



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Non-English Majors' Perceptions of English Proficiency Standards and CEFR-V in Tertiary Education in Vietnam

Linh Dieu Nguyen

Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam

Email: [linhnd@hnue.edu.vn](mailto:linhnd@hnue.edu.vn)

### Article history

Received: 10 April, 2023

Accepted: 26 June, 2023

Published: 30 June, 2023

### Keywords

National Foreign Language Project, English proficiency standards, CEFR-V, tertiary education, Vietnam

### ABSTRACT

Vietnam's education system has made significant efforts to enhance foreign language proficiency, particularly with English language, across all levels of education and training. In recent years, although many educational policies and projects, typically the National Foreign Language Project have been promulgated and widely applied, there are still gaps and limitations. One of them is the lack of research on the perceptions and understanding of the students who are most deeply affected by the English graduation standard policies. This paper aims to examine non-English major undergraduates' understanding of the CEFR-V (a Vietnamese version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and their perceptions of the current implementation of the English proficiency standards to university students in Vietnam. The study surveyed 122 students from a large university in Vietnam. Descriptive statistics indicate that while the participants possessed sufficiently positive perceptions about the implementation of the national proficiency standards for undergraduate students, there are still concerns about standardization and differentiation. Additionally, the students were found to have limited knowledge and low usage of the CEFR-V. Thereby, some suggestions were made to improve the foreign language policy and optimize students' learning outcomes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have witnessed significant educational reforms worldwide whose focus is on developing the English language competence of learners so that they can actively and successfully engage in the international labor market during this era of globalization. Vietnam is not an exception as its authorities have also made several attempts to enhance the English proficiency levels of the citizens. The National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) is one of the initiatives taken towards accomplishing this goal. Its initial aim was "to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system" (Prime Minister of SRV, 2008, p. 1).

The year 2014 marked a significant milestone in the progress towards accomplishing this goal of the NFLP as the Vietnamese version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), known as CEFR-V, was officially introduced (Vietnam MOET, 2014). Since then, this framework has been implemented by many universities in Vietnam as a tool to set the English proficiency standards (EPS) for tertiary students. According to the current policy, university students in Vietnam are required to achieve level 3 in the CEFR-V to graduate. The appropriateness and reasonableness of this decision, however, are still matters of debate.

In addition, with the significant paradigm shift in pedagogy from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness, the role and voice of learners today are increasingly valued (Barman, 2013; Moreno, 2015). Many researchers in the field of language teaching (Horwitz, 1999; Abdi & Asadi, 2015) have emphasized the importance of listening,

respecting, and understanding learners' perspectives and beliefs to create motivation and necessary conditions for them to improve their learning outcomes. Students are important stakeholders in any educational innovation. In the case of the current requirements of English proficiency for graduation, students unquestionably are influenced deeply by those. Without understanding their opinions, and concerns, the innovation is unlikely to achieve its goals. As a result, every educational innovation or policy needs to listen to students' voices, their wills, and viewpoints to gain better alignment with the current approach in education.

This study attempted to (1) investigate students' understanding of the CEFR-V, in terms of its objectives and the contents of each level, and (2) provide an account of the students' opinions about the implementation of EPS for tertiary education in Vietnam.

In order to achieve the above-stated aims, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do non-English major undergraduates understand the CEFR-V and use it to support their learning?
2. What are their perceptions of implementing EPS for university graduates in Vietnam? Why do they perceive that way?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Background of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam

Since 'Doi Moi' ('Reform') 1986, when the Vietnamese government started mandating a series of free-market reforms, it has triggered a substantial need for using English as the main foreign language for better success, and the English language has also gradually expanded its influences on different fields ever since.

In the 2018 General Education Program, English was introduced nationally as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 12, and as an elective subject for Grades 1 and 2. At the tertiary level, English is a compulsory subject for both undergraduate and graduate programs. In a report by Huong and Hiep (2010), non-English major students at Vietnamese universities had to study 200 hours of English during their four years at college. Some tertiary institutions even offer undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs in English in which English is used as a medium of instruction for some fundamental science subjects or some specialized ones.

