



ISSN: 2768-4563

International Journal of
TESOL & Education



ICTE Press

International Association of TESOL & Education

5243 Birch Falls Ln, Sugar Land, Texas, USA, 77479

<https://i-jte.org> | <https://i-cte.org/press>

International Journal of TESOL & Education (ijte)

ISSN: 2768-4563
Volume 6, Issue 3, 2026

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.2663>

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3233-457X>



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Library of Congress, U.S. ISSN Center

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Semantic Scholar



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Publication frequency

International Journal of TESOL & Education will publish 4 issues per year in February, May, August, and November. The IJTE will publish manuscripts as soon as they are accepted.

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Publisher: ICTE Press

Address: International Association of TESOL & Education, 5243 Birch Falls Ln, Sugar Land, Texas, USA, 77479

Principal Contact

Associate Professor Dr. Pham Vu Phi Ho

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: phamvuphiho@iuh.edu.vn; editor@i-jte.org

International Journal of TESOL & Education

Vol. 6, No. 3 (2026): TESOL & Education

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A Note from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear beloved TESOLers & Educators,

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I am pleased to announce the completion and online publication of Volume 6, Issue 3 (2026) of the International Journal of TESOL & Education (IJTE, ISSN 2768-4563). This issue brings together five original contributions spanning teacher education, corpus-based writing assessment, mobile-assisted language learning, test washback, and Business English for employability, reflecting the breadth of inquiry that continues to define our journal's mission.

The issue opens with a qualitative study by Tran Thi Yen and Nguyen Thi Mai Huong, who examined how five EFL teacher educators at a Vietnamese pedagogical university perceive and enact social-emotional learning (SEL). Drawing on thematically analyzed semi-structured interviews, the authors found that although participants were largely unfamiliar with SEL as a formal framework, they intuitively practiced its principles through modeling, group work, and assessment, while identifying limited training, time, and institutional support as persistent barriers. Looking ahead, the authors call for larger, multi-institution samples and triangulated designs that combine interviews with classroom observation, curriculum analysis, and the perspectives of other stakeholders, so that findings can move beyond self-reported data and context-bound conclusions.

The second article, by Truong Van Uyen, takes a corpus-based approach to a long-standing question in language testing: what linguistic features actually distinguish adjacent IELTS Writing Task 2 band levels. Using a 30-essay learner corpus with ten essays per band, the study examined lexical diversity (MTLD), lexical sophistication (AWL percentage), and syntactic complexity (mean sentence length) across Bands 6, 7, and 8. One-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in lexical diversity, though this was driven by the contrast between Bands 6 and 8 rather than between adjacent bands, while lexical sophistication and syntactic complexity showed only non-significant upward trends. The author recommends that future work draw on larger, authenticated IELTS corpora with independently verified ratings and adopt finer-grained measures, such as phraseological sophistication, collocational accuracy, and subordination ratios, to better capture distinctions between neighboring bands.

Our third contribution, by Loi Gia An, Nguyen Ngoc Man Nhi, and Truong Phu Sy, examines technology-assisted reading instruction through a mixed-methods case study of 53 English-majored students at Van Lang University. Survey and interview data revealed generally positive attitudes toward the 4English mobile application, particularly regarding vocabulary growth and accessibility, alongside challenges such as overly advanced vocabulary, limited engagement with the interface, and financial barriers that restrict access to premium features. The authors suggest that future research pursue larger-scale studies of learner motivation and autonomy, longitudinal designs to assess sustained engagement over time, and action research to test the application's actual effects on reading outcomes.

The fourth article, a conceptual paper by Meisam Khalilnejad, examines how IELTS shapes teaching methods and instructional materials through the lens of washback theory. The paper argues that certain strategic departures from Communicative Language Teaching may improve the efficiency of IELTS preparation, proposing skill-specific adaptations across reading, writing, speaking, and listening, including greater emphasis on academic vocabulary, more direct grammar instruction, reduced reliance on pair work, and the selective use of learners' first language. The author acknowledges that empirical validation of these proposals is still needed and calls for comparative analyses of other high-stakes tests, such as TOEFL, PTE, Duolingo, and CELPIP, as well as skill-specific studies that isolate the impact of individual pedagogical adjustments on band-score outcomes.

To round out the issue, Nguyen Tuong Thien Lac and Nguyen Van Nguyen present a qualitative case study exploring how 12 third-year English majors at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking perceive the role of Business English speaking in their future employment. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study identified five themes, most notably the perceived centrality of speaking skills to professional success and a persistent gap between theoretical coursework and authentic workplace practice, with students calling for more simulation-based activities and greater engagement with business experts. The authors encourage future studies to draw on larger, multi-institutional samples and experimental designs that can test the actual impact of Business English speaking instruction on employment outcomes.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the authors whose scholarship made this issue possible:

1. Tran Thi Yen, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam
2. Nguyen Thi Mai Huong, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam
3. Truong Van Uyen, Independent Researcher, Vietnam
4. Loi Gia An, Nguyen Ngoc Man Nhi, and Truong Phu Sy, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
5. Meisam Khalilinejad, Department of English, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Louisiana, USA
6. Nguyen Tuong Thien Lac and Nguyen Van Nguyen, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Their rigor, patience through revision, and commitment to advancing TESOL scholarship are deeply appreciated.

Last but not least, this issue would not have been possible without the dedicated work of our peer reviewers, who generously gave their time and expertise to ensure the quality and integrity of every submission through rigorous, constructive evaluation. I am equally grateful to our editorial and production staff, whose diligence in manuscript handling, formatting, proofreading, and online publication ensured this issue's timely release. Your collective efforts sustain the standards that IJTE strives to uphold.

We look forward to receiving manuscripts that contribute new theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical insights to TESOL and education.

Thanks be to God for everything!

Warm regards,



Associate Professor Dr. Pham Vu Phi Ho
Editor-in-chief
International Journal of TESOL & Education

EFL Teacher Educators' Perspectives on Embedding Social-Emotional Learning into EFL Teacher Education in Vietnam

Tran Thi Yen^{1*}, Nguyen Thi Mai Huong²

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

²University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: yentt@tnue.edu.vn

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1825-1190>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26631>

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Received: 06/01/2025

Revision: 20/07/2026

Accepted: 22/07/2026

Online: 12/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: English language teaching, social-emotional learning, social emotional competencies, teacher education, teacher educator

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has received growing attention, but little is known about how it is understood and enacted in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. This qualitative study examined how five EFL teacher educators at a Vietnamese pedagogical university perceived and enacted SEL. Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically. Most were unfamiliar with SEL as a formal framework; however, they considered its principles relevant to Vietnamese values, effective teaching, and students' development. They reported modelling SEL-related skills, using group work and extracurricular activities, and including these skills in assessment. These practices, however, were mostly based on experience and were not explicitly connected to SEL. Major reported barriers included limited training, time, resources, large classes, and insufficient institutional support. Participants suggested integrating SEL into existing courses, providing professional development, and strengthening collaboration. The study shows that teacher educators are willing to adopt SEL but need clear guidance and sustained institutional support.

Introduction

Nowadays, the growing demands of modern education require a transition towards a more holistic approach that educates children as whole individuals and prioritizes social-emotional growth, as focusing only on academic skills is no longer enough (Jones & Kahn, 2017). A growing body of research has shown that fostering social-emotional competencies (SECs) for students is just as important as developing their intellectual abilities (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). All of these competencies would help prepare them for the challenges of modern education, life, work, and society (Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). In this context, social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a transformative educational framework that integrates aspects of emotional, social, and academic growth (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020; Greenberg et al., 2003). Educators in many countries around the world have recognized the potential of SEL not only to enhance social-emotional competencies but also to facilitate teaching and learning (Bridgeland et al.,

2013; Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2024).

In Vietnam, there are both opportunities and challenges in integrating SEL into the educational system, especially since the country's 2018 General Education Curriculum, issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), marked a comprehensive shift toward competency-based education. In the new National General Education Curriculum, qualities such as autonomy, effective communication, problem-solving, compassion, and accountability are emphasized, aligning with the principles of SEL (CASEL, 2020; MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023). In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the significance and relevance of SEL is even more prominent (Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023). Learning a language is an inherently social and emotional process where learners have to constantly get involved in interpersonal communication, cultural sensitivity, and managing emotional or affective factors like motivation, confidence, anxiety, or fear of error (Arnold & Brown, 1999; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Vo, 2025; Vygotsky, 1986). SEL has the potential to support students in managing these social-emotional factors to engage successfully in the learning process and improve linguistic proficiency (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024). Accordingly, nowadays, EFL teachers are expected not only to teach linguistic skills but also social-emotional skills. This context requires EFL teachers and EFL teacher educators to integrate SEL into their professional practices (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Although the benefits of SEL have been recognized universally (Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2024), effectively embedding it into educational practices is challenging (Elias et al., 2003; Tran & Le, 2023). It requires EFL teachers who are not only knowledgeable in SEL theories but also capable of modeling, teaching, and assessing SEL skills during their teaching practices (Huynh et al., 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran, 2025; Yoder, 2014). This raises important questions about the extent to which EFL teachers feel prepared for integrating SEL in their daily teaching practices, and how teacher education programs prepare EFL pre-service teachers (EPTs) for such responsibilities, especially in contexts like Vietnam (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). More specifically, are teacher education programs equipping EPTs with both social-emotional competencies (SECs) and SEL instructional competence (SELIC) so they can implement SEL effectively in their future classrooms (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Tran, 2025)?

In this process of teacher preparation, the role of teacher educators is extremely important (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). If teacher educators advocate for SEL and actively promote SEL, they can equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to implement SEL successfully (Lawlor, 2016; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). In other words, teacher educators' perceptions and practices of SEL can significantly impact how pre-service teachers understand, value, and apply SEL in their future teaching practices. However, the extent to which EFL teacher educators (ETEs) in Vietnam perceive and practice SEL is not thoroughly examined (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). This research gap indicates the need for research that examines how ETEs perceive and practice SEL within teacher education programs.

To fill this gap, this study was conducted to explore how ETEs at a pedagogical university in Vietnam perceive and practise SEL. It focuses on exploring their understanding of SEL, their perspectives on its relevance to EFL education, their perceived roles in implementing SEL, their reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the challenges they face and the recommendations they could make to overcome these challenges. The findings of the study

reveal how SEL is currently interpreted and enacted within one EFL teacher education program in Vietnam, offering practical recommendations for integrating SEL more effectively into EFL teacher education to prepare future EFL teachers to foster students' SECs alongside linguistic proficiency. All of these efforts can create meaningful changes in teacher education and promote holistic education in Vietnam.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of the conceptual and contextual grounding of SEL in EFL teacher education. It begins with major conceptualizations of SEL along with its theoretical frameworks, followed by a summary of its benefits. It also reviews teachers' perspectives on SEL and examines existing research on SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam to identify gaps that establish the focus and contribution of the present study.

Existing conceptualizations of SEL

The concept of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) was first introduced in 1994 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organization headquartered in Chicago, United States, that plays a leading role in advancing SEL research, policy, and practice. SEL is defined as

“the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”
(CASEL, 2020, p. 1)

Since its formal introduction in 1994, SEL frameworks, particularly those proposed by CASEL, have been continually developed and refined to identify and specify five core social-emotional competencies (SECs), namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, as well as the specific skills under these competencies. They are viewed as interrelated, developmental, and teachable through everyday classroom practices (CASEL, 2020; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Yoder, 2014).

SEL has been increasingly recognized as an essential or integral part of modern education (Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). Jones and Kahn (2017) claim that SEL has the potential to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which students can develop comprehensively not only in social-emotional aspects but also in academic domains. In the same vein, Markowitz and Bouffard (2020) and Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2022) emphasize the active and integrative nature of SEL. They argue that SEL should not be seen as a static, optional, supplementary, separate, or stand-alone program but as a continuous, integrative process that needs to be integrated into daily lesson content and teaching practices. From these perspectives, SEL is viewed as a holistic approach to educating well-rounded students, who are not only academically excellent but also socially and emotionally intelligent. These perspectives place significant instructional responsibility on teachers and teacher educators (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

While existing research largely focuses on learners' and teachers' personal SECs, less attention has been paid to teachers' SEL instructional competence (SELIC) (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Tran, 2025). This limitation is particularly concerning in teacher education, where pre-service teachers require not only awareness of SEL but also explicit guidance on how to integrate SEL into teaching, learning, and assessment (Pentón Herrera,

2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). To address this gap, several scholars have begun to conceptualize SEL not merely as personal competencies, but also as a professional instructional competence (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Phan, 2021; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran, 2025). Tran (2025), based on existing empirical studies, introduces the construct of SELIC to address teachers' ability to design, implement, model, and evaluate SEL within subject teaching. This construct highlights the need to distinguish between possessing SECs and intentionally fostering them in students.

Benefits of SEL implementation

Many studies have been conducted, and all have confirmed the significant impact of SEL on students' social, emotional, and even academic outcomes (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). These studies consistently show that SEL can help students foster essential skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. All of these social-emotional skills can contribute to stronger intrapersonal intelligence and interpersonal relationships; better mental health; improved classroom behaviors and attitudes; enhanced academic engagement, motivation, persistence, and achievement for students; and better future personal lives and professional careers (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024).

In EFL and language learning contexts, SEL has also been found to play an important role in addressing affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and learner engagement, thereby supporting sustained participation and successful language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023; Vo, 2025). In addition to its benefits for students, SEL offers both professional and personal benefits for teachers. SEL can help teachers enhance teaching effectiveness, improve classroom management, foster supportive learning environments, reduce stress, avoid burnout, and achieve greater job satisfaction (Braun et al., 2020; Collie et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These reported benefits help explain why SEL has gained global interest and confirm its relevance not only for students but also for teachers and the entire educational system, establishing a strong empirical rationale for its integration into EFL teacher education (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Teachers' perspectives on SEL

Teachers' perspectives on SEL play an important role in determining its effective integration into educational practices (Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2009). Previous research findings reveal a limited formal understanding of SEL concepts, with knowledge often fragmented or incomplete (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013). Despite this, research shows that even without familiarity with SEL concepts and frameworks, teachers naturally or intuitively promote SECs for their students through everyday classroom practices such as relationship building, classroom management and collaborative learning (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Yoder, 2014). They generally recognize the positive impacts of SEL on developing students' social skills, academic performance and emotional resilience (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013).

At the same time, the literature consistently emphasizes teachers' roles as facilitators, role models, and emotional supporters in promoting SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), yet studies like Ee and Cheng (2013) reveal that only a minority of teachers perceived themselves as active agents responsible for explicitly teaching SEL. More recent studies have reinforced this concern by highlighting a persistent belief–practice gap: teachers may highly value SEL but lack the pedagogical knowledge, confidence or institutional support

to integrate it systematically (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran & Le, 2023). This gap highlights the need for teacher education programs to move beyond awareness-raising toward strengthening teachers' personal SECs as well as their instructional capacity to design, implement, and assess SEL explicitly (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025). It also highlights the importance of teacher educators' own understanding, modeling, and instructional use of SEL, as these may shape how preservice teachers learn to enact it in their future classrooms (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam

SEL in Vietnamese teacher education is gaining attention; however, it remains an emerging area of interest (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). The recent educational reforms, particularly the competency-based orientation of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, have created policy-level opportunities for integrating SEL-related principles into teaching and learning (MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023); however, empirical research on SEL within Vietnamese teacher education remains limited and fragmented (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). Research suggests that although SEL is not explicitly labeled in many teacher education programs, its principles are often integrated into courses such as teaching methods, educational psychology, and classroom management, which emphasize emotional intelligence, stress management, and building positive student-teacher relationships (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

However, existing Vietnamese studies suggest that such implicit integration is insufficient to ensure coherent and effective SEL implementation (Huynh et al., 2022; Phan, 2021; Tran, 2025). For instance, Phan (2021) found that preschool teachers had a limited understanding of SEL and could not prioritize or organize SEL-focused activities. Similarly, Huynh et al. (2022) reported that Vietnamese pre-service teachers demonstrated only moderate perceived competence in implementing SEL and faced difficulties conceptualizing SEL and applying its components coherently in teaching. Despite this emerging evidence, empirical research on SEL within EFL teacher education in Vietnam remains extremely limited, particularly with respect to how SEL is understood, advocated, and enacted by EFL teacher educators (Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025; Tran & Le, 2023).

In summary, although there is a substantial body of research on SEL, they primarily focus on students (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Kahn, 2017) and in-service teachers (e.g., Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). There have been few studies on the perspectives of teacher educators, who play an essential role in shaping how SEL is conceptualized and implemented in teacher preparation programs (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). This gap is even more pronounced in the context of EFL teacher education (Pentón Herrera, 2024; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Tran, 2025). Within the Vietnamese context, existing studies on SEL have largely concentrated on learners' or pre-service teachers' competencies (Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025), with very limited empirical research examining EFL teacher educators' perspectives and practices. As a result, there remains insufficient understanding of how SEL is interpreted, advocated and integrated at the level of teacher education to prepare pre-service teachers to implement SEL effectively in their future EFL classrooms.

To address this gap, the present study was conducted to investigate the perspectives on SEL among EFL teacher educators at a pedagogical university in Vietnam. The study focuses on exploring their understanding of SEL, their beliefs about its benefits, their perceived roles and

reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the barriers they face and their proposed recommendations.

Methods

Research paradigm and design

This study adopted a constructivist research paradigm, which views reality not as a fixed, objective entity but as socially constructed by the subjective beliefs, actions, experiences and interpretations of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design was selected as it is suitable for exploring a complex and context-specific phenomenon such as the perspectives on SEL among ETEs at a pedagogical university in Vietnam (Patton, 2015). The adoption of a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative research design can provide an in-depth exploration of how EFL teacher educators perceive SEL, how they report incorporating SEL-related principles into their teacher education practices, as well as how they handle the challenges and opportunities to promote SEL within a specific EFL teacher education program.

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a Vietnamese pedagogical university, which offers an undergraduate EFL teacher education program preparing pre-service teachers to teach English at secondary levels. The EFL teacher education program includes coursework in language skills, linguistics, teaching methodology, assessment, educational psychology and teaching practice. This setting was selected because pedagogical universities play an important role in shaping future EFL teachers' professional knowledge, beliefs and skills. In addition, the site was accessible and feasible for in-depth qualitative inquiry thanks to the researcher's institutional affiliation, which facilitated access to participants. This combination of relevance, accessibility and feasibility made the setting appropriate for exploring EFL teacher educators' perspectives on SEL integration in EFL teacher education.

The participants were five EFL teacher educators (coded as ETE01-05) from the selected pedagogical university, recruited using purposive sampling, following the principle of maximum variation to ensure the collection of sufficient data and diverse perspectives (Patton, 2015). The participants were varied in gender, age, qualifications, teaching experience, expertise and roles within the teacher education program (see Table 1). The five selected participants included two teacher educators with doctoral degrees and three with master's degrees in TESOL or Education. These teacher educators held different positions within the EFL teacher education program: one faculty dean, two heads of division (English Language Teaching Methodology and Languages & Cultures), and two instructors with teaching-only responsibilities, including one foreign instructor. Their professional experiences also vary considerably in the range between 9 and 32 years, during which they have designed and taught a wide range of courses within the program, such as ELT, micro-teaching, language skills, curriculum development, research methods, study skills, information technology, psychological counseling and linguistic courses. This diversity can help the researcher gather data on different aspects of SEL such as leadership, curriculum development and classroom practices within the EFL teacher education program.

Table 1.**Profile of the semi-structured interview participants**

Code	Gender /Age	Qualifications	Position/ Professional Experience	Courses designed and taught
ETE01	Female 46	MA (TESOL)	Teaching only; 24 years of experience	ELT; practicum; micro-teaching; IT; language skills, PBL, etc.
ETE02	Female 37	PhD (TESOL)	Former Head of the ELT Division; 15 years	ELT; micro-teaching; language skills; research methods, testing & assessment
ETE03	Male 55	MA (TESOL)	Former Head; currently teaching only; 32 years	Language skills; culture & literature; phonetics & phonology; