



## Factors Influencing the English Proficiency of English Pedagogy Students

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### ABSTRACT

There is very little research on the factors influencing the English language proficiency development of learners. This study presents factors that may affect the English proficiency development of 75 English Pedagogy students participating in a 120-credit training program at a University in Hai Phong city. The study used the IELTS test to assess students' proficiency after two years of study and a survey on factors that may influence this proficiency level. The results show that time management and part-time work are significantly related to students' academic outcomes after two years compared to other factors. The second important factor is the input proficiency, determined by the initial TOEIC score. Self-study method, specifically self-regulation, has very little impact on students' academic outcomes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to a credit-based education model has been implemented in many universities nationwide. Haiphong University (HPU) has adopted the credit system since Semester 1 of the academic year 2007-2008, and from 2010, the university implemented the 120-credit program. With the aim of training high school English teachers with strong English proficiency, the English Pedagogy program sets the outcome standards for students to proficiently use language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) equivalent to 6.5 on the IELTS scale or 80 points on the TOEFL iBT scale to serve professional purposes. When referencing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the English teacher's output must correspond to level C1. The 120-credit program, as presented in Table 1, consists of 3 knowledge blocks, with the specialized knowledge block accounting for 1/3 of the total program's knowledge volume.

*Table 1: Distribution of Knowledge Blocks in the English Pedagogy Program Curriculum*

Knowledge	Block Credit Hours	Percentage (%)
General education	42	35
Major foundation	27	22.5
Specialization (Skills, Literature, and Linguistics)	51	42.5

Among the 51 specialized credits, the total credits for English language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing are 28, equivalent to 420 classroom hours over four years. The transition to the credit-based education system is based on the educational effectiveness this system can bring, as summarized by Nguyen Kim Dung (2005): Developing students' self-learning ability, self-exploration, and knowledge development, reducing teachers' knowledge cramming; emphasizing the diversity of knowledge, promoting the method of understanding the world rather than knowledge; with flexibility, it allows students to choose suitable courses based on their abilities and personal resources, actively plan their studies, and implement those plans to fulfill the requirements for a degree and serve their future careers. However, this model may or may not have created some difficulties for learners in the Vietnamese context, as pointed out by some Vietnamese education researchers and some presentations at the evaluation conference of credit training activities at HPU in April 2010: Students' autonomy is low, they lack the habit of self-study, self-research, and lack appropriate learning methods due to deep influences of the habit of only learning from textbooks and lectures by teachers formed since high school or due to subjective and objective conditions of schools and services serving this model not meeting the requirements of the training model. With the aim of determining the effectiveness of the English Pedagogy program, a study by Nguyen Van Loi and Chung Thi Thanh Hang (2013) showed that about 60% of students achieved level B1 and about 40% achieved level A2 after two years of study. In this article, we will continue to present and analyze some factors that may affect the English proficiency development of students to contribute to clarifying the 'credit-based education picture' in the context of universities in Vietnam, especially HPU.

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## 2. FACTORS INFLUENCING LEARNERS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Learning a foreign language is a complex process, in which the development of learners' language abilities is influenced by various factors. The theory of second language acquisition has addressed many factors that may affect the process of language learning and development, but this research only mentions those important factors recognized through scientific studies. These factors may be related to the teaching and learning process in a training program.

### 2.1 *Self-study*

Self-study plays a crucial role in learning outcomes and is the most important factor in credit-based learning programs (Tran Thanh Ai, 2013). According to Little (2007), learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning determines the success of their language learning. Hedge (2000) described this ability in detail: it involves learners understanding their own needs and purposes, striving to achieve set goals, independently exploiting resources, being active in thinking, adjusting learning methods to improve outcomes, and managing study time reasonably.

Several studies have demonstrated the importance of self-study for learning outcomes. Gradman and Hanania (1991) investigated factors affecting the English proficiency of 101 students enrolled in a seven-week Intensive English Program at Indiana University's English Language Institute. The authors used TOEFL scores to determine students' progress and a survey on factors that may affect English proficiency. The study found that the most important factor influencing students' English proficiency was actively using resources through reading and listening activities outside the classroom. Another study in Korea employed a grounded theory approach, where interview data was deeply mined to generalize into themes to understand factors influencing the success of an English training program for Korean students at Biola University. The results showed that learning methods were one of the significant factors; additionally, material and emotional support also played an important role in leading to successful learning outcomes (Kim, 2012). Chou (2007) used a questionnaire of 43 items for 604 English learners as a foreign language at language institutes in the United States regarding factors influencing their English proficiency development. Factor analysis and regression analysis results showed that using learning methods had the most significant impact on the development of learners' English proficiency.

