

Vietnamese Students' Foreign Language Competence

Giap Thi Yen¹, Nguyen Thi Quynh Huong², Le Thi Thanh Trang³

Abstract

Universities in many countries around the world are currently being required to provide human resources good at professional knowledge and proficient in using foreign languages to participate in the labor market in the context of international integration. Therefore, researches on higher education, foreign language teaching and related issues to develop students' foreign language competence are critical in need. This paper focuses on the issues identified as factors affecting students' foreign language competence: students' competence of foreign language input; students' foreign language learning competence. Based on the theoretical research framework, a survey of 500 senior students (course 2019-2023) from National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities (affiliated with Ho Chi Minh City National University), representing the group of universities in the field of social sciences in Vietnam, were carried. The survey aims to assess students' current foreign language competence and the impact of students' competence of foreign language input and foreign language learning competence on their foreign language competence development. The main finding reveals that students have self-assessment of their foreign language input at low level, which much affects their learning process and development of foreign language competence on higher education. From this, solutions to develop foreign language competence to the students of the National Academy of Public Administration, University of Social Sciences and Humanities and other universities in the field of social sciences in Vietnam are recommended.

Keywords: *foreign language competence, foreign language input, learning competence, Vietnamese students.*

1. Introduction

Vietnam is a developing country, with a higher education system of 224 universities, of which the universities majoring in social sciences accounts for over 20% (MOET, 2023). National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities are ranked in the group of universities having a large number of enrolled students in comparison with other universities in the field of social sciences: over 6.000 students in total (NAPA, 2023; USSH, 2023).

Vietnamese higher education is also not high - ranked in the world. Quality of human resource provided by universities for the national development has proved that 22.6% of labor force have technical qualifications; 10% of Vietnamese workers meet the requirements of businesses in the context of international integration (Nhat, H., 2022). In the field of social sciences, human resources with high qualifications, good working

¹ National Academy of Public Administration, Hanoi city, Vietnam, giapthiyen.flc.napa@gmail.com

² National Academy of Public Administration, Hanoi city, Vietnam, quynhhuong138@gmail.com

³ National Academy of Public Administration, Hanoi city, Vietnam, lethanhtrang.vn@gmail.com

performance and foreign language proficiency have not been emphasized as national advantages. The reasons not only come from education programs and professional practice skills, but also from foreign language learning and teaching process in universities. Therefore, the research on students' foreign language competence is necessary for higher education development in Vietnam.

In this study, on the basis of the theoretical framework of students' foreign language competence, a survey focusing on the students' foreign language competence in English developed in the educational activities was conducted with 500 senior students at National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities (course 2019-2023). From the findings, the paper hopes to provide empirical information to help leaders of National Academy of Public Administration, University of Social Sciences and Humanities and other universities in the field of science Vietnam's society have more scientific basis to plan their educational development policies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Students' foreign language competence (FLC)

The term competence is mentioned by many researchers to mean an individual's qualities and capacity to work for an organization and the society. Loan, T. (2017) emphasizes: competence is the capacity to perform work, expressed through the working results. In the same opinion, Hai, N.T.H. et al. (2019) affirms: competence is the capacity to perform work, including the capacity to work independently and coordinate to achieve the common goal. In terms of linguistics, many researchers define that competence is an individual's capacity to carry out an activity or a task (Lan, N., 2006).

Therefore, it can be conclusively drawn that the term competence emphasizes the capacity to perform work and get results. For higher education, this paper defines: A student's foreign language competence is the capacity to acquire knowledge and skills to use a foreign language for communication and research. This capacity is demonstrated in foreign language features (vocabulary, phonetics, grammar) and communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) developed and recognized during students' learning process at universities. In Vietnam, students' foreign language competence is determined according to the the framework prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training, including 6 levels: A1 (level 1), A2 (level 2), B1 (level 3), B2 (level 4), C1 (level 5), C2 (level 6) [MOET, 2014]. This foreign language competence framework is built on the basis of reference to the Common European Reference Framework (CERF) and combination with real contexts of teaching, learning and using foreign languages in Vietnam.

Given Vietnam's foreign language competence framework, universities determine students' foreign language competence before their graduation in accordance with the characteristics of their majors. Actually, in Vietnamese universities in the field of social sciences, including National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities, after four – year study, students are obliged to get B1 level of foreign language proficiency. This means students can understand the main ideas of a paragraph or speech on familiar topics at work, school and entertainment (FLC1); students can handle most situations where the language is spoken and write simple paragraphs relating to common topics or personal interest (FLC2); students can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, ambitions and briefly explain reasons, express their opinions and plans (FLC3) [MOET, 2014].

