

## English as a Global Language: An Exploration of EFL Learners' Beliefs in Vietnam

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### ABSTRACT

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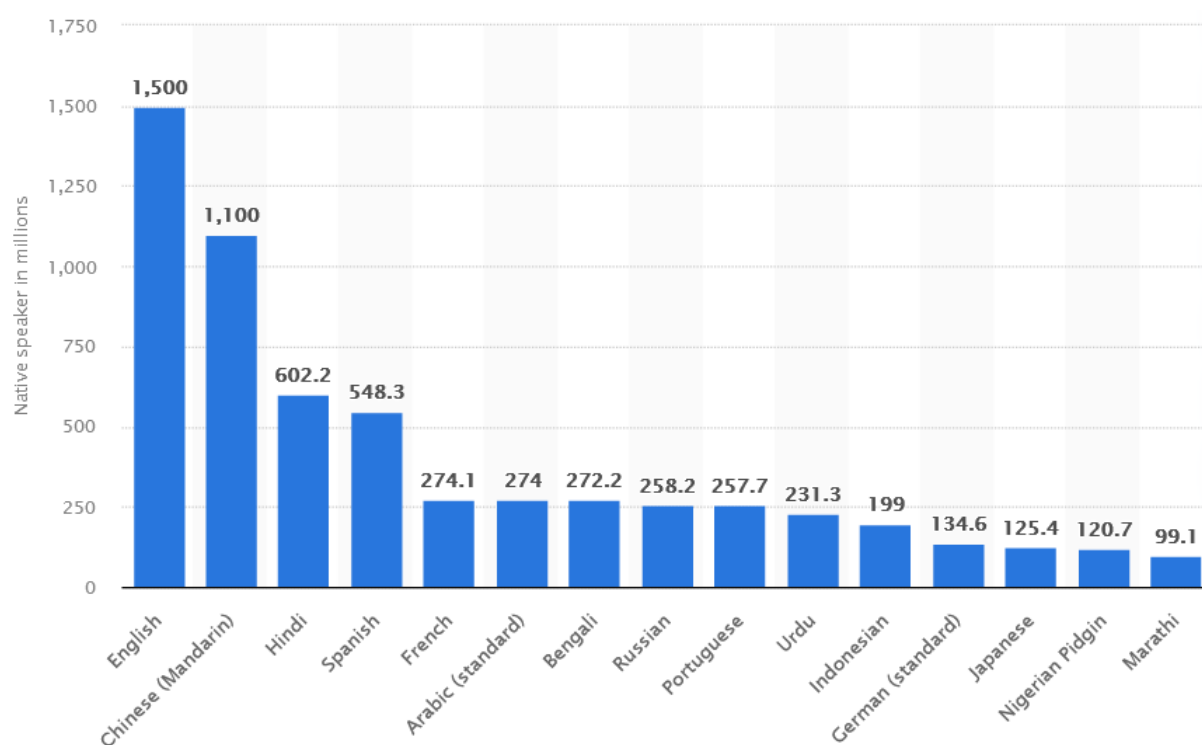
In the era of globalization, the English language has been considered a global language that plays a vital role in many countries. This research paper discusses the beliefs of EFL learners related to the significance of English in Vietnamese contexts. These language perceptions consist of Vietnamese students' attitudes toward the importance of English in Vietnam, their motivations for learning English, and the status of English teaching and learning in Vietnam. Data collected from the questionnaire with the contribution of 514 participants from 4 universities in Ho Chi Minh City has been analyzed for shedding light on the issues of language beliefs. The results indicate that English is regarded as a prevalent international language. To have better job opportunities and to gain competitive advantages are the two main reasons why Vietnamese students learn English. The focus on exam-oriented teaching and learning of English, however, is still prominent in the educational environment in Vietnam. Finally, although communication in English is still a problem of Vietnamese EFL learners, English is expected to become a second language in Vietnam in the near future.

### Introduction

'English is a global language' is such an apparent statement that most people would agree with it. You can hear English spoken on television by famous politicians like President Joe Biden of the United States of America or Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom. You can also see many signs, advertisements, and menus written in English when you travel to a foreign country. English has authentically achieved global status because large numbers of people speak this language in many countries around the world (Crystal, 2003).

As can be seen in Figure 1, with around 1.5 billion native and non-native speakers, English is the most widely-spoken language in the world (Statista, 2022). These speakers of English 'can be divided into three roughly equal groups, native speakers of English, speakers of English as a second (or intranational) language, and speakers of English as a foreign (or international) language' (Pennycook, 2017, pp. 7-8). The interrelationship between globalization and English is a two-way process. Whereas globalization is being accelerated in part by English's status as

a global language, globalization is also causing English to be used more frequently (Graddol, 2006).



**Figure 1.** The most spoken languages worldwide in 2022 (Statista, 2022)

Especially in a developing country like Vietnam, English is taught very early as well as many young Vietnamese people have been aware of its importance for the reasons of finding a quality job, communicating with the foreign world, and approaching scientific sources they are pursuing. Despite that, the English proficiency level in Vietnam is still rather low. According to the ranking of the international educational organization named EF Education First, Vietnam ranked 66 among 112 countries in terms of the English proficiency index in 2021 (EF, 2022). This English proficiency index is based on the analysis of more than 2 million English users from 112 countries whose mother tongue is not English.

At the present time, the term 'global English' is being used more and more commonly, and English is being talked about everywhere in the world, from people having the same nationality and the same mother tongue to people having different nationalities and speaking different languages. This topic has been widely discussed in various articles by different language scholars, but few research papers have been conducted in the context of Vietnam. This study explores Vietnamese learners' beliefs regarding the significance of the English language, learners' inspiration to learn English, and their outlook toward the future of English in Vietnam.

## Literature review

### *English as a global language*

English has become a global language because of geographical-historical and sociocultural

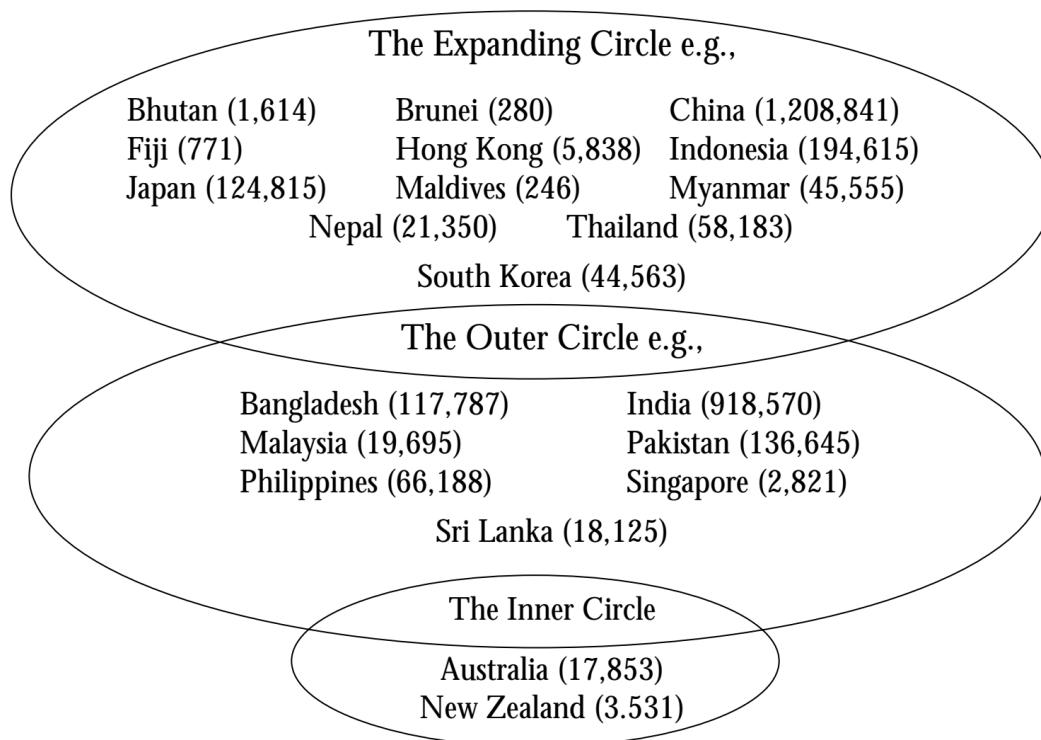
features (Crystal, 2003). The geographical-historical factor explains how English accomplished the state of a distinct language, and the sociocultural clarifies why English continues to exist as a dominant language. When it comes to the geographical-historical factor, due to the historical effects of the British Empire over their former colonies like the United States, Australia, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa, and India, “English has become the principal language of the countries influenced by the British colonialism” (Rao, 2019, p. 67). Besides the influence of British colonists, the emergence of America, with its dominant power in politics and military force since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, helped spread English's popularity over the world (Asningtias, 2017).

When it comes to the sociocultural factor, English gains its high social status and people are encouraged to use it in a global context because of its socioeconomic supremacy (Majidi, 2013). English has a significant impact on most domains of life, including political activities, commerce, communication, entertainment, mass media, and education (Crystal, 2003). In politics, English is the official language of many international organizations like the United Nations, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and international aviation (Ibrohimova & Ziyaboyeva, 2022). English is also used as a medium language to communicate across national borders so that everyone in the world can understand each other and respect differences in languages, cultures, and lifestyles (Pandarangga, 2016).

#### *English as a lingua franca*

English continues to serve as an important lingua franca to globally support human relations in the postmodern world (Graddol, 2006). Ishikawa (2017) indicates that the majority of people whose English is not their native language use English mainly for lingua franca purposes instead of using it as an intra-national or intra-regional means of communication. In the arena of education, Yao *et al.* (2019) state that the use of English as a lingua franca has increased in many educational institutions because of internationalization. In order to attract international students and boost their educational prestige, transnational universities have used English as a lingua franca in teaching and learning.

Language scholars have various perspectives on the spread of English, and a debate about whether English is an Asian language or not has been raised (Kirkpatrick & Lixun, 2020). Kachru (1998) develops a model using three concentric circles to illustrate the widespread of English in different countries. This model divides countries using English into three categories involving the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. The inner circle signifies the countries where English has a role as the first language (for example, the UK, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand). The outer circle characterizes the multilingual countries where English is considered as the second additional language (for example, India, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia). The expanding circle represents the countries and regions where English is used as an international language (for example, Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Brunei). According to the classification of Kachru (1998), Vietnam is categorized into the expanding circle where English is treated as a foreign language.



**Figure 2.** The original three concentric circles model of Asian Englishes, populations in thousands (Kachru, 1998)

### *The spread of English in Vietnam*

In the Vietnamese context, the emergence of English is supposed to begin from the Vietnam War period of 1954-1975. According to Hoang (2020), the North of Vietnam, with the political ideology of the Soviet Union and China, encouraged learning Russian and Chinese as foreign languages whilst the South of Vietnam, with the political ideology of the United States of America, highlighted learning English and French as foreign languages. After the ‘Renovation Policy’ or “Đổi Mới” in 1986, which was a remarkable milestone for socio-political collaboration with Western countries, English has officially become the dominant foreign language to be taught in the education system of Vietnam.

At the present time, English is one of the mandatory subjects being taught in the national curriculum of Vietnamese education. English is currently a crucial means of communication for Vietnam to integrate into the world (Nguyen, Marlina, & Cao, 2020). In the domain of business, after being a member of WTO (World Trade Organization) in 2006, English has turned out to be much more vital in Vietnam because of its necessity in welcoming foreign investors with flows of foreign investments from other countries (Ton & Pham, 2010).

### *Previous research on the status of English as a global language in Vietnam*

In a quantitative study conducted by Nguyen and Lo (2022), the authors investigated the insights of Vietnamese EFL teachers and students from both gifted and non-gifted high schools concerning English as a lingua franca. In this research, 155 Vietnamese high school teachers of English and 300 Vietnamese high school EFL students were invited to respond to a 20-item questionnaire. The results revealed that both the teachers and the students of this study showed

positive perceptions towards different scopes of English as a lingua franca, including teaching materials, using English for communication, the role and culture of English, and the use of English in the classroom.

In the study conducted by Ap (2015), the author discovers three factors that make language become a global language: military power, political power, and economic power. To illustrate, this author discusses the advantageous inferences of the English language to students in Vietnam. In particular, the English language supports Vietnamese students in broadening their knowledge, improving their ways of thinking, and brightening their career prospects (Ap, 2015). Especially in the fields of science, Vietnamese scientists can take advantage of having a good command of English to take part in global scientific projects with foreign counterparts and to contribute to international scientific accomplishments (Ngo *et al.*, 2018).

In terms of the current status of English in the context of Vietnam, Hoang (2020) states that English has been the most vital foreign language used nationally, and it is the second most popular language only after Vietnamese. In her paper, Hoang (2020) explains that English has gained its dominant status because English is not only a crucial means of communication that helps Vietnam modernize and compete in the international market but also critical for Vietnamese people to open a wide range of opportunities related to personal education, job seeking and promotion. However, in spite of its importance and predominant status in the years to come, it is difficult for English to become the second official language in the Vietnamese linguistic area (Hoang, 2020; Hoang, 2016; Hoang, 2011).

### *Research Questions*

To achieve the purpose of the study, the survey was looking for the answers to the following research questions:

1. Why is English important and popular from the perceptions of EFL learners in Vietnam?
2. What are EFL learners' motivations for learning English in the Vietnamese context?
3. What are EFL learners' attitudes toward the current status and the future of English in Vietnam?

## **Methods**

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

The participants of this study are 514 students from 4 universities in Ho Chi Minh City, where English is a mandatory subject in their curriculum. Their age ranges between 18 and 22 years old. Nearly half of the respondents have studied English for 7 to 10 years, and about a quarter have studied for more than 10 years. In order to protect their privacy and keep confidentiality, participants' names and university names are not required to provide.

Although coming from dissimilar backgrounds, they are all native Vietnamese speakers and just use English as a foreign language. When being asked to self-evaluate their English proficiency level, more than 44% of the students say that they are just at A1 level according to CEFR, and more than 30% of them reach A2 level. Less than a quarter of the survey takers

believe that their English proficiency is at B1 or higher level.

### *Design of the Study*

The research method carried out in this study is a quantitative approach because quantitative research help to describe a research problem through a description of trends in attitudes or opinions of a population of people (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The results from the questionnaire are used as indicators to determine individual beliefs and attitudes of a large population through gathering and analyzing statical data.

Although the qualitative method can be applied to discover insights from each participant through interviews, this approach cannot access a large target population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Instead, this study wanted to pay more attention to a large-scale population and the items from the questionnaire have been chosen because they addressed direct issues of language beliefs.

### *Data collection & analysis*

Quantitative data is assembled through a survey concerning the students' beliefs about English as a global language. The questionnaire was distributed to 514 students in 4 universities in Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest city in Vietnam in terms of population and economy, via an online survey using Google Forms. A questionnaire is a useful means for gathering answers to the same questions ‘*What?*’, ‘*Where?*’, ‘*When?*’ and ‘*How?*’ from a large number of respondents allow the researcher to describe certain features in certain categories (Bell & Waters, 2014). Following that, descriptive statistics and thorough analysis are performed to provide an understanding of students' feedback.

There are five main sections designed in the questionnaire to answer the research questions:

1. The importance of English
2. Why English is popular
3. Why the students learn English
4. The current status of English education in Vietnam
5. The future of English in Vietnam

Regarding the first issue, there are five statements using rating scales from strongly disagree to strongly agree to investigate students' level of agreement on the significance of English in different life aspects. Concerning matters number two and three, participants are required to clarify why English has been popular and why they learned English by choosing listed reasons which are true for them or adding their own ideas. The last two topics regard the students' opinions about the recent situation of teaching and learning English in Vietnam as well as the prospect of English in Vietnam has four statements for each category, and rating scales are applied for these items.

## Findings

### *The importance of English*

The first section of the questionnaire points out that English is significantly crucial from the sense of the students (see Table 1). More than 80% of the participants agree or strongly agree that English is the current dominant language in today's world. The same high percentage, 82.9% of the respondents from the survey acknowledge that besides the Vietnamese language, which is the mother tongue of Vietnamese people, English gets the second position among popular languages in Vietnam. As a result of the popular status of English in the country, more than four-fifths of Vietnamese students believe that Vietnam will integrate and globalize better into the world. A majority of them are also confident that Vietnam will soon become a country having a strong influence in the region with the useful support of English.

Table 1.

The beliefs towards the significance of English

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. English is currently the dominant language in the world.	27 (5.3%)	10 (1.9%)	65 (12.6%)	243 (47.3%)	169 (32.9%)
2. English is the second most popular language in Vietnam, only after Vietnamese.	26 (5.1%)	11 (2.1%)	51 (9.9%)	256 (49.8%)	170 (33.1%)
3. With the popularity of English, Vietnam will become more integrated and globalized.	22 (4.3%)	8 (1.6%)	68 (13.2%)	264 (51.4%)	152 (29.6%)
4. English is a helpful tool to help Vietnam rise up into an influential country in the region.	25 (4.9%)	4 (0.8%)	43 (8.4%)	259 (50.4%)	183 (35.6%)

### *The prevalence of English*

In order to investigate how the survey-takers explain the popularity of English, ten rationales were suggested to select in the second section of the questionnaire, and the respondents raised no additional ideas (see Table 2). When being asked why English is popular, the top answer selected by the participants is "English is the most used language in the world". The next two top reasons chosen by nearly two-thirds of the respondents are that English is an important language of not only in international finance and business but also in education and science. The results in Table 2 also reveal that being the language of tourism and the internet is also an explanation for the dominance of English.

Table 2.

## The reasons why English is popular

Reason	Respondents	Percentage
1. English is the most used language in the world	467	90.9%
2. English is the language of international finance and business.	338	65.8%
3. English is important in education and science.	320	62.3%
4. English is the language of tourism.	292	56.8%
5. English is the language of the internet.	279	54.3%
6. The USA and other English-speaking countries have great influence.	247	48.1%
7. English is used a lot in politics.	223	43.4%
8. English is easier to learn than other languages.	215	41.8%
9. Speaking English fluently shows you are in a different social class.	203	39.5%
10. There is a global dominance of Hollywood blockbuster movies and US-UK music.	148	28.8%

*The motivations for learning English*

To discover the incentives for Vietnamese learners to learn English, a list of 10 common reasons was recommended in the questionnaire (see Table 3). The participants added no other opinions. According to the results of Table 3, the primary purpose that promotes EFL learners to learn English in Vietnam is to have better opportunities to have a good career in the future.

Table 3.

## The reasons why the students learn English

Reason	Respondents	Percentage
1. To seek for better job opportunities	455	88.5%
2. To have a competitive advantage in the study, work, and promotion	409	79.6%
3. To communicate with foreigners	364	70.8%
4. Because English is a mandatory subject in school	343	66.7%
5. To expand relationships in friendship and international partnership	315	61.3%
6. To entertain (watching movies, listening to music in English, etc.)	295	57.4%
7. To improve position and social status	212	41.2%
8. Because there is a passion for learning English	167	32.5%
9. To study abroad	145	28.2%
10. To immigrate to a foreign country	84	16.3%

In the second place with a percentage of approximately 80%, this section of the questionnaire also indicates that good English can help gain a great advantage over the competition in different aspects of life, including study, work, and promotion. Furthermore, 70% of the survey-takers suggest that they learn English because they want to have the ability to communicate with foreign people from other countries. Besides being a mandatory subject to be taught at school, the students are motivated to learn English to expand their social relationships with international friends as well as in doing business with global partners around the world with a selection percentage of 66.7% and 61.3%, respectively.

*Current status of English education in Vietnam*

Statements related to the up-to-date situation of English teaching and learning in Vietnam are raised in this section for the participants to appraise (see Table 4). More than 80% of the students agree or strongly agree that English education in Vietnamese schools and universities is



examination-oriented. A similar percentage of the respondents (83.9%) supports the opinion that English examinations in Vietnam primarily concentrate on testing English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Hence, it is supposed that listening and speaking skills are not paid attention to in English exams in Vietnam.

Item 3 of this section has been designed not only to determine their ability to use listening and speaking skills in communication but also to check for the connection with the previous question regarding the concentration on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in English examinations. Consequently, when being asked whether the students could communicate well in English or not, 44.2% of them seemed to be confused and not sure whether to agree or disagree. While 21.2% of the students believe that they are good at using English to interact with other people, 34.6% of them need more confidence in communicating in English. In general, only about half of the participants assume that the current English education can meet their satisfaction in terms of general needs and expectations of learning outcomes, whereas 17.6% of them feel dissatisfied with the English education they have received.

Table 4.

The status of educating English in the Vietnamese context

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. English education in Vietnamese schools is currently exam-oriented.	15 (2.9%)	6 (1.2%)	76 (14.8%)	285 (55.4%)	132 (25.7%)
2. English exams in Vietnam mainly focus on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.	17 (3.3%)	5 (1.0%)	61 (11.9%)	275 (53.5%)	156 (30.4%)
3. I can communicate well in English.	30 (5.8%)	79 (15.4%)	227 (44.2%)	130 (25.3%)	48 (9.3%)
4. Generally, an English education has satisfied my needs and expectations.	26 (5.1%)	64 (12.5%)	161 (31.3%)	190 (37.0%)	73 (14.2%)

### *The prospect of English in Vietnam*

Students are also asked for their level of agreement on the future status of the English language in the Vietnamese context. As can be seen in Table 5, nearly 90% of Vietnamese learners think that English will still keep its dominant position as the most widely used foreign language in Vietnam. Accordingly, 84.4% of the EFL learners in Vietnam trust that investments in learning English will become a promising trend. If more and more students invest time and money in learning English, their English proficiency will significantly improve. Obviously, 83.2% of the respondents hold a belief that future learners of English in Vietnam will increase their proficiency level and communicate better in English.

In the questionnaire, item 4 of this section has been directly explained in the Vietnamese language regarding the differences between a foreign language and a second language. In particular, the term 'foreign language' has been briefly clarified as a language that is not a dominant one in a country. On the other hand, the term 'second language' has been simply described as a language that is widely used as the main or official language in a country. According to the results, there is also optimism that English will transform its position from a foreign language into a second language in Vietnam with the approval of more than two-thirds

of the participants.

Table 5.

Future of English in Vietnam

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Among foreign languages, English will still be a global language widely used in Vietnam.	19 (3.7%)	2 (0.4%)	50 (9.7%)	277 (53.9%)	166 (32.3%)
2. Investing in learning English will become a trend.	17 (3.3%)	9 (1.8%)	54 (10.5%)	276 (53.7%)	158 (30.7%)
3. The proficiency level of English learners in Vietnam will be significantly improved, especially in communication.	21 (4.1%)	6 (1.2%)	59 (11.5%)	288 (56.0%)	140 (27.2%)
4. English will soon transfer from a foreign language into a second language in Vietnam.	28 (5.4%)	20 (3.9%)	116 (22.6%)	240 (46.7%)	110 (21.4%)

## Discussion

Through the findings from the five sections of the questionnaire, the answers to the research questions are found. Regarding the first research question, a very high proportion of the EFL learners in Vietnam manifest that English is a dominant language in the world. In the age of technology and globalization, many language scholars agree that English is becoming more and more dominant and that no other languages could gain the same leading position (Ngo *et al.*, 2018). In Vietnam, besides Vietnamese, which is the official language of this country, many participants of this study believe that English is the most spoken foreign language in Vietnam. In reality, it is not an overstatement to state that English cannot be eliminated from the crown of languages in the near future. A majority of the respondents also agree that English is a supportive instrument to assist Vietnam not only in integrating into the globalized world but also in evolving into an influential country in the region. Phan (2021) adds that English is considered an influential tool in facilitating the international integration of the Vietnamese government. English is an effective tool playing a vital role in helping global citizens understand the language, culture, and society of Vietnam in the internationally integrated era.

An overwhelming number of the EFL students in the survey believe that English is popular simply because it is the most commonly used in the world. In the trend of integration and globalization, English is considered the most popular language in the world, with more than 60 countries using English as the main language and about 100 countries using English as the second language. From Vietnamese learners' perspectives, English also gained popularity because it is considered the international language of business, finance, education, science, tourism, and the internet. These outcomes share the same findings in other studies of Hoang (2020), Ap (2015), and Ton and Pham (2010). With commercial institutions in financial centers of the world like Great Britain or the USA, English has been a default business language for a long time. The importance of English has been emphasized, expanded, and expressed in the educational sector because most education resources, materials, and books are written in English, and global educational systems require English certificates (Ngo *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, when traveling abroad, a tourist needs to be equipped with English to communicate well with local people and explore more interesting things at foreign destinations. Besides, due to the quick development of information technology, English is regulated as the default language of Internet users. It means we can only operate effectively in the internet world with English.

Concerning the second research question, which examines what factors inspire Vietnamese learners to learn English, the top reason is to look for a good working position in a competitive jobs market. Being good at English can be a viable advantage for learners of English because English opens new opportunities to help them learn better at school, earn more money and become more successful in their future careers (Le & Le, 2022). In addition, many EFL learners in Vietnam learn English to communicate well with foreigners to expand their social and professional relationships. In the trend of integration into the world, there is a need for employees who can communicate in English with international partners and customers globally. Moreover, Vietnamese students have to learn English simply because it is a compulsory secondary and tertiary subject. In the educational system of Vietnam, English subject is started to be taught from grade 6, and it maintains the obligatory position until the end of grade 12 (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). At the tertiary level, English is still a compulsory subject in many universities, and it is set as a language outcome requirement for students to graduate (Hoang, 2020).

According to the survey results, although the respondents of this study have learned English for seven years or more, their English proficiency is rather low. The third research question tries to listen to the participants' comments on the current status of teaching and learning English in Vietnam as well as their thoughts on the forthcoming period of English education in the Vietnamese context. Most of the students in this study hold a belief that education in English in Vietnam has an examination orientation. Therefore, teaching to the test is a popular method of education whose curriculum is deeply concentrated on preparing students for standardized tests. In order to assess the test-taker's ability in a large population, English standardized tests are regularly designed in multiple-choice format and mainly focus on English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. It is obvious that listening and speaking skills are not highlighted in English examinations. Hence, when being asked whether to have good communication in English or not, a majority of the participants stayed neutral because they were uncertain about their ability to use English to communicate. In actual fact, it has been generally noticed that many EFL learners in Vietnam experience many difficulties in communicating and speaking English (Ly, 2021). Despite some problems related to English learning and teaching methods, a significant proportion of the students in the survey still feel pleased regarding English education in Vietnam because their needs and expectations have been satisfied. One possible reason to explain their satisfaction is that teaching to the test helps the students straightforwardly qualify for the exams. In the study of Nguyen and Lo (2022), their results also show positive perceptions of Vietnamese students towards their satisfaction with using English as a lingua franca in different program domains.

Relating to the outlook of English in Vietnam, EFL learners suppose that English will still maintain its dominant position among foreign languages. Understanding the importance of

English, populous Vietnamese parents have massive investments in their children to learn English from a very young age, and that has become a contemporary trend in Vietnam. Consequently, the English proficiency of learners in Vietnam is expected to reach a higher level. Their ability to communicate in English is accordingly enhanced as well. In an optimistic future, English will transform from a foreign language into a second language in the Vietnamese context. As a matter of fact, it is not simple to officially recognize English as a second language (Hoang, 2011; Hoang, 2016; Hoang, 2020). The foremost condition needs to be satisfied to create an environment for using English on a daily basis for Vietnamese people.

## Conclusion

In the trend of globalization nowadays, the importance of English is neither deniable nor ignorable because it has been used commonly everywhere in the world. English is undoubtedly a dominant international language not only in Vietnam but also in many other countries around the globe. As it is shown in the study, Vietnam will integrate deeply and widely into the globalized world owing to the spread of English. More importantly, English is a useful tool assisting Vietnam to have great influence in the nearby region.

This article has also discussed the reasons explaining the popularity of English regarding the beliefs of EFL learners in Vietnam. The top reasons involve the leading status of English as the most used language in the world and its significance in international finance, commerce, education, science, tourism, and the internet. Vietnamese students are motivated to learn English to pursue better career paths and to gain a competitive advantage in the study, work and promotion. In addition, students in Vietnam learn English not only because it is a mandatory subject in schools but also because they want to communicate with foreign citizens to expand their international relationships.

Participants of this study comment that English education in Vietnam is mainly exam-oriented, with a focus on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in English standardized tests. Thus, communication in English is not a strength for Vietnamese English learners. Nevertheless, they are generally satisfied with the current English education and believe that English will remain a global language extensively used in Vietnam. They also have faith in the improved proficiency level of English learners and the transference of English into a second language in the Vietnamese context in the future.

Some particular limitations are unavoidable, such as the limited research location in only one city, as well as uncomplex methods of collecting and analyzing data. Though English as a global language has been investigated via various studies by language scholars around the world, updating its status in different contexts is never an obsolete task. Moreover, another similar research using a qualitative approach to have a profound understanding of each particular student's viewpoint and feeling is strongly recommended. Further examination of the beliefs of Vietnamese EFL teachers towards the same topic is also suggested to have a bigger picture of English as a global language in Vietnam.

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