis of students' needs has not been conducted in the language program development. Thus, HUEIC learners' target needs and learning needs failed to be documented.

With regard to the methodology, communicative language teaching (CLT) is not a commonly used in HUEIC English classrooms. One of the most prominent reasons is that the HUEIC teachers have been overworked. They have to fulfill 25 to 35 45-minute classes per week, which nearly double the MOET-recommended limit of 18 classes. Numerous research conducted in Vietnam have identified this as a prevalent problem in EFL education (Le, 2013). In order to keep things simple, most HUEIC teachers have opted for the grammar-translation method, which requires minimal preparation. The size of the class and the students' proficiency in English are further factors. Despite being fully aware of the advantages of CLT, the teachers chose not to implement it in the HUEIC English sessions. Due to their large class sizes and poor competency levels, students were reluctant to practice productive skills, particularly speaking. Very little time has been allocated for the students to practice English in communicative contexts. This is contrary to Long's interaction hypothesis (1996, 2006), which holds that interaction facilitates second language acquisition when learners are negotiating meaning. When English is taught in vocational and technical education programs, one of the five criteria for developing successful second language learning settings is to provide English language

learners with classroom time to utilize their English effectively (Hernández-Gantes & Blank, 2009). Then, student-centered teaching strategies are necessary for the HUEIC Project in order to optimize learners' opportunities to use the target language productively. However, teachers are unable to implement student-based teaching approach like CLT because of the large class sizes and students' low English competence.

In terms of teaching materials, Cunningham and Moor's (2008) pre-intermediate *New Cutting Edge* series has been utilized. The package including a set of teacher manuals was compiled using a modular structure in orientation to general English education. It seeks to increase students' pre-intermediate language proficiency and competency. Despite *New Cutting Edge* being on the list of recommended materials for achieving A1-C2 levels, the teachers discovered that the series was beyond HUEIC students' English competence. Moreover, the book evaluation reveals that the materials do not sufficiently include industry-focused terms, real-life communicative skills and practical scenarios.

The current study also resorted to placement testing to specify the gap between the students' English levels and the expected learning output. Project 2020 states that college graduates who do not major in English should achieve level 3 (CEFR-B1) (MOET, 2013). Students at HUEIC are similarly expected to achieve this objective proficiency (HUEIC, 2012; HUEIC, 2015; HUEIC, 2016). Nevertheless, the majority of graduates were unable to attain the necessary English learning objectives, according to the results of the placement examinations. 1177 students, or over 70% of the 1793 HUEIC graduates who took the English Proficiency Tests, failed (HUEIC, 2017).

Table 2. Placement testing results

CEFR level	ALTE level description	%
A1	Beginner	40.1
A1+ to A2	Elementary	57.7
A2 + to B1	Pre-intermediate	2.2

Generally speaking, the current English curriculum at HUEIC existed several obstacles, as highlighted above. Additionally, college students and stakeholders encountered challenges arising from the wide-ranging integration in business. In order to improve college students' English proficiency and equip them with professional communication skills suited to the globalized environment, it is crucial to innovate the English program (as recommended in R(115), R(233), R(318), R(472), and R(483) by the Rector in the HUEIC Project) (HUEIC, 2012b; HUEIC, 2012c; HUEIC, 2012d; HUEIC, 2012e).

In response to the current needs of the institution, the English program was developed specifically for students majoring in Business Administration (BusiAd). This major was selected for course development, as the BusiAd curriculum at HUEIC has been in place for the past seven years. Notably, BusiAd students were taught based on a predetermined curriculum that incorporated only an institutional needs analysis, where the ESP curriculum was no exception. However, institutional ESP curricula have faced significant criticism from critical educators. Jasso-Aguilar (1999) criticized a covert policy that directed language education for specific purposes towards immigrants, placing them in marginal occupations with limited opportunities for skill advancement. This policy ensured that immigrants acquired just enough English to function adequately in low-wage jobs, while preventing them from progressing to higher-level employment. Similarly, Jasso-Aguilar (1999) criticized needs analysis for often being conducted from an outsider's perspective, using information rooted in institutional viewpoints that serve the interests of the institutions themselves. She argued that such analyses traditionally marginalized ESL speakers, socializing them into passive acceptance of subservient roles. In contrast, Long (2002) advocated for the use of multiple sources—both insider and outsider perspectives—and the triangulation of sources and methods. According to Long, this approach to needs assessment could address the concerns raised by Jasso-Aguilar regarding the limitations of traditional needs analysis. In light of these considerations, the present paper proposes a research framework aiming at documenting the communication needs of BusiAd students in conjunction with the expectations of stakeholders. This framework seeks to inform the design of an ESP curriculum tailored to address the students' requirements for professional language communication. By incorporating national and institutional standards, as well as stakeholders' expectations for English education, the proposed ESP curriculum aims to equip BusiAd students with a minimum English proficiency level of 3 (CEFR-B1/TOEIC 250), ensuring that graduates possess an adequate English language competency.