To achieve the output standard of foreign language competence at level B1 (level 3), it is necessary for students to develop not only vocabulary, grammar but also communicative skills (listening, speaking, skills, writing skills) of the foreign language designed in university education programs. They are required have sufficient vocabulary enabling

them to express their desire, describe unpredictable situations, explain the main points of problems with reasonable accuracy, and give a talk about topics they are concerning.

2.2. Influencing factors on students' foreign language competence

Students' acquisition of foreign language knowledge and skills to form foreign language competence is influenced by many factors, associated with their learning process at university. In other words, according to Loi, N.V. et al. (2014), they are students' competence of foreign language input and learning competence. In this paper, theoretical research framework is built basing on the agreement with main point of foreign language competence given by previous researchers.

a) Students' competence of foreign language input (LI)

In Vietnam, foreign language entry level of university students is regulated at the general knowledge threshold according to the foreign language competence framework issued and managed by the Ministry of Education and Training, including 6 levels: A1 (level 1), A2 (level 2), B1 (level 3), B2 (level 4), C1 (level 5), C2 (level 6). The foreign language program taught at high schools provides students with the foundation knowledge to take university entrance exams or admissions. Foreign language proficiency students get before entering university is equivalent to A2 (Level 2) in reference to the 6-level foreign language competence framework [MOET, 2014]. This means after high school graduation, students can understand frequently used sentences and structures related to basic communication needs (such as information about family, individual, shopping, asking for directions, a job) (LI1); exchange information about simple, daily topics (LI2); simply introduce themselves, surrounding environment and issues of essential needs (LI3).

From a theoretical perspective, students should be prepared with knowledge of linguistics items and communicative skills at A2 level through the process of learning foreign language at the high school. In other words, knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) at elementary level (A2 level) are considered to be students' foreign language input when they start their study at universities.

It is the fact that different learning conditions due to different regions (islands, mountainous areas, rural areas, urban areas) cause differences in foreign – language - proficiency when students graduate from high school. This has much influence on students' development of foreign language competence at universities.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): students' competence of foreign language input has an impact on development of students' foreign language competence at universities.

b) Students' foreign language learning competence (LC)

Based on the definition of competence referring to the capacity to perform work and get working results, the factor "students' foreign language learning competence" is emphasized on capacity to acquire foreign language knowledge and communicative skills during the learning process and meet the output standards of foreign language competence according to universities' educational program.

In both theoretical and practical aspects, university students' foreign language proficiency is additionally formed and developed in comparison with that when students start universities (Tuyet, H.T., 2013). Foreign language programs in universities are developed and integrated with the characteristics of different training majors to enhance students' foreign language competence. This also sets requirements for students' corresponding learning competence to achieve the goals of the university program according to their chosen major. This competence is assessed by universities through exams for each foreign language module. The assessment results of students' foreign language learning competence are shown in a number of criteria: vocabulary (LC1), grammar (LC2),

foreign language communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) (LC3) developed and improved when students practice communicating, learning, and researching.

The formation and development of students' foreign language learning competence is an important premise to complete their educational program in university. Moreover, this is a factor having a great impact on the learning process and affirms students' foreign language competence upon graduation.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Foreign language learning competence has an impact on the development of students' foreign language competence during their studying process at university.

In reference to related studies, the paper provides a theoretical framework focusing on factors affecting students' foreign language competence. The research model includes 3 scales: "students' competence of foreign language input", "students' foreign language learning competence" (02 independent variables) and "students' foreign language competence" (01 dependent variable). These scales include 9 observed variables, designed into 9 questions in the survey questionnaire and measured with a 5-level Likert scale: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - No opinion; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1. Research theoretical framework

No	Scales	Encryption	Rating levels				
			1	2	3	4	5
I	Students' competence of foreign language input	LI					
1	Students can understand frequently used sentences and structures related to basic communication needs (such as information about family, individual, shopping, asking for directions, a job).	LI1					
2	Students can exchange information about simple, daily topics.	LI2					
3	Students can simply introduce themselves, surrounding environment and issues of essential needs	LI3					
II	Students' foreign language learning competence	LC					
1	Students' vocabulary developed and improved when students practice communicating, learning, and researching.	LC1					
2	Students' grammar developed and improved when students practice communicating, learning, and researching.	LC2					
3	Students' foreign language communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) developed and improved when students practice communicating, learning, and researching.	LC3					
III	Students' foreign language competence	FLC					
1	Students can understand the main ideas of a paragraph or speech on familiar topics at work, school and entertainment...	FLC1					
2	Students can handle most situations where the	FLC2					

	language is spoken and write simple paragraphs relating to common topics or personal interest.						
3	Students can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, ambitions and briefly explain reasons, express their opinions and plans.	FLC3					