To raise the rank in English proficiency and make this foreign language an advantage for Vietnamese people, on 30th September 2008, the NFLP named *Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008-2020*, was officially approved and launched. The general goal of NFLP is that "by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges, and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently" (Prime Minister of SRV, 2008, p.1). If this goal can be attained, it is about to open up plenty of opportunities for not only the country to develop but also for each individual to integrate into multicultural environments.

### 2.2. Vietnamese national standards on foreign language proficiency framework (CEFR-V standards)

Acknowledging the necessity of a common language framework, NFLP indicates one of its major tasks is to develop and release a detailed and unified language proficiency framework which comprises 6 levels. This framework plays a role as a backbone of the entire foreign language training systems nationwide, which can ensure the smooth interconnection between school levels from elementary to higher education (Prime Minister of SRV, 2008).

On 24th January 2014, the Vietnam's Minister of Education and Training officially promulgated Circular No.01/2014/TT-BGDĐT on the CEFR-V standards. This framework is a localized version of the CEFR introduced by the Council of Europe in 2001. Similar to the CEFR, this framework also consists of three broad proficiency levels, namely Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User. Each level is divided into two sublevels, forming a 6-level framework as in *Table 1*. In the CEFR-V, both general and detailed descriptions of language activities for each specific level are demonstrated. Moreover, a self-assessment grid whose contents are various learning targets - 'I can' statements are available at the end of the framework.

This framework has been used, according to the NFLP, to set standards of English for general education, higher education, foreign language teachers, and government officials. Besides, language learners can use it to self-rate their current English proficiency level, determine their goals and trace their learning progress so that necessary learning adjustments can be made.

Table 1. The 6 levels of the CEFR-V

Level group	Level	Level name
A- Basic user	1 (A1)	Breakthrough or beginner
	2 (A2)	Waystage or elementary
B- Independent user	3 (B1)	Threshold or intermediate
	4 (B2)	Vantage or upper intermediate
C- Proficient user	5 (C1)	Effective operational proficiency or advanced
	6 (C2)	Mastery or highly proficient

### 2.3. Mandated EPS for non-English major students at the tertiary level

With undergraduate institutions that are not specialized in foreign languages, their language training programs require a language proficiency of level 3 (CEFR-V) upon graduation. To get level 3 (B1), students of those institutions have to be capable of understanding the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. They also need to be able to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst they are traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Additionally, they should be able to produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Lastly, the students can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions, as well as give brief reasons and explanations for their opinions and plans (Vietnam MOET, 2014).

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 3.1. Participants & sampling

The study surveyed 122 first-year non-English major students enrolled in 5 A2-level (equivalent to level 2 according to CEFR) classes at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), which is one of the key educational institutions in Vietnam. Participants in this study were classified as A2 (level 2 on CEFR-V) achievers. At the time of the study, these students were taking a compulsory English course, focusing on practicing to achieve level 3. Among 122 participants investigated, except for ten students who did not fill in their gender, about two-thirds were female ( $n = 90$ ) and the number of male students was 21 (account for almost 20% of the total number of student participants). There was only one student who claimed to belong to another gender.

The total number of A2 first-year learners at HNUE or the population size of the study was 175 students studying in ten classes. Thus, with a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error of 5%, the minimum sample size is 121. As the sample size identified, five classes whose total number of students was up to 122 were randomly chosen from 10 A2-level classes.

### 3.2. Questionnaire

A questionnaire combining both close-ended and open-ended items was used as the data collection instrument of the study. Closed-ended items such as multiple choice or checklist provide a set of alternative answers to each item from which the respondent must select at least one while open-ended items allow participants to express their answers with greater freedom. The primary benefit of close-ended questions is the straightforwardness in coding and analyzing statistically but data gained from those items are relatively short and superficial. In such cases, adding some open-ended items can help increase much more richness of participant responses than just using quantitative data alone (Neuert et al., 2021). Therefore, the researchers decided to include some clarification questions and short-answer questions to some closed-ended items in the questionnaire to gain more profound insights into what the numerical responses mean.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections (I and II) with a total number of nine items. Section I included four items regarding the demographic data of the participants such as gender, faculty, years of learning English, and purposes of using English after graduation. Section II with five items was constructed in accordance with the two Research Questions. Four questionnaire items were used to discover the extent to which the student participants knew about the CEFR-V as well as the extent to which they used the CEFR-V to support their study. One last item was designed with a 4-point Likert scale indicating levels of agreement (*Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Agree*, *Strongly*