4.2. Requirements from the industry

The involvement of eleven corporations in this research was based on their active engagement with international entities. It was expected that the industries' real language requirements would reveal informative data for the research. Simultaneously, their professional English language use would indicate the contemporary societal necessities.

The current study considered recruitment documents as part of its analysis. The analysis of recruitment data from 11 industries revealed that employers prioritized English as a key recruitment standard. While the specific English requirements varied across companies, a common expectation was that employees should possess appropriate English competence, especially in business-related communication. This emphasis on English for workplace use was largely driven by the recognition among Vietnamese corporations of the challenges posed when entering an era of greater global integration (Duong, 2026; Viet, 2015; Trung, 2016). In

particular, these industries sought skilled workforces capable of meeting the increasing demands of international cooperation, where English plays a vital role in facilitating mutual understanding and collaboration. The prioritization of English in recruitment policies highlights the significant responsibility for EFL educators to equip learners with essential language competencies. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the improvement or development of English language programs to align with these societal demands.

4.3. A framework for developing an ESP curriculum specialized for BusiAd students

Based on the findings, a framework for developing an ESP curriculum specialized for BusiAd students has been proposed. In this framework, a needs-focused approach, integration of English content for workplace, and a concentration on real-world communication language competence will be emphasized. The study suggests three stages in the ESP curriculum development. Stage 1 starts with a comprehensive needs analysis, encompassing the identification of environmental factors, target situation analysis, and assessment of learners' needs. This stage serves as the foundation for developing a tailored curriculum specifically for BusiAd field. In Stage 2, the new ESP program is designed based on the needs identified in the preceding phase. Stage 3 involves a rigorous evaluation process to assess the alignment of the newly developed curriculum with the demands of the workplace and the evolving English learning needs of BusiAd students. To achieve these objectives, the research employs a multifaceted methodology including placement testing, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and curriculum evaluation. The adapted framework for developing a more efficient ESP curriculum is illustrated as below.

Table 3: A framework for developing an ESP curriculum for vocational students

Stage	Participants	Data collection	Focus	Outcome
1.Needs analysis	- Vocational students (BusiAd students) - Graduates/employees - College's administrators - ESP teachers - Content teachers	- Document study - Placement testing - Questionnaires - Interviews	Documenting environmental factors, students' target needs, and learning needs of English	Target needs and learning needs

2. Curriculum Development	Researcher(s)		Developing a new ESP curriculum based on the needs analysis	A new ESP curriculum (for BusiAd majors)
3. Evaluation	- Administrators - ESP teachers - Content teachers	Curriculum evaluation form	Assessing the alignment of the new curriculum with the identified needs	Evaluation of the new-designed curriculum

5. Conclusion and implication

This study analyzed the existing English curriculum of a vocational institution. The findings indicate the current English curriculum failed to address the learners' target language needs in terms of linguistic and communicative needs. In addition, the examined program lacked integration of vocational content, limiting its effectiveness in preparing students for workplace communication. Noticeably, the program lacked the contextual relevance in terms of real-world scenarios and practical communication tasks necessary for effective vocational English teaching and learning. Thus, a well-conducted needs analysis is essential in the development process of an effective ESP curriculum, which should consider the specific vocational context, student profiles, and their future career needs. The data also imply that vocational institutions should develop a more ESP-focused curriculum integrating feedback from industry stakeholders and aligns with the specific objectives of vocational training. The research proposes a more appropriate and feasible framework for developing an ESP needs-oriented curriculum special for BusiAd students.

In conclusion, by implementing the above suggested framework for developing an ESP curriculum, English language educators can provide more relevant vocational English instruction that increases students' employability and readiness for the workforce in the era of economic globalization. This research also serves as a foundational step bridging the gap between English teaching and vocational practice, promoting more effective English learning outcomes by proposing a possibly feasible framework for developing an ESP curriculum for students at vocational colleges.

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