Source: Compiled by the authors from the literature review

Research models

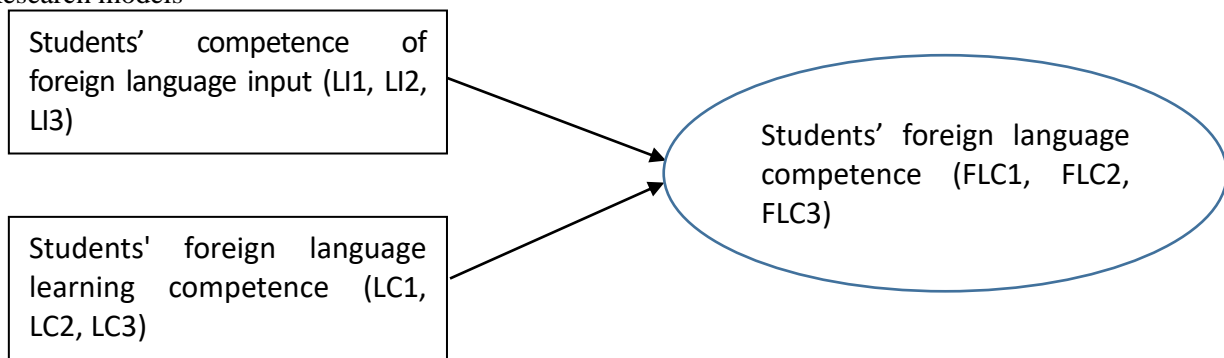


Figure 1. Research model

3. Research methods

a) Qualitative method

Qualitative method is mainly used in reviewing researches. The paper collected and analyzed related studies and built initial background knowledge on factors influencing on students' foreign language competence. Next, interviews were conducted and comments on initial background knowledge were collected to complete the research theoretical framework and research model, including the following scales: students' competence of foreign language input (LI); students' foreign language learning competence (LC); students' foreign language competence (FLC) [Table 1, Figure 1].

b) Quantitative method

Quantitative method is mainly used in practical research. The data were collected from survey of 500 final students (course 2019-2023) from National Academy of Public Administration, University of Social Sciences and Humanities and analyzed. The survey results then were used for regression analysis to examine the relationship among the scales and the proposed research hypothesis.

According to Hai, D.H. et al. (2018), the minimum sample size needed for the regression analysis of the model with 3 scales and 9 observed variables in this study is $N = 9 \times 5 = 45$. In fact, the survey of students' perspectives was conducted at National Academy of Public Administration, University of Social Sciences and Humanities with sample size $N = 500 > 45$ to ensure the reliability of the collected data. The survey results are: 500/500 students agreed to answer and 500/500 valid answer sheets, reaching a valid response rate of 100%.

4. Research results

In the light of the theoretical research framework, a survey of 500 senior students' opinion (course 2019-2023) were carried out at National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities. The collected data were tested with a Cronbach' Alpha for the reliability of the scales and observed variables in the research

model. The scales are reliable in case of Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 ; the observed variables are reliable in case of Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3 . The test results show that all of the 3 scales and 9 observed variables are reliable (Table 2) [Hai, D.H. et al., 2018].

Table 2. Statistical and scale testing results

Scales	Observed variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach' Alpha	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
1. Students' competence of foreign language input (LI)	LI1	500	1	5	3.53	.579	.663	LI1 = .443
	LI2	500	1	5	3.57	.612		LI2 = .482
	LI3	500	1	5	3.51	.655		LI3 = .469
2. Students' foreign language learning competence (LC1)	LC1	500	1	5	3.77	.547	.676	LC1 = .587
	LC2	500	1	5	3.78	.519		LC2 = .543
	LC3	500	1	5	3.85	.634		LC3 = .562
3. Students' foreign language competence (FLC)	FLC1	500	1	5	3.96	.611	.689	FLC1 = .571
	FLC2	500	1	5	4.01	.574		FLC2 = .569
	FLC3	500	1	5	4.03	.643		FLC3 = .580
Valid N (listwise)		500						

Source: Authors' survey results

Table 2 data shows:

+ Observations on the scale "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC), "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC) are all evaluated at an average level of Mean > 3.5 , statistically significant according to Likert scale (1-5). However, the observed variables of the scale "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI) are rated at the lowest level with Mean (LI1) = 3.53, Mean (LI2) = 3.57, Mean (LI3) = 3.51, showing that students' foreign language knowledge and skills before enrolling are at a low level. This is a factor that affects students' learning process and English language learning results at National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities today.

+ The 3 scales and 9 observed variables in the research model all meet standard test values: Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 ; Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3 . These scales continue to be used for the regression analysis to examine the relationship among the independent variables "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC) with the dependent variable "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC) [Table 3].

Table 3. Multivariable regression results

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	.631	.311		3.167	.000	
	Students' competence of foreign language input (LI)	.391	.188	.371	4.517	.000	1.812

Students' foreign language learning competence (LC1)	.565	.176	.512	7.942	.000	1.812
a. Dependent Variable: Students' foreign language competence (FLC)						
R Square = .672; Durbin-Watson = 2.005						

Source: Authors' survey results

The regression analysis data in Table 3 shows:

+ R Square = .672, confirming that the scales "Students' competence's foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC) explain 67.2% of the variation of the scale "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC).

+ VIF = 1.812 ($1 < VIF < 2$), showing that the regression model does not have multicollinearity; Durbin-Watson = 2.005 ($1 < d < 3$), showing that the regression model has no autocorrelation phenomenon, confirming the scales "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC) are independent and both influence on the scale of "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC).

+ The regression coefficients of the two independent variables "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC) are both statistically significant Sig. = 0.000 (Sig. < 0.05) and have a positive value: B (LI) = 0.391, B (LC) = 0.565, confirming the positive relationship between the two independent variables "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC) and 01 dependent variable "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC); Hypotheses H1, H2 are accepted.

Applying the generalized regression model of Hai, D.H. et al. (2018): $Y = B_0 + B_1 * X_1 + B_2 * X_2 + \dots + B_i * X_i$, the multivariate regression model of this study is determined as follows:

$$FLC = 0.631 + 0.391 * LI + 0.565 * LC$$

Based on the above regression model, the correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable is evaluated according to the regression coefficients. Given the regression coefficients of the scales as independent variables: B (LI) = 0.391, B (LC) = 0.565, it can be confirmed that the correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable is in increasing order: "Students' competence of foreign language input" (LI), "Students' foreign language learning competence" (LC), respectively.

5. Conclusion

The analysis and testing results reveal that students of National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities self-assess their competence of foreign language input at a low level. This has great impact on the students' learning process and foreign language competence and the educational quality of the two universities at the same time. It is recommended that managers and educators of National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities as well as other universities in the field of social sciences should much concern about this issue to develop appropriate educational programs.

From the study results, it is suggested that students' entry levels of foreign language should be classified for placement at National Academy of Public Administration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities as well as other universities in the field of science so that appropriate training policies could be proposed and effectively carried out. The classification of students' entry level of English language proficiency is significant to

both the students' learning process and educational management in the universities, specifically:

- Firstly, students in different regions (mountainous areas, islands, rural areas, urban areas) have different conditions for learning English, leading to differences in students' English proficiency when they enter university. Moreover, that the classification of students' entry level of English proficiency for placement will create learning conditions (appropriate interaction in learning) and learning motivation (learning psychology, interests) for each group of students in the process of their learning of English as a foreign language.
- Secondly, the classification of students' entry level of English proficiency will help university educators actively develop educational plans and programs so that the educational quality could be more and more improved.

So far, the aim of the study has been achieved through the study results. Additionally, this study also provides information to help managers of National Academy of Public Administration, University of Social Sciences and Humanities and other universities in the field of social sciences in Vietnam have a deep sight of students' level entry of English proficiency so that appropriate solutions could be given for better training process.

References

1. Hai, D.H.; Ngoc, H.S. (2018). Statistical probability and quantitative methods in economics. Hanoi Labor Publishing House.
2. Hai, N.T.H. and Doan, P.D. (2019). "Solutions on application conditions of competence-based civil servant management to meet administrative reform requirements". State Management Review, No. 10/2019.
3. Lan, N. (2006). Dictionary of Vietnamese words and phrases. Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House.
4. Loan, T. (2017). "Administrative civil servants' competence of public duty performance". Communist Review, address <https://tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/quan-triet-va-thuc-hien-nghi-quyet-ai-hoi-xii-cua-ang/-/2018/43204/ve-nang-luc-thuc-thi-cong-vu-cua-doi-ngu-cong-chuc-hanh-chinh.aspx#>
5. Loi, N.V; Hang, C.T.T. (2014). "Factors affecting English ability of English pedagogical students, Can Tho University". Journal of Science Can Tho University, No. 32.
6. MOET - Ministry of Education and Training (2014). Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT dated 24th January, 2014 promulgating the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam.
7. MOET - Ministry of Education and Training (2023). "List of educational institutions", address <https://moet.gov.vn/cos oGiaduc/Pages/list-sach.aspx>
8. NAPA - National Academy of Public Administration (2023). "Training", address <https://napa.vn/>
9. Nhat, H. (2022). "Only 10% of Vietnamese workers can meet the requirements of enterprises". Dan Tri newspaper, address, July 23, 2022.
10. Tuyet, H.T. (2013). "Development of university programs according to competency approach: Trends and needs". Journal of Development and Integration.
11. USSH - University of Social Sciences and Humanities (2023). "Admissions information", address <https://hcmussh.edu.vn/tuyensinh>