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SOLUTIONS TO DEVELOP ENGLISH COMPETENCY FOR STUDENTS AT DAINAM UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam is in the process of deep international integration in all areas of social life. This requires a human resource with good expertise and proficiency in at least one foreign language as an integration tool. English is chosen by the majority of students in Vietnam to meet the foreign language output standards of the training program. Dai Nam University aims to train students to become good citizens and have a good life, developing English proficiency for students is an essential requirement and a commitment of the University to the quality of its training to the society.

KEYWORDS: English proficiency, solutions, students, Dai Nam University.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, globalization and international integration have become one of the main trends of modern international relations. For Vietnam, international integration brings great opportunities to absorb achievements and good values in the development process of humanity in all areas of social life. However, to take advantage of opportunities in the process of the country's international integration, in addition to promoting the potential for socio-economic development and attracting foreign investment, young human resources with qualifications, capacity, courage, and skills, in which foreign language proficiency is considered one of the basic requirements and the most important factor in the country's development process.

Dai Nam University was established on November 14, 2007 under the Decision No. 1535/Ttg of the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This is an applied university, developing in the direction of entrepreneurship and innovation; multi-disciplinary, multi-field flexible according to the development requirements of the country and international integration. With the mission of training students to have a good life and be good citizens after graduation; contributing to strongly promoting the country's education, training students with professional qualities and abilities is the top priority. To achieve this goal, in addition to professional skills, developing English proficiency is a prerequisite for students to be able to meet the requirements and high-quality human resources of the country and international integration.

2. CONTENTS OF THE STUDY

2.1. *Some general theoretical issues*

2.1.1. *Concept of capacity:*

Currently, there are many definitions of capacity, in which, ECDPM defines as follows: “Capacity is defined as ability of individuals, organizations or systems to perform appropriate functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably”¹. UNDP defines capacity development as the process through which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time². The definition by the UNDP (1997) and the OECD Development Assistance Committee is used: Capacity development is the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and societies increase their abilities to: 1). Perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives; 2) Understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner³.

In Vietnamese documents, we pay attention to the following definitions: “Capacity is a psychological and physiological quality that enables a person to complete a certain type of activity with high quality”, and capacity can also be understood as “the ability, subjective or natural condition available to perform a certain activity”⁴. The Vietnamese Encyclopedia defines: “Capacity is an individual characteristic, showing the level of proficiency, that is, the ability to perform one or several types of activities proficiently and reliably”⁵. The Ministry of Education and Training in the *Training Document on Innovation in Teaching Methods and Testing and Assessment in the Orientation of Developing Students' Capacity* explains: “Capacity is the ability to successfully perform activities in a certain context thanks to the mobilization of knowledge, skills and other personal attributes such as interest, belief, will, etc. Individual capacity is assessed through the methods and results of that individual's activities when solving life problems”⁶.

Thus, it can be said that capacity development needs to promote the positivity, self-awareness, initiative and creativity of learners to improve knowledge, foster cooperation capacity, and capacity to apply knowledge into practice; form and foster self-study methods; positively impact thinking and emotions, and bring excitement to learning for learners. For foreign languages, especially English, capacity development needs to be understood as the process in which learners can use English

¹ ECDPM, *Building the Base for Co-operation: Institutional capacities and partnerships*. Issues Paper 3, 2000.

² UNDP. *Capacity assessment and development, in a systems and strategic management context*. Technical Advisory Paper 3, 1998.

³ OECD. *Shaping the 21st Century: the contribution of development cooperation*, Paris, 1996.

UNDP. *Capacity development. Technical Advisory Paper II. In: Capacity Development Resource Book*, 1997.

⁴ Hoang Phe (editor-in-chief) - Hoang Thi Tuyen Linh - Vu Xuan Luong - Pham Thi Thuy - Dao Thi Minh Thu - Dang Thanh Hoa, *Vietnamese Dictionary*, Da Nang Publishing House, 2011, p.71.

⁵ Steering Committee for Compiling the Vietnamese Encyclopedia Dictionary, *Vietnamese Encyclopedia Dictionary*, volume 3, Encyclopedia Dictionary Publishing House, Hanoi, 2011, p.41.