### 2.2 *Exposure to Language Input and Meaningful Language Use*

Exposure to comprehensible input and meaningful language use (Ellis, 1994) through learning activities inside and outside the classroom are also important factors that may influence language development. Gradman and Hanania (1991) affirmed that these factors contribute significantly to the success of learners. Similarly, Carhill, Suarez-Orozco, and Carola (2008) studied 274 adolescent immigrants from China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico to the United States and found that the language environment strongly impacted their English proficiency. The study showed that if learners spent more time exposed to and using English in real-life situations, their English proficiency would be better. However, the socio-cultural environment in these studies is entirely different from the socio-cultural environment where English is taught and learned as a foreign language in schools. Particularly, the duration of study, synonymous with the duration of exposure and use of language, also affects learners' language proficiency. Kim and Lee (2010) used an econometric statistical method to analyze factors related to the English proficiency of English learners from 64 countries worldwide. TOEFL scores were used as a measure of English proficiency, and the influencing factors were divided into two groups: language factors and non-language factors. Among non-language factors, the number of years of study was related to the development of learners' English proficiency. This is a predictable result if other influencing factors are ignored.

### 2.3 *Motivation and Learning Attitude*

Motivation and learning attitude are also considered crucial factors in the process of second language acquisition (Ellis, 1994). According to Gardner (1985, p. 5), motivation includes four factors: the goals to be achieved in learning activities, the effort to achieve these goals, the desire for success, and the attitude towards learning activities. In foreign language classrooms, learners' attitudes are manifested through language teaching and learning activities (Ellis, 1986). Learners' attitudes and motivation determine their perseverance when facing challenges or difficulties in learning, which affects the level of language proficiency and alternately leads to success or failure in language development (Ellis, 1994). If learners have positive motivation and attitude (due to the results of learning), it will continue to lead them to success; conversely, negative motivation and attitude will be barriers to learners' language development.

Regarding motivation and attitude towards learning English, regression analysis by Gradman and Hanania (1991) showed that learners' awareness of the need to learn English and the role of English in their future had an impact on their success. Chou (2007) also found that learning motivation was the second factor, after learning methods, that influenced learners' English proficiency.

### 2.4 *Assessment Methods and Evaluation*

Although the factor of assessment methods and evaluation is not explicitly mentioned in the theory of language acquisition processes, studies have found its relationship with learners' foreign language proficiency development. A large and long-term study conducted by Ross (2005) in the context of English teaching and learning in Japan is a significant example. The study lasted for 8 years and involved eight groups of English learners participating in a 4-semester academic English program. The eight groups, totaling 2215 learners, were divided into two sets: four groups followed a program that used

traditional assessment methods such as tests, homework assignments, exams, and project reports. The remaining groups followed a program where assessment methods focused on the learning process, such as self-assessment, group assessment, and collaborative projects. The TOEFL test was used to measure learners' English proficiency at three different times during the learning process. The study showed that changing assessment methods towards evaluating the learning process had an impact on learners' English proficiency.

The overview of the mentioned research indicates that several factors may influence learners' English proficiency development. These factors include self-directed learning methods, motivation and learning attitudes, exposure time to language in communicative contexts (although the study does not specify how much time is reasonable to achieve good learning outcomes), and assessment methods of learning outcomes. These factors are directly related to the training program and the interaction between the training program and learners. Additionally, in this study, other factors such as family economic circumstances and part-time employment were also further investigated.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine and identify factors affecting the English proficiency of English Education students after two years of studying in the 120-credit program at the English Education Department, Faculty of Education - University of Education and Training.

#### 3.1 Research Methods

To understand the influencing factors, the study utilizes a survey questionnaire designed based on the synthesis and analysis of previous research documents, focusing on several important factors that may affect the development of learners' English proficiency. The survey questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale to collect data from students regarding factors such as self-study, motivational learning attitudes, English learning methods, and evaluation methods applied in the program. Self-study includes questions about attitudes towards self-study and learning methods. Survey questions about motivational learning attitudes are based on questions in the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI), commonly used in many studies. These questions are adjusted to fit the research objectives, closely related to the context of the credit program. Additionally, some information about the learners such as part-time work, self-study time, and gender is collected. The entry level is determined through the TOEIC scores obtained at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year. These results are converted into a 9-point scale using the Cambridge English Exam conversion table (<http://www.examenglish.com>).