*Agree*) to find out the answers to Research Question 2. Omitting the midpoint in the scale was expected to encourage respondents to express their opinion and to minimize the potential misuse of the midpoint when they respond to unfamiliar questionnaire items or items that are vague or socially avoided (Chyung et al., 2017). For each item in the questionnaire, there was a space for participants' brief clarification of their answers. The content of the questionnaire was face and content validated by an expert in the field of TEFL & TESOL.

### 3.3. Data collection and data analysis

Data collection was carried out during the last two weeks of April 2021, near the end of the second school semester. Group administration which is a common method of collecting survey data was employed. Compared to other methods such as self-administration, or postal survey, group administration can ensure a much higher response rate (Dornyei, 2003). In fact, this current study achieved a response rate of nearly 100% thanks to the use of group administration. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire individually in their regular classroom.

The collected data was then analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative descriptive analysis was applied to all numerical data collected from the closed-ended items in the questionnaire. The study used the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) to store and process quantitative data such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of the results. In addition, data collected from the open-ended items were analyzed qualitatively using inductive content analysis. Based on the content categories and subcategories of each item, we created an Excel report including data description and interpretation of the results.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Non-English major undergraduates' understanding about the CEFR-V

To answer the first research question, the study investigated the participants' self-evaluation of their understanding of the CEFR-V and its purposes as well as tested their ability to recognize level 3 (CEFR-V) which was their required English proficiency level for university graduation. Additionally, the extent to which they used the CEFR-V to support their study was also found.

Table 2. Participants' self-evaluation of their understanding of the CEFR-V

Item	1. Don't know	2. Barely know	3. Quite know	4. Know well	Mean	SD
To what extent do you know about the CEFR-V?	18 14,8%	79 64,8%	23 18,9%	1 0,8%	2,06	0,61

It is clear from the table that the great majority of the participants (79,6%) claimed that they knew nothing (14,8%) or just knew very little (64,8%) about the CEFR-V. There was only one student, making up 0,8% reporting to be well familiar with the framework, compared to 18,9% believing that he/she knew it relatively well. These findings thus reveal the truth that the CEFR-V was still a novel and vague concept to most of the students. It was possible that some of the respondents just heard about the name CEFR-V a few times through their teachers' speeches without making any significant effort to uncover its real meaning and its components.

The next questionnaire item would reveal students' understanding about the purposes of the CEFR-V. All nine main purposes of the CEFR-V were included in the item in the form of a checklist, and the participants had to put a tick on the purpose(s) they know belonging to the CEFR-V. Students who got this item correct when they selected all nine purposes otherwise their responses were considered incorrect. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants' understanding about the purposes of the CEFR-V

Item	Correct		Incorrect	
	N	%	N	%
What are the purposes of the CEFR-V?	8	6,6%	114	93,4%

As the table illustrated, the incorrect responses vastly outnumber the correct ones with 93,4% and 6,6% respectively. The striking result that only eight out of 122 student participants could answer this question correctly is fairly alarming because it showed that there was a serious gap in the students' recognition of the CEFR-V and its

purposes. Most of the students participating had quite little ideas for which the CEFR-V has been used, so they might not know exactly about some practical uses of the CEFR-V, especially for language learners.