⁶ Ministry of Education and Training, *Training Materials on Innovation in Teaching and Testing Methods, and Assessment in the Orientation of Developing Students' Competency*. Internal circulation document, issued by the Department of Secondary Education, Hanoi, 2015.

effectively in many different environments to achieve goals such as work, promotion opportunities, advanced learning opportunities, etc.

2.1.2. The Party's guiding viewpoints and the State's policies and laws on foreign language training

Teaching and learning foreign languages in universities is a major policy of the Party and Government of Vietnam to meet the trend of globalization and cooperation for mutual development. English is a powerful tool to support integration and cooperation to access the world's advanced working environment and technology.

The Conclusion No. 91-KT/TW of the Politburo sets out a breakthrough task in teaching and learning English with the key content: "Focus on improving foreign language skills of students, gradually making English the second language in universities"⁷. Accordingly, teaching and learning English is increasingly being paid attention to not only by educational institutions but also spreading positivity to students and parents because they all realize that this language will become a tool in the future, not just a mere subject. The goal is to help learners listen and speak English according to their ability.

The Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg dated February 22, 2017 of the Prime Minister sets out the following general objectives: "Innovating foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system, continuing to implement new foreign language teaching and learning programs at all levels and training levels, improving foreign language proficiency to meet the needs of study and work; enhancing the competitiveness of human resources in the period of international integration, contributing to the construction and development of the country"⁸. For higher education: "By 2025, strive for 100% of foreign language training majors to implement foreign language programs according to output standards and training majors; 80% of other majors to implement foreign language programs according to output standards and training majors; implement a number of teacher training programs in foreign languages".

2.2. Developing English proficiency for students of Dai Nam University

2.2.1. Current status of teaching and learning English at Dai Nam University

⁷ The Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Conclusion No. 91-KT/TW of the Politburo dated August 12, 2024 "Continuing to implement Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW, dated November 4, 2013 of the Central Executive Committee of the 11th Party Congress "On fundamental and comprehensive innovation of education and training, meeting the requirements of industrialization and modernization in the conditions of a socialist-oriented market economy and international integration", Hanoi, 2024.

⁸ Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg dated February 22, 2017 "Approving the adjustment and supplementation of the Project on teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system for the period 2017 - 2025", Hanoi, 2017.

Currently, according to the university training regulations of Dai Nam University⁹, foreign language is a compulsory subject in the training program of all majors of the University. This subject contains the main and prerequisite knowledge of each program, showing the indispensable characteristics of the major and students are required to accumulate. The foreign language that students choose to study is one of the following languages: English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. The majority of students of Dai Nam University choose English in their study program. Number of credits and study time according to the table below:

Subject	Number of credits	Study time	Prerequisite subjects	Textbook
English 1	03	Semester 1, year 1		Oxford, English File Elementary, 4th Edition
English 2	03	Semester 2, year 2	English 1	Oxford, English File Elementary, 4th Edition
English 3	03	Semester 1, year 2	English 2	Oxford, English File Pre-intermediate, 4th Edition
English 4	03	Semester 2, year 2	English 3	English 4 (internal circulation document)

Table 1: Credits of English courses for non-language majors of Dai Nam University

With 12 credits and 4 courses taught throughout the University years, especially the first and second years, the University has had orientations to promote students' foreign language skills. The first and second years of university are usually the years with less hardship because students are focusing on studying general and basic subjects, arranging English courses in these years so that students can spend time studying English in a long-term, systematic way, preparing for the standard output exam and having a long-term accumulation for English skills to become proficient. It can be said that a diverse and detailed-oriented English program creates strengths for students to step out of a professional environment, confidently integrating into the globalization trend.

Regarding the curriculum, the University's lecturers have chosen materials printed and published by a reputable publisher - Oxford Publishing House for the 3 English courses of the students. For students of Dai Nam University, they have had an English foundation since high school, so the lecturers have chosen suitable textbooks such as English File 4th Edition - Elementary and English File 4th Edition - Pre-Intermediate. These textbooks include knowledge and exercises related to 4 skills: Listening, speaking, reading, writing and 3 language components: Vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. In particular, the reading or listening passages are all related to a certain topic, which can be a story or useful scientific knowledge to help learners have a rich vocabulary associated with

⁹ Ministry of Education and Training, Dai Nam University, the Decision No. 746/QĐ-DN dated August 15, 2024 "Decision on promulgating the regulations on university training of Dai Nam University", Hanoi, 2024.

many different areas of life. This is a useful course that helps students comprehensively develop their English communication skills, while building a solid foundation for students to participate in academic exams such as TOEIC, IELTS. With English 4, students are provided with documents compiled by lecturers in the department. These are documents for taking international certificates according to the output standards of the University.