To understand the relationship between predictive factors and the level of English proficiency of students, the study uses multiple linear regression analysis, with the average score of the IELTS English test considered as the dependent variable and the independent variables as the factors investigated. The data of the independent variables obtained from the survey questionnaire are entered into a standardized regression model to find the relationship between these variables and the dependent variable. Before running the regression analysis, factor analysis is used to identify factors from the clusters of questions in the survey questionnaire based on standard extraction indices ( $\geq .40$ ) and standard sample indices from .60 upwards (Larson-Hall, 2010).

#### 3.2 Research Subjects

The survey questionnaire was distributed to voluntary English Education students of cohort K36 participating in the English proficiency test IELTS. The research subjects include 75 second-year students enrolled in the 120 credit program at the University of Education and Training, including 8 males and 67 females. Among them, 9 students are from urban areas and 66 are from rural areas. These students underwent the National Entrance Exam in 2009-2010, and 55 students took the TOEIC entrance exam in 2010. Table 2 below summarizes the characteristics of this group of students.

**Table 2: Percentage of Students by Personal Characteristics (n=75)**

Sample characteristic	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	8	10.7
Female	67	89.3
Urban	9	12
Rural	66	88

### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 4.1 Predictive Factors of English Proficiency Results of K36 Students

Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistical results of the investigated factors, showing that overall, self-study and motivational learning attitudes of students are above average. Students are not very proactive in self-study ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=.39$ ;  $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=.44$ ). The results indicate that students' level of exposure to English language environments is very low ( $M=2.63$ ,  $SD=.47$ ) compared to the average scale of 3.0. Specifically, students rarely engage in learning activities to enhance their English skills beyond classroom activities such as reading English newspapers, listening to radio or watching English movies, exploring additional English materials outside the curriculum, or participating in English clubs ( $M=2.63$ ,  $SD=.47$ ). Students almost regularly

engage in learning activities right in the classroom, with forms such as group discussions, presentations, listening to lectures, and discussions with teachers ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=.40$ ). The weekly self-study hours are  $M=11$ , equivalent to 2 hours per day.

More specifically, regarding students' self-study methods, it can be seen that the 'self-adjustment' study method has the lowest average score ( $M=3.4$ ,  $SD=.58$ ). Next is 'utilizing study materials' ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=.68$ ), and the highest is the group of 'seeking internship opportunities and using English' ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=.66$ ). These results indicate that overall, students' self-study habits are not yet at a frequent level; students do not have a high awareness of self-study.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the variables used to run the linear regression model**

Factors	Mean	SD	N
Meanposttest	3.95	.71	75
Kinhteggiadinh	.53	.47	75
Lamthem	.52	.47	75
giolamthem_tuan	7.40	10.4	75
Sogiotuhoctuan	11.5	7.9	75
Tudieuchinh	3.40	.55	75
Timcohoisudungtienganh	3.76	.66	75
Renluyen themtiengAnh	2.63	.47	75
RenluyentiengAnhtrenlop	3.45	.40	75
Dongcothaidohtap	3.56	.44	75
Trinhdodauvao	1.98	.26	75
Tutinvecachhoc	2.69	.75	75
Danhgiaketqua	4.2	.49	75
Danhgiatientrinh	2.7	.84	75

(1 = Never or Completely Disagree,

5 = Always or Completely Agree)

On average, for every two students, there is one student who works part-time ( $M= 0.53$ ), and for every two students, there is one student with financial difficulties to support their studies ( $M=0.52$ ). The average number of hours worked per week is  $M=7.4$  hours, and the difference in working hours among students is very large ( $SD=10.6$ ). The number of self-study hours per week also varies greatly among students ( $M=11.4$ ,  $SD=8.16$ ). The assessment method commonly used is outcome-based assessment ( $M=4.2$ ), while process assessment is less frequently used ( $M=2.7$ ).

#### 4.2 Multiple Linear Regression Results

Table 4 presents the hypothesis testing results of the regression model with a predictive value of 0. The indices ( $F= 2.38$ ,  $p=.008$ ,  $Df =17$ ) indicate that this regression model differs significantly from the null hypothesis, with statistical significance at a high level. This means that the regression model has predictive value for the impact of independent variables on the dependent variable.

According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001, cited in Larson-Hall, 2010), if the correlation between independent factors or variables is too high, meaning the correlation coefficient  $r >= .70$ , then the regression model is not meaningful, indicating an inability to determine the relationship between independent variables and the dependent variable. In this study, multicollinearity tests after running the regression model showed that most correlation indices between independent variables are below the permissible level ( $r < .60$ ), and the regression model is statistically significant ( $p=.008$ ).

**Table 4: ANOVA test for the hypothesis model with predictor value = 0**

	Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.41	17	.848	2.38	.008 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	19.89	56	.355		
	Total	34.30	73			

a. Dependent Variable: Meanposttest b. Predictors: (Constant), Trinhdodaovao, Danhgiatienrinh, Sogiotuhoctuan, Lamthem, RenluyenthemtiengAnh, Dongcothaidochoctap, Danhgiaketqua, MucdohailongveHP, Kinhtegiadin, Hocthem, TimcohoitsudungtiengAnh, RenluyentiengAnhtrenlop, Tudiueuchinh, Tinhthuhoc, giolamthem\_tuan

Table 5 summarizes the regression results of the independent variables or factors influencing students' English proficiency. The R-squared value is .42, SE=.59, p=.008, indicating that the combined independent variables explain 42% of the variation in students' English proficiency.

**Table 5: Summary of Regression Model Results**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	AR <sup>2</sup>	SE of the Estimate
1	.648	.420	.244	.596

*Predictors: (Constant), Sogiotuhoctuan, Thaidovoituhoc, trindhodaovao, Khaihactailieu, Kinhtegiadin, HocTiengAnhtrenlop, Tutinvecachhoc, giolamthem\_tuan, Dongcohoctap, Timcohoithuctaptienganh, HocTiengAnhngoailop, Tudiueuchinh, Khanangtuchiutrachnhiem, Lamthem* Dependent Variable: Meanposttest

About the correlation between impacting factors and students' English proficiency, it shows the regression model with statistically significant t-test results. The t-values and significance indexes indicate that there are 5 factors predicting variation in students' English proficiency or competence. The squared semipartial correlation coefficients of each variable (Sr2, abbreviated in the "Part." column) further indicate the degree of influence of each independent variable on the dependent variable (excerpted from Larson-Hall, 2010, p.194). Five variables predicting variation in students' English proficiency with statistically significant probability at the 95% level include: (1) part-time work, (2) hours of part-time work per week, (3) self-regulated learning methods, (4) seeking opportunities for English practice, and (5) initial proficiency level. The most important factor is part-time work as it has the highest correlation coefficient (Sr2 = .34, t = 3.3, p = .002). Next is the initial proficiency level factor (Sr2 = .239, t = 2.3, p = .022), followed by two factors belonging to the learning method group: seeking English practice opportunities (Sr2 = -.211, t = -2.0, p = .042), and self-regulated learning methods (Sr2 = .212, t = 2.8, p = .042). Meanwhile, the number of hours of part-time work per week has a low negative correlation coefficient (Sr2 = -.200, t = -1.9, p = .055). Other factors have very low correlation coefficients, almost equal to 0, and are not statistically significant based on the t-test.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

According to the statistical results, the progress in students' English skills in the 120-credit program is a gradual process over time and varies depending on individual efforts. The academic performance of students is influenced more by factors related to time management of each individual rather than other factors.

Part-time work has the most significant impact on the quality of students' learning. The negative correlation coefficient of the number of hours worked part-time with English proficiency indicates that the more hours students work part-time per week, the lower their English language skill outcomes. Although this result may seem unsurprising, it hasn't been found in previous studies. This outcome may be related to the economic circumstances of each individual. It's often argued that students facing economic difficulties may tend to work more to support their living and studying, thus affecting their study time and consequently their academic performance. However, in this study, the positive correlation coefficient between family economic status and working part-time ( $r = .255$ ), with the negative correlation with self-study hours per week ( $r = -.215$ ), suggests that students from relatively financially stable backgrounds tend to work more hours and study fewer hours compared to students from slightly disadvantaged families. The data (Sr2 = -.20, p = .055) indicates that the more hours students work part-time, the slower their progress in studies. This could be due to students lacking interest and persistence in self-study, as reflected in their average attitude and motivation towards studying (M = 3.56, SD = .44).

Students who frequently use self-regulated learning methods in their studies show more progress than those who do not, although the correlation coefficient is not high (Sr2 = .212). However, overall, students' participation in additional English language practice outside class hours does not affect their academic performance. This result may be due to students spending very little time self-studying, an average of only 2 hours per day, with unfocused study, unclear learning methods, or lack of initiative in seeking study methods, and limited participation in extra English language skill enhancement activities outside class hours as presented in the descriptive table. This could explain why a significant number of students did not progress after a similar period as their peers. As mentioned in the theoretical background, one of the challenges in transitioning to the credit system is that students are not accustomed to self-study and are not ready for self-directed learning to keep up with the transition from a yearly to a credit-based curriculum. Although the data shows that self-study positively impacts some students' progress in English proficiency, overall, this influence is not significant and not universal. This result reflects previous studies on the impact of self-study and accurately reflects students' self-study habits as presented at the conference evaluating students' self-study sessions in January 2011.

