Students' Foreign Language Competence and Issue of University Administration in Vietnam

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Abstract

In the context of international integration, the human resource of an organization, in addition to being professionally good, needs to be proficient in using foreign languages. That poses a requirement for educational institutions (in this study called universities) to provide human resource both professional expertise and capacity of using foreign languages. In relation to the educational development in universities, the study focuses on influencing factors on students' foreign language competence, that is, Students' foreign language learning proactive and Students' input foreign language level. In this study, the theoretical research framework was developed and a survey of 450 senior students from the Nam Dinh University of Nursing (NDUN) representing universities in the field of medicine in Vietnam was conducted to assess students' foreign language competence and influencing factors. The results show that: students meet university requirements of foreign language output standards stated by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam but lack of initiative to learn foreign languages, which is considered the most influencing factor to the students' job performace competence required from the labor market in the context of international integration. In addition, the study suggests the NDUN and other universities in the field of medicine solutions to develop students' foreign language competence.

Keywords: *Foreign language competence; foreign language learning proactive; input foreign language level; Vietnamese students.*

1. Introduction

Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country with a higher education system of 224 universities, of which less 10% are universities in the field of medicine (MOET, 2023). Of many universities in the field of medicine, the NDUN is ranked in the group of universities having a large number of enrolled students: Over 4,000 students (NDUN, 2023). Every year, over 1.000 NAPA students graduate, adding professionally trained human resource for the national development.

As a developing country, Vietnam has a large population; Educational level and income level are ranked at an average level compared to other countries in the region. Vietnamese workers are assessed on their professional qualifications with 22.6% having technical qualifications; only 10% meet the requirements of businesses in the context of international integration (Hong, N., 2022). With this ratio, it can be seen that not many of Vietnam's trained workers are able to meet requirements of the labor market in the context of international integration. This reality comes from two main reasons: limitations in professional practice skills and foreign language competence.

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The above issue is posing a need to improve the educational quality of university so that Vietnamese students are well – trained at both their professional expertise and foreign language competence to be able to actively participate in the international labor market. In terms of foreign language learning, there are many factors that influence the development of students' foreign language competence during their studies at university. This needs much attention from the Vietnamese universities in term of administration activities. Therefore, the study on factors influencing students' foreign language comptence is necessary in the context of higher education development in Vietnam.

In this study, on the basis of the theoretical framework of influencing factors to students' foreign language competence, a survey of English language competence developed in universities was conducted with 450 senior students from the NDUN. From the findings, the paper hopes to provide empirical information to help leaders of NDUN and other universities in Vietnam have more scientific basis to plan their educational development policies in the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Students' foreign language competence (FLC)

In research on higher education, many studies have approached students' foreign language competence based on the perspective of the subject's (student's) capacities to perform foreign language learning activities so that their foreign language knowledge and skills are developed. According to Thuat, T.H. et al. (2022), "a student's foreign language competence is the ability to use a foreign language for communication and research, expressed in foreign language knowledge (vocabulary, phonetics, grammar), and communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)". In the same opinion, Tuan, T.A. (2023) affirmed: "Foreign language competence is the foreign language knowledge and skills acquired during the study process at university level to develop the capacity to use the foreign language for communication, research and professional activities. In this case, foreign language knowledge is defined as vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar; foreign language skills are defined as listening, speaking, reading and writing skills".

The above research perspectives all emphasize students' acquisition of foreign language knowledge and skills during their studies at university. This linguistic knowledge and skills are formed and developed to support students' communication, research and professional activities and meet the university's output standards of foreign language competence. This study shares the same viewpoints when approaching research on students' foreign language competence: It is the students' capacity to acquire foreign language knowledge and skills during the learning process and meet output standards in terms of foreign language competence given by the university. In Vietnam, on the basis of training major features, universities set students' foreign language output standards upon graduation in accordance with the foreign language competence framework prescribed by law (MOET, 2014), called foreign language competence output standards including 6 levels: A1 (level 1), A2 (level 2), B1 (level 3), B2 (level 4), C1 (level 5), C2 (level 6).

It is the fact that in most universities in the field of social sciences, including the NAPA, foreign language output standards required from students' competence is B1 level (level 3). This means students can understand the main ideas of a paragraph or speech on familiar topics of work, school, entertainment, etc. (FLC1); students can handle most situations that arise when visiting an area where the language is spoken; can write simple paragraphs relating to common topics or personal interests (FLC2); students can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, ambitions and can briefly present reasons, explain their opinions and plans (FLC3).