To demonstrate students' foreign language proficiency, over the years, the University has always built output standards for each training major of the University. Output standards are understood as: "requirements to be achieved in terms of qualities and abilities of learners after completing a training program, including minimum requirements for knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility of learners upon graduation"¹⁰. In the requirements for output standards, foreign languages are an indispensable requirement. The minimum criteria for knowledge and English proficiency that a learner needs to achieve after completing a non-foreign language training program is to be able to understand the main ideas of a report or speech on familiar topics in work related to the trained industry; be able to use foreign languages to express and handle some common professional situations; be able to write reports with simple content, present opinions related to professional work. To meet the country's integration requirements and the need for high-quality human resources, in recent years, Dai Nam University has always made the foreign language output standard a mandatory criterion for graduation for students of all majors: "The output standard for foreign language proficiency of the training program is the standard level of foreign language proficiency that learners need to achieve when graduating from the training program; is the criterion for learners to orient their foreign language learning process, set specific goals and plans to achieve that foreign language output standard. At the same time, it is also the standard that the University commits to society about foreign language proficiency when learners graduate"¹¹. The foreign language output standards for non-language major students of Dai Nam University are increasingly improved, specifically as follows:

Major	Standard output	Applicable subjects
Economics	Minimum TOEIC 450 or equivalent international certificate	Applicable to students enrolled in faculties from 2019 (from k13) and earlier
Social Sciences & Humanities		
Technique		

¹⁰ Ministry of Education and Training, the Circular No.: 17/2021/TT-BGDDT dated June 22, 2021 "Regulations on training program standards for levels of higher education; developing, appraising and promulgating training program standards for training fields and majors; development, appraisal and promulgation of training programs for all levels of higher education", Hanoi, 2021.

¹¹ Ministry of Education and Training, Dai Nam University, the Decision No. 91604/QD-DN dated September 16, 2021 "Decision on promulgating regulations on learning, testing and recognition of output standards on foreign language proficiency applicable to university and master's level learners", Hanoi, 2021.

Health	Minimum TOEIC 450 or equivalent international certificate	
Economics, Social Sciences & Humanities, Engineering, Health	Minimum English output proficiency equivalent to level 3/6 according to the 6-level competency framework for Vietnam according to Dai Nam University's own English project	Applicable to students enrolled from 2020 (from K14) to present

Table 2: Foreign language output standards for students Dai Nam University

6-level language proficiency framework for Vietnam	Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)	Cambridge Tests	TOEIC	TOEFL ITP	TOEFL iBT	IELTS
Level 3	B1	140-159	405-600	450-499	30-45	4.0-5.0

Table 3: Conversion table of international English certificates accepted at Dai Nam University

Table 3 shows that students can choose from many different certificates to meet the output standards of the University. International certificates assess students' level of English knowledge and skills, are recognized in many countries, helping students have more opportunities in their future studies and work.

2.2.2. Solutions to improve foreign language proficiency for students at Dai Nam University

2.2.2.1 Enhance students' awareness of the role of English in their future studies and careers

A study by Ur has shown that people with certain goals will be motivated to achieve that goal and contribute more to study better. Motivation also affects students' performance during the learning process. Many different studies have found that motivation is closely related to performance in language teaching¹². Students need to be aware that learning a foreign language well is a prerequisite for graduation, meeting the output standards of the industry and being able to apply it in professional practice. However, students' awareness does not form spontaneously but needs guidance from the University and English teachers.

Firstly, the University needs to provide students with information about foreign language output standards as soon as they enroll so that they know the level and foreign language certificates accepted by the University for graduation. As Table 2 shows, for each course and each training major, the output

¹² Ur, Penny, *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, tr.274.

standards are different and the way to convert certificates is also different. Students need to know the output standards for their major and determine the type of certificate they need for graduation and future work.

Secondly, lecturers need to act as guides and proactively seek appropriate methods to develop students' foreign language skills. Foreign language learning begins in the first year, so English teachers are the ones who guide students to understand the requirements and criteria for evaluating the university's output standards. Teachers need to provide students with ways to learn foreign languages at university and the characteristics of international certificates so that students have a basis to choose the appropriate learning method. If at the high school level, learning English is to get points in class and pass exams with grammar lessons or short readings in textbooks, then at the university level, most schools apply international English standards to assess students' English proficiency, most typically TOEIC, IELTS or TOEFL iBT. The TOEIC test focuses on business English to serve the communication environment in the workplace, while the IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests focus on academic content to serve the study and research in the English environment. Provide information about the differences between international certificates helps students choose the certificate that suits their needs and abilities, avoiding wasting time and money.

Thirdly, students themselves must see the importance of foreign languages in their studies and future careers. In our opinion, this is the most important factor in developing foreign language skills for students because students themselves are the main subjects of the foreign language learning process and are also the beneficiaries of those results. Students themselves must determine their learning motivation and create goals for themselves throughout the learning process. An appropriate learning path will be effective, helping students have more opportunities for career advancement and increase their chances of studying at higher levels. During the teaching process and interaction with students in the university, we found that most students see the importance of English but only limit it to graduation, and do not have a deep understanding of the benefits and advantages of having an international English certificate. Therefore, students mostly focus on measures to get the certificate and neglect the application of the English knowledge they have learned in their own lives and other subjects. This is a huge limitation in developing foreign language skills for students, not only at Dai Nam University but also at most universities in Vietnam today.

2.2.2.2 Creating an environment for regular English practice

The way to promote students' English proficiency lies not only in the learning method, but also in a regular practice environment, closely linked to the students' daily learning activities.

First of all, English lessons. As we have pointed out above, first and second year students are still quite passive in learning English, especially with the two skills of listening and speaking due to the influence of foreign language learning at high school level which only focuses on reading and writing skills. While international certificate exams do not emphasize grammar testing, but focus on assessing the

four practical language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The way of doing the test and the types of questions in these exams are completely different, requiring students to adapt and have a completely new way of learning. That is learning to have language skills and to communicate fluently in English, not learning to grasp some trivial grammar phenomena. Therefore, students must have reflexive skills to be able to speak English. The classroom is a miniature model with hypothetical situations to help students gradually get used to using English as a daily communication tool.

However, the time to study English in the classroom is not much, requiring students to have more environments to practice English continuously and regularly. The next solution is to join clubs that use English in their activities. Research by J.W. Thomas (2011) shows that the advantages that English clubs bring to members with the same passion and direction have been recognized by many schools and organizations.¹³ Currently, Dai Nam University has an English Club with many activities such as workshops, debate competitions, English speaking competitions and regular meetings. This is an opportunity for students in the university to communicate with friends in English, share and learn effective learning experiences from members and experts.

2.2.2.3 Improving the qualifications of English teachers

Currently, the number of teachers participating in teaching basic English to students in the university is 25 and all have master's degrees. The teaching staff is well-trained, specialized and has solid pedagogical skills. However, in order to develop students' foreign language skills to meet the increasingly high demands of the domestic and international labor market in the globalization period, lecturers themselves also need to be regularly updated with new knowledge and teaching methods. The university's financial and time support helps lecturers have more opportunities to participate in courses and seminars to update new information on foreign language teaching and learning, thereby better serving the teaching work.

Lecturers also need to improve their pedagogical skills in understanding and grasping the abilities of each student, thereby having appropriate orientations for students in learning English. This requires lecturers to teach small-scale classes, have friendly classroom organization methods, create conditions for students to demonstrate their abilities and have appropriate encouragement and guidance to encourage students to develop their strengths, while having a positive learning attitude and the right learning motivation.

3. CONCLUSION

Developing foreign language skills, including English skills for students, is an essential requirement for universities in Vietnam, including Dai Nam University. The goal is to improve students' English proficiency to meet the demand for high-quality human resources in the era of integration, internationalization and globalization. Developing English skills needs to start with raising students'

¹³ J.W. Thomas, *A review of Research on Project Based Learning*, Retrieved September 10, 2009

awareness of the role and importance of foreign languages so that students have motivation and goals to achieve in learning foreign languages. Lecturers as instructors need to have the knowledge and methods to provide students with necessary information about international certificates, and to set appropriate roadmaps for students to achieve their goals. In addition, instructions from the University and activities of university organizations to create an environment for regular English practice are also important factors to promote students' foreign language skills.

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