Statistical results and assessment method factors also reaffirm the results of previous research (Ross, 2005); specifically, assessment emphasizes that results do not impact students' progress. In the context of the University of Technology, lecturers have the authority to assess students; however, due to the influence of result-oriented assessment traditions, many lecturers do not pay attention to using assessment to impact students' learning processes. Moreover, due to autonomy, many lecturers also do not want the pressure of spending more time assessing students' progress. Descriptive statistical results show that lecturers frequently use assessment forms that emphasize outcomes.

An interesting point is that students' initial proficiency level is the second most important factor determining students' progress in the 120-credit program over the past two years ( $Sr^2 = .24, p = .022$ ). The correlation between initial proficiency level and English language learning experience (students attending additional English language courses before university) with English proficiency after two years, although very small ( $Sr^2 = .24, p = .022$  and  $Sr^2 = .20, p = .057$ ), demonstrates that students with better initial English proficiency make more progress than those with lower initial proficiency levels. This result also reflects the concern of many lecturers about the very low English language admission scores of many students, as the University of Technology has not weighted English language scores in its admissions for many years.

It also reaffirms the theoretical basis mentioned; this study has shown that attitude and motivation factors in interaction with program implementation have almost no effect on students' progress in English proficiency. This can be explained by the average attitudes and motivations of students being not high.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the limitations of this study, such as not evaluating students' speaking skills, it can tentatively conclude that with a duration of two years of study from 2010-2012, the progress of students is very slow. Factors influencing this outcome are related to individual factors such as time management for studying and students' part-time work, as well as their initial proficiency level. With these results, the study proposes the following recommendations:

Admission criteria should pay attention to English language exam scores. Increase the duration for specialized knowledge, especially English language skills and supplementary language knowledge such as grammar and pronunciation. The English Language Education program should focus on enhancing listening skills as this is a new skill for students. With the current 420 hours allocated for skills courses, it is difficult to raise students' proficiency to the C1 level when starting from a relatively low level (equivalent to A2). According to the estimates of the National Foreign Language Project 2020, learners need at least 300 hours in class and 100 hours of self-study to advance one level. Therefore, with a B1 level, students need at least 600 hours of study and additional practice in new English language skills to achieve C1. Skills courses end at the end of the second year, and although there are some courses that may support the development of English language skills such as English Literature, Extended Reading, and Linguistics, if students do not make additional efforts to enhance their English language skills in the last two years, it will be difficult to achieve the expected outcomes. To train professionals, scientific knowledge is essential, especially for teacher training programs. Teachers need to be proficient in the scientific field they will teach at school, and the quality of their expertise must correspond to the training curriculum (Tran Thanh Ai, 2013).

In addition, measures need to be taken to manage students' self-study to help them cultivate a sense of responsibility for self-learning. Introducing self-study content into course assessments to encourage students to improve their English language skills outside class hours is one approach. The University should also institutionalize the use of information technology to manage students' self-study. Although the University has equipped an E-learning system that can be used, the system needs to be upgraded to ensure sufficient technical support for teaching and learning. We fully agree with author Tran Thanh Ai (2013) that the University should "institutionalize" the lecturer's responsibility for the 'two hours of self-study' by applying the calculation method of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (ECTS credits of a course include hours in class and self-study). Only when self-study is recognized as a formal activity and linked to the lecturer's teaching hours can self-study be well-implemented.

However, if the number of credits for specialized courses is increased, it must be done reasonably because self-study remains essential; increasing the duration further means less time for students to use for self-study. It is agreed that when self-study is not properly emphasized, the "training program will become inadequate and ineffective" (Tran Thanh Ai, 2013), but if increased excessively, it contradicts the positive teaching approach, which emphasizes autonomy and responsibility in students' learning. Without an evaluation of the English language output quality of previous cohorts (following the 150 and 138-credit programs) for comparison, reverting to increasing credits also needs to consider the effectiveness of training evaluation along with this change. Any change brings both positive and negative impacts; what matters is objectively assessing them with a scientific spirit to make appropriate adjustments for the best training outcomes.

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