In the light of the aim and scope of the research, the study uses the B1 (level 3) output standards of students' foreign language competence to build the theoretical framework

which is both consistent with the provisions of Vietnamese law and the reality of the research context in the NDUN.

2.2. Influencing factors to students' foreign language competence

Students' process of learning a foreign language and developing communicative skills to improve their foreign language competence is influenced by different factors which, according to researchers, include both subjective and objective ones associated with students' foreign language learning process university. Stated by Quyet, N. et al. (2018) and Thuat, T.H. et al. (2022), these factors refer to students' foreign language input and foreign language competence during their learning process at university. Some other studies also emphasize cultural, educational, economic, and social features of the region where students previously or currently studied, leading to differences in students' foreign language input (Tuan, T.A., 2023); or students' foreign language competence achieved after taking part in study programs in universities (Loi, N.V. et al., 2014). In terms of learning organization, these factors are the learning environment (classroom organization; teaching methods) and students' initiative to learn (Tuan, T.Q. et al., 2016; Bang, T.C., 2017).

In case of classifying the influencing factors to students' foreign language competence into subjective and objective factors ones, affect students' foreign language ability, the study focuses on two subjective factors, directly related to the learners (student), which are: (1) Students' foreign language learning proactive; (2) Students' input foreign language level.

a) Students' foreign language learning proactive (LP)

Learners (students) are the main subjects of the foreign language learning process. Therefore, to improve students' foreign language competence, students themselves are the first factor that should be mentioned. Many studies consider students' initiative to learn a foreign language as the most important factor influencing their success of the language acquisition process (Moeinvaziri, S. et al., 2014; Bang, T.C., 2017). Researchers also explain students' initiative to learn a foreign language in some basic aspects as follows:

- LP1. Students themselves raise awareness of the importance of learning a foreign language and actively participate in foreign language training programs to achieve university output standards. In other words, the researchers emphasize that if students are not aware of the importance of learning a foreign language, they will not create motivation to learn, develop a sense of self-improvement; determine learning target and build up effective learning methods, which leads to inefficient language acquisition.

- LP2. Students actively take part in foreign language learning activities to practice communicative skills of foreign languages and create love, passion, and interest in learning. This means, according to researchers' explaination, love, passion, and interest in learning foreign languages must become necessary conditions for students. Without these conditions, students' foreign language learning process cannot be successful. The students who are interested in learning a foreign language will actively complete assignments and try to find out the effective learning methods of a foreign language.

- LP3. Students keep trying to find out the appropriate foreign language learning method for themselves. Researchers explain that a foreign language self-study method that suits student's schedule, capacity, learning needs and goals could help them soon succeed in studying the foreign language. Therefore, in terms of methods to improve learners' foreign language competence, researchers recommend that apart from linguistic knowledge, educators pay more attention to guiding students to develop effective learning methods.

A student's learning effectiveness depends greatly on the ability to self-organize his learning process. That the learning process is well - organized and scientific is a factor to

promote students' interest and bring out the effectiveness of learning a foreign language. When students are interested in learning a foreign language, they are eager to acquire the knowledge and practice communicative skills to improve their foreign language competence meeting universities' output standard requirements.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Students' initiative to learn foreign languages has a direct impact on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and improvement of foreign language competence to meet universities output standard requiremen.

b) Students' input foreign language level (IL)

In terms of university administration theory, foreign language input is students' foreign language competence before being admitted to universities. The knowledge and skills are acquired by students through the process of learning foreign languages at high schools. However, Vietnamese high school students' foreign language competence is not the same among regions (mountainous areas, islands, rural areas, urban areas). Therefore, in Vietnam, on the basis of training major features, universities set students' foreign language output standards upon graduation in accordance with the foreign language competence framework prescribed by law (MOET, 2014), called foreign language competence output standards including 6 levels: A1 (level 1), A2 (level 2), B1 (level 3), B2 (level 4), C1 (level 5), C2 (level 6).

It is the fact that before they are admitted into universities, non – linguistic major students' foreign language input is almost below level B1 (level 3), usually at level A2 (level 2). This means their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge and communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) meet the requirements of simple expression and communication according to the high school curriculum. Specifically, the target of level A2 (level 2) is determined that students can understand frequently used sentences and structures related to basic communication needs, such as information about family, self, shopping, asking for directions, job (IL1); exchange information about simple, familiar daily topics (IL 2); simply describe themselves, their surroundings and issues of essential needs (IL 3).

Foreign language input for non-language major students are often set at a low level due to the huge difference in students' foreign language competence at high schools in different regions. However, this is also a factor that has a direct impact, greatly influencing students' foreign language learning process to meet output standards requirements in universities.