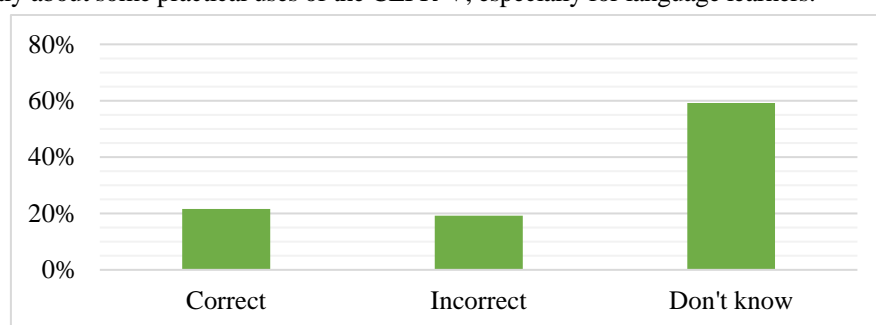


Figure 1. Participants' recognition of level 3/B1 (CEFR-V)

The following questionnaire item was designed to discover whether the students could recognize the level 3/B1 (CEFR-V) which is also the required level for their university graduation or not. In this item, student participants were provided with a general description of level 3 in the CEFR-V and asked to identify which level the description belongs to. Respondents could select one out of two options. The former was for any of them thinking that they knew the answer and there would be a space for them to note it down; while the latter was for those having no ideas about what the answer was. The results are illustrated in *Figure 1*.

As described in the bar chart, there was a significant difference in the number of respondents selecting 'Don't know' and that of the other two groups of respondents getting their answers either correct or incorrect. Nearly three-fifths of the participants ( $n = 71$ , 59.2%) did not know what level it was, and about one-fifth of them ( $n = 23$ , 19.2%) gave incorrect answers. It came as a surprise that merely 20% of the respondents filled in the correct answer that is B1 or level 3. This means that, of every five student participants, four of them failed to recognize the general description of their learning target or foreign language outcome standard, which is an exceptionally startling revelation.

As just mentioned previously, two of the main purposes of the CEFR-V are to help language learners understand the requirements of each language proficiency level as well as evaluate their current level on their own; therefore, the researcher was curious to find out how many student participants had already taken this advantage of the CEFR-V. The participants were asked whether they had ever used the CEFR-V to assess their level of language proficiency before. Those who said "Yes, I have" then needed to include further information on what purposes for their use of the CEFR-V whereas, those who said "No, I haven't" would also need to explain the reasons why they had not used it. *Table 4* shows the results of this item.

Table 4. Participants' usage of the CEFR-V

Item	Yes, I have		No, I haven't	
	N	%	N	%
Have you ever used the CEFR-V before?	37	30,6%	84	69,4%

Not beyond the researchers' earlier supposition, approximately two-thirds of those surveyed (69,4%) reported that they had never used the CEFR-V to assess their language proficiency level and this also means the rest of the participants (30,6%) claimed they had evaluated their levels using the CEFR-V before. Generally speaking, it was quite unfortunate that a great number of the students failed to make full use of the CEFR-V which is expected to be a particularly helpful tool in foreign language learning. The extra explanations for both groups of respondents were varied.

Among 37 respondents who said they had used the framework before, 34 students answered the open-ended question about their purposes of using it during their learning process, among which three reasons stood out. The most popular usage of the CEFR-V, according to the respondents, was to enable learners to self-evaluate their current level of language proficiency ( $n = 14/34$ , 41.2%). Secondly, some student participants (4 out of 34, 11.7%) reported that they had used the CEFR-V to read the descriptions of the level 3/B1 - the level that they need to achieve to graduate from the university so that they could get a clear picture of the final goal of their journey to language achievement.

It is worth mentioning from these data that only about half of the respondents had ways of using CEFR-V similar to what has been instructed by the MOET: as a self-assessment tool and a description of different language

proficiency levels. It also means the other half seemed to misunderstand the concept of the CEFR or had misused the CEFR-V for some unrelated purposes. Some students even got the wrong idea of CEFR-V and seriously confused this framework with proficiency tests that they took at school. This is indeed an interesting result because it strengthens the finding about the participants' utter lack of understanding of the CEFR-V. Even those claiming that they had already used the CEFR-V misinterpreted and misused the framework.

Concerning the second group of respondents who answered that they had never used the CEFR-V, 75 out of 84 respondents in the group clarified their reasons for not using the framework. The most common one was the lack of understanding. A great number of students ( $n = 29/75$ , 38.7%) admitted that they did not obtain adequate knowledge and understanding about the CEFR-V. Some of them even left honest feedback that they knew completely nothing about it.

Other explanations were the lack of conditions and the lack of personal interests, which accounts equally for 24% respectively ( $n = 18/75$ ). Regarding the former explanation, students blamed some objective factors as the main causes such as they had not had time, or any chances to use the framework. With the latter, students said that they had not paid any genuine attention to the CEFR-V and they also felt no essential need for using it.

To sum up, the data received from the four questionnaire items has revealed some astonishing results. The most obvious finding can be drawn is the conspicuous and severe lack of basic understanding of the CEFR-V and more seriously, of their outcome standard (level 3/B1) by the majority of the participants. From their subjective points of view, most of them claimed that they were barely aware of the framework, and results from other objective items have shown that the case could be possibly even worse. Few respondents were able to understand the purposes of the CEFR-V or know how to use the framework effectively. What is more, many of them were unable to distinguish between the two concepts: CEFR-V and proficiency test. More surprisingly, the majority of the students knew very little about the level of language proficiency that they needed to achieve to graduate from university, the level that they were supposed to know best.

These problematic issues completely go against one of the center principles of standards-based education (SBE) - clarity of focus (Spady, 1994). In SBE, it is fundamental for students to have a clear understanding of their learning targets from the first day, so that, with the guidance of their teachers, they can motivate themselves, decide on proper learning strategies, and create a comprehensive learning plan to help them achieve their predetermined outcomes. The result thus indicates that SBE has not been applied correctly and most of the non-English major students at HNUE possess a blurred vision about their language learning path in the future.

One of the most reasonable explanations for this might come from the students' lack of interest and motivation to get to know about the framework. They seem to underestimate the necessity and the helpfulness of the CEFR-V. However, from the researcher's viewpoint, the underlying cause of this issue is more likely to stem from teachers who failed to provide students with a sufficient introduction to the CEFR-V and its learning targets, neither emphasizing its benefits nor providing detailed instructions on how to use the CEFR-V effectively to support their learning. Therefore, actions by both teachers and learners need to be taken to tackle the problems.

To help raise undergraduate students' awareness about CEFR-V, it is suggested that the framework and all requirements of EPS need to be clearly introduced and emphasized to students right at the beginning of the course so that they can have a clear picture of their expected final performance and will take their learning more seriously. Moreover, teachers are advised to instruct their students on the proper way to use the framework to assess their proficiency levels as well as estimate their progress toward the final learning goals.

Additionally, to increase students' interest and develop intrinsic motivation in using the framework, learner autonomy needs to be further strengthened and promoted in tertiary education. The ability to be self-directed in learning helps learners achieve better academic performance (Benson, 2009; Kohonen, 2012). Learners should be encouraged to self-determine their learning target based on the CEFR-V framework, take responsibility for their own learning and develop self-study skills. This, in turn, can help them improve their English proficiency by taking advantage of what they are offered both inside and outside the classroom.

#### **4.2. Non-English major undergraduates' perceptions of EPS for university graduates**

The current study strives to get some levels of insight into the perceptions of undergraduate students about the current implementation of EPS for the tertiary level. The participants were asked to rate their extent of agreement on a four-point scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) agree and (4) strongly agree to the following idea: "Every

university student in Vietnam, regardless of majors or specialties, must achieve a national standardized level of proficiency in using a foreign language to graduate". After that, to gain a deeper and more comprehensive picture of students' perceptions, the respondents were also asked to give some brief explanations for their decision. The results of students' answers are described in Table 5.

Table 5. Participants' perceptions of EPS for university graduates in Vietnam

Item	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
To what extent do you agree with the idea of implementing EPS for university graduates in Vietnam?	5 4.1%	21 17.2%	71 58.2%	25 20.5%	2,95	0,737

It is quite evident from the descriptive data that most of the participants expressed highly positive perceptions toward the use of EPS at universities with almost three-fifths of them (n=71, 58.2%) agreeing and around one-fifth (n=25, 20.5%) strongly agreeing with the statement provided. On the other hand, the number of students who were opposed to the statements was only 26 making up 21.3% of the respondents. Based on these results, it can be inferred that the application of EPS at the tertiary level, in general, receives remarkable support from students.

#### 4.2.1. Non-English major undergraduates' perceptions of the benefits of EPS for university graduates

Several explanations for the participants' advocacy had been provided through the additional open-ended item. Most of the advocates were found to be fully aware of the significant impacts of foreign languages, especially the English language on almost all aspects of life.

First, many of them supported the idea that English and other foreign languages can allow more chances for further study and professional development in any fields or specialties. This perception of those students is understandable because, nowadays, a majority of human beings' knowledge and most significant findings from studies in various fields are widely available in English. Therefore, achieving a certain proficiency level in English is likely to make it easier for students to approach the enormous knowledge treasure of mankind, which promotes further individuals' professional development.

Second, some student participants believed that being able to use English to a certain level meant higher opportunities to get a better and higher-paid job in the future. In fact, having foreign language competence has been a common requirement, a prerequisite of numerous employers in Vietnam, especially in international companies or corporations. In support of this, Heller (2002, cited in Block & Cameron, 2002, p. 71) observes that "many entry-level service jobs in tourism, travel, leisure, and hospitality demand foreign language competence". As a result, if students can possess the ability to use a foreign language such as English after graduation, recruiters will be more likely to value them higher than those who cannot.

Third, some participants agreed that EPS policy can open more doors for international integration, which enables the country to keep up with more developed countries. For instance, S111 mentioned, "As the society is more and more developed, if our country wants to integrate and exchange values with the world, each student needs to equip themselves with sufficient English competence, otherwise we will be a backward nation". The explanation for this idea refers to the current status of English - a global language. Compared to other living languages, this language is more dominant and more prominent in various fields such as international relations, security and travel, media, education, and communications. McKay (2002) asserts that this widespread use of English in these areas makes it "imperative" for any country wishing to become part of the global community. English also helps to promote communication, interactions, and mutual understanding of people either in the local or global contexts, as well as creates better conditions for sharing knowledge among different cultures.

Fourth, non-English major students at HNUE thought that applying EPS could be a good practice to assure higher education quality. The national outcome standard can work as a source of extrinsic motivation which pushes the students to keep making great efforts to achieve the language goal. Without that external guide, it is likely that students, especially those lacking self-study skills would probably struggle to define the learning target themselves and become less determined to learn a foreign language. S51 supported the outcome standard implementation owing to this reason. She confessed: "The outcome standard should be sustained so that I (and some others) are motivated to learn foreign languages". Therefore, imposing foreign language proficiency standardization may help more students to enrich their language capability, which in turn raises the quality of tertiary education.

Generally speaking, non-English major undergraduate students at HNU approved the implementation of the national proficiency standards mainly because it allows individuals, schools, and the whole society to take advantage of the English language and it helps increase the education quality.

#### 4.2.2. Non-English major undergraduates' perceptions of the problems of EPS for university graduates

Besides those supporting EPS, some other students owned contradicting opinions toward the practice of English proficiency standardization. Although their ideas did not get popular among the participants, to the researcher's mind, these students had shown a high level of critical thinking and had given some relatively deep and comprehensive thought over the matter.

First, these students said that applying the same level of English proficiency to all non-English major students was quite unreasonable since it failed to address individual differences in needs, abilities, and preferences. The following are direct quotes from the students' responses to illustrate:

*"Each person has a different ability, I think we should consider the needs of each person rather than just limit to a fixed standard" (S47)*

*"We shouldn't impose a level of English proficiency that is too high for students to achieve. It should depend on their ability and their preferences. Some students may prefer to learn other languages rather than English" (S4)*

What these students wanted to emphasize was that learners' voices should be listened to, learners' needs should be considered and learners' differences should be appreciated. The past decades have witnessed significant changes in language learning and teaching approaches, from teacher-centered to learner-centered (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Barman, 2013; Al-Zu'be, 2013). As a result, some teaching philosophies such as "one-size-fits-all teaching" or "teaching the average" are no longer appropriate to meet the needs of every learner in a certain English classroom. They have been gradually replaced by differentiated instruction or "no child left behind" policy in which learners' diversity or differences in terms of competence, motivation, interests, prior experiences, learning styles, and so on are well recognized (Tomlinson, 2001; Moreno, 2015; Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015). Nevertheless, when implementing the same level of proficiency for students who are different in multiple facets, it is of similarity to the "one-size-fits-all" educational model, which does not go along with the current development in educational philosophy.

Second, other students addressed a problem related to the learning condition of language learners around the countries. For example, one student explained that he disagreed because he thought that *"not everyone has the condition to learn English properly"* (S17). In the last open-ended item, this student suggested that *"Although the implementation of the English outcome standard is necessary, it is important to set a reasonable level so that everyone (including those who do not have adequate learning conditions) can meet the standard to graduate."* The problem is that it seems unfair for students coming from rural or remote areas where learning conditions are much poorer than that in big cities. The findings of a study investigating the challenges of implementing the outcome standards with ethnic minority students in Vietnam by Nguyen (2016) cast serious doubt on the outcome standard attainment of minority students. Nguyen concluded that "limited or inadequate English competence of the students at Tay Bac University... do not well match the predictions and expectations of MOET and Project 2020" and "the outcome standard would not behave perfectly among groups of ethnic minority students" (p. 70).

The last idea from the opposing side is that one fixed outcome standard cannot meet the requirements of all majors. In other words, each major or profession may require different levels of English proficiency. For some majors such as Social Work, Early-childhood education, or Special Education, students of those majors rarely need to use English to communicate after graduation. On the other hand, students of some areas of natural science such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology, or Mathematics may need more English for Academic purposes rather than English for general or non-technical communication. Moreover, some sectors would require their students to master only reading and writing skills rather than all four skills. To illustrate, below is the answer of a respondent:

*"Each profession may require a different level of foreign language proficiency. For some specialties that do not require using English after graduation, learning English is really time-consuming. Students of some majors that don't require regular use of English can just self-study or learn English in out-of-school English centers."* (S62)

Overall, the most critical problem of implementing EPS from the students' perspective is the lack of individuality and differentiation. In a diverse and global world where diversity and individual differences are more and more appreciated, imposing the same standards on students of different needs, different backgrounds, different areas of



specialty, and different living and learning conditions seems to go against the educational trend of the world, despite several benefits it might bring. Therefore, the idea of imposing the same level of proficiency as a required condition for graduation to all non-English major undergraduate students in Vietnam seems to be inappropriate and impractical for different students of different backgrounds to successfully achieve. As a result, efforts to form and maintain the balance between standardization and differentiation need to be made by all stakeholders. It is suggested that standards should arise locally as community or school aspirations, rather than be prescribed as national policy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In general, the findings of this study indicate that non-English major students at HNUE possessed relatively positive perceptions about the implementation of the national English proficiency standards for undergraduate students. According to their points of view, EPS are necessary to enhance students' foreign language abilities, raise higher education quality and embrace all the merits that foreign languages, especially English, may bring to the success of individuals, society, and the whole nation. Despite those promising results, the research has stressed an alarming issue relating to students' serious lack of fundamental knowledge of the CEFR-V, and their required proficiency standards (level 3/B1). Moreover, the findings from the survey raised a complicated problem of imposing foreign language standards which is how to balance standardization and differentiation. While standardization is necessary to ensure the quality of language education, it is also important to recognize the individualities and learning differences of students. From these findings, this research highlights teachers' role in providing students with strong learning targets and promoting learner autonomy. Teachers of English at the tertiary level are recommended to prioritize the early introduction and explanation of language proficiency standards to their students, including the CEFR-V and other relevant policies. This will help students better understand their required proficiency level, set realistic language learning goals, and motivate them throughout the whole learning process.