Hypothesis 2 (H1): Students' foreign language input has a direct impact on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and the improvement of students' foreign language competence to meet universities' output standard requirements.

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' foreign language learning proactive", "Students' input foreign language level" (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' foreign language learning proactive	LP					
1	Students themselves raise awareness of the importance of learning a foreign language and actively participate in foreign language training programs to achieve	LP1					

	university output standards.						
2	Students actively take part in foreign language learning activities to practice communicative skills of foreign languages and create love, passion, and interest in learning.	LP2					
3	Students keep trying to find out the appropriate foreign language learning method for themselves.	LP3					
II	Students' input foreign language level	IL					
1	Students can understand frequently used sentences and structures related to basic communication needs, such as information about family, self, shopping, asking for directions, job.	IL1					
2	Students can exchange information about simple, familiar daily topics.	IL2					
3	Students can simply describe themselves, their surroundings and issues of essential needs.	IL3					
III	Students' foreign language competence	FLC					
1	Students can understand the main ideas of a paragraph or speech on familiar topics of work, school, entertainment, etc	FLC1					
2	Students can handle most situations that arise when visiting an area where the language is spoken; can write simple paragraphs relating to common topics or personal interests.	FLC2					
3	Students can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes, ambitions and can briefly present reasons, explain their opinions and plans.	FLC3					

Source: Compiled by the authors from the literature review

Research models
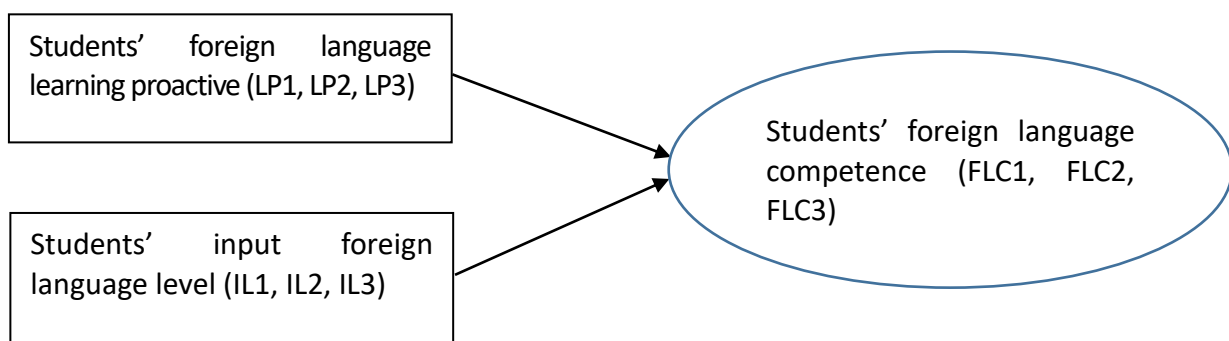

Figure 1. Research model

3. Research methods

a) Qualitative method

Qualitative method is mainly used in reviewing researches. The athors collected and analyzed related studies and built initial background theoritical knowledge on factors affecting students' foreign language competence. Next, the authors 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' foreign language learning proactive" (LP); "Students' input foreign language level" (IL); "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC) [Table 1, Figure 1].

b) Quantitative method

Quantitative method is mainly used in practical research. The data were collected and analyzed from survey of 450 senior students (course 2019-2023) from the NDUN according to the developed theoretical framework. The survey results then were used for scale test, correlation analysis to examined the research model, examined 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 correlation analysis of the model with 3 scales and 9 observed variables in this study is N = 9*5 = 45. In fact, the survey of students' perspectives was conducted at the NDUN with sample size N = 450 > 45 to ensure the reliability of the collected data. The survey results are: 450/450 students agreed to answer and 450/450 valid answer sheets, reaching a valid response rate of 100%.

4. Research results

Based on the developing a theoretical framework for their study, the authors polled 450 senior students of the NDUN (course 2019-2023). With the data collected from survey activities, the authors conducted Cronbach's Alpha test to identify the reliability of the scales and observed variables in the study model. According to Hai, D.H. et al. (2018), Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 and Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3 are the requirements for the reliabilities of the scales and the observed variables, respectively. The test results show that all 3 scales and 9 observed variables are reliable (Table 2).

Table 2. Statistical and scale testing results

Scales	Observed variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach' Alpha	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
1. Students' foreign language learning proactive (LP)	LP1	450	1	5	3.61	.619	.668	LP1 = .435
	LP2	450	1	5	3.54	.601		LP2 = .456
	LP3	450	1	5	3.59	.654		LP3 = .471
2. Students' input foreign language level (IL)	IL1	450	1	5	3.81	.542	.716	IL1 = .589
	IL2	450	2	5	3.79	.521		IL2 = .551
	IL3	450	1	5	3.82	.611		IL3 = .564
3. Students' foreign language competence (FLC)	FLC1	450	1	5	3.92	.606	.729	FLC1 = .647
	FLC2	450	1	5	3.81	.583		FLC2 = .629
	FLC3	450	2	5	4.01	.635		FLC3 = .638
Valid N (listwise)		450						

Source: Authors' survey results

Table 2 data shows:

+ Observations on the scale "Students' foreign language learning proactive" (LP), "Students' input foreign language level" (IL), "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' foreign language learning proactive" (LP) are rated at the lowest level with Mean (LP1) =

3.53, Mean (LP2) = 3.57, Mean (LP3) = 3.51, showing that many students of the NDUN have not yet taken the foreign language learning proactive. This is a factor that affects students' learning process and English language learning results at the NDUN today.

+ All three scales and the nine observed variables in the research model have standard test values, as shown by the results in Table 3 (Cronbach'alpha > 0.6; Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3). We used this test result as a foundation for dependability as we carried out correlation analysis to take the association of scales in the study model: 02 independent variables "Students' foreign language learning proactive" (LP), "Students' input foreign language level" (IL) and 01 dependent variable "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC) [Table 3].

Table 3. Correlation analysis results of the scales

Correlations		LP	IL	FLC
LP	Pearson Correlation	1	.733**	.576**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	450	450	450
IL	Pearson Correlation	.733**	1	.689**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	450	450	450
FLC	Pearson Correlation	.576**	.689**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	450	450	450
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: Authors' survey results

Table 3 data shows:

+ Correlation coefficients of the scales reach 0 < r < 1, indicating that there is a positive relationship between the two independent variables "Students' foreign language learning proactive" (LP), "Students' input foreign language level" (IL) and 01 dependent variable "Students' foreign language competence" (FLC); Hypotheses H1, H2 are accepted; the initially determined research model is confirmed to be consistent with the research theoretical framework and survey data set.

+ Based on the values of r [r (LP) = .576 and r (IL) = .689], it can be confirmed that the correlation level between the independent variables and the dependent variable in ascending order, that is: "Students' foreign language learning proactive" (LP), "Students' input foreign language level" (IL). This is the basis for the author to draw research conclusions that many students of the NDUN have not yet taken the foreign language learning proactive; it affects students' learning process and English language learning results at the NDUN today.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis and study results lead to the confirmation:

(1) NDUN students' foreign language competence can meet the output standard requirements of foreign language proficiency. However, many of them have no initiative to learn foreign languages, which affects their learning foreign language process and results.

(2) Students' initiative to learn foreign languages and their foreign language input are two factors that have a direct impact on the NDUN students' foreign language competence development. The initially determined research model is confirmed to be consistent with the research theoretical framework and survey data.

These findings suggest recommendations to promote students' initiative to learn foreign languages and improve the educational quality at the NDUN. Specifically:

- Firstly, encourage students' choices in learning foreign languages. That means teachers need to engage learners in a relative level of decision-making to choose the content and learning methods of each lesson instead of following strictly the given curriculum. In that case, students will become active to propose lesson content, choose appropriate situations and approaches to interact with lecturers and other students in the classroom.

- Secondly, encourage students to create their own exercises in foreign language learning. That means instructors encourage students to make choices about the types of exercises and give them opportunities to adjust types of exercises in class while learning a foreign language. If so, students will be able to actively create their own learning tasks. For example, lecturers give a task of reading comprehension lesson but not a question in the textbook, then ask students to work in small groups to write their own questions and discuss with partners to find answers.

- Thirdly, encourage students themselves to become teachers and researchers in the process of organizing the foreign language learning. That means lecturers encourage students to teach each other through presentations and discussion of topics. The success of each presentation is measured by the other group's responses. Lecturers encourage students to become researchers by creating opportunities outside classroom for students to research and find information related to the lesson content they are studying.

In fact, promoting student's initiative to learn foreign languages requires the synchronous action from different subjects (lecturers, students). The final target is to help learners to be active, self-aware, and responsible in learning to improve the quality of foreign language learning process. The study has contributed to point out NDUN students' current foreign language competence and influencing factors to their foreign language competence. Moreover, some solutions to promote students' initiative to learn foreign languages are given in the hope of supporting to better educational management activities in the NDUN.

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