Despite being prudent in every stage of conducting this current research, some limitations are unavoidable. Firstly, the population of the present study were all freshmen who had experienced only one semester of English and still had quite a long period of time until their graduation (3 years). Therefore, the EPS and its policy might not be their concern or matter of interest. The next source of weakness in this study which could have affected the results is the small sample size. The study could only investigate 122 non-English majored students in A2 classes. The findings of this current study would certainly be able to be generalized to non-English major, first-year, A2 level students at HNUE. However, the generalization from the findings to a larger population such as to all non-English majored students at HNUE should be made with caution. Studies in the future should expand the scope of the study to a wider range of students in different regions in Vietnam. For instance, those studies can focus on examining perceptions of sophomore students or senior students, instead of just freshmen. Additionally, it is suggested that future research involve students of different English proficiency levels so that more comprehensive understanding about Vietnamese students' perspectives of EPS can be successfully achieved.

**Conflict of Interest:** No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

## REFERENCES

- Abdi, H., & Asadi, B. (2015). A Synopsis of Researches on Teachers' and Students' Beliefs about Language Learning. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 3(4), 104-114.
- Al-Shammakhi, F., & Al-Humaidi, S. (2015). Challenges Facing EFL Teachers in Mixed Ability Classes and Strategies Used to Overcome Them. *World Journal of English Language*, 5(3), 33-45. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v5n3p33>
- Al-Zu'be, A. F. M. (2013). The difference between the Learner-centred approach and the Teacher-centred approach in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. *Educational Research International*, 2(2), 24-31.
- Barman, B. (2013). *Shifting Education from Teacher-centered to Learner-centered paradigm* [Conference session]. International Conference on Tertiary Education at Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning - a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change Magazine*, 27(6), 12-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544672>

- Benson, P. (2009). Making sense of autonomy in language learning. In Pemberton, R., Toogood, S., & Barfield, A. (Eds.), *Maintaining Control: Autonomy and Language Learning* (pp. 13-26). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789622099234.003.0002>
- Block, D., & D. Cameron. (Eds.). (2002). *Globalization and Language Teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Chyung, S. Y., Roberts, K., Swanson, I., & Hankinson, A. (2017). Evidence-Based Survey Design: The Use of a Midpoint on the Likert Scale. *Performance Improvement*, 56(10), 15-23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pfi.21727>
- Council of Europe (2001). *A Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press. <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97>
- Dornyei, A. (2003). *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration, and Processing*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: A review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27(4), 557-576. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0346-251x\(99\)00050-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0346-251x(99)00050-0)
- Huong, T. N. N., & Hiep, P. H. (2010). Vietnamese teachers' and students' perceptions of Global English. *Language Education in Asia*, 1(1), 48-61.
- Kohonen, V. (2012). Developing autonomy through ELP-oriented pedagogy: exploring the interplay between shallow and deep structures in a major change within language education. In Kuhn, B., & Cavana, M. L. P. (Eds.), *Perspective from the European Language Portfolio: Learner autonomy and self-assessment* (pp. 8-22). London and New York: Routledge.
- McKay, S. L. (2002). *Teaching English as an International Language: Rethinking goals and approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moreno, S. (2015). *Differentiated Instruction: Strategies for English Language Learners Listening Comprehension Development*. Master's Thesis, Bridgewater State University.
- Neuert, C., Meitinger, K., Behr, D., & Schonlau, M. (2021). Editorial: The Use of Open-ended Questions in Surveys. *Methods, data, analyses: a journal for quantitative methods and survey methodology (mda)*, 15(1), 3-6. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/73172>
- Nguyen, D. A. (2016). *The Challenges of Implementing the National Proficiency Standards with Ethnic Minority Students: An exploratory study at Tay Bac University*. Master's Thesis, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 589-613. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588214>
- Prime Minister of SRV (2008). *Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008-2020*. Issued under Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg signed by the Prime Minister of the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Prime Minister of SRV (2017). *Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2017-2025*. Issued under Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg signed by the Prime Minister of the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Spady, W. G. (1994). *Outcome-based education: Critical Issues and Answers*. American Association of School Administrators.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-ability classrooms*. Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Six-level framework for foreign language proficiency in Vietnam*. Issued under Circular No. 01/TT-BGDĐT by the Vietnam's Minister of the Ministry of Education and Training.
- Vietnam MOET. (2018). *General Education Curriculum*. Issued under Decision No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT by the Vietnam's Minister of the Ministry of Education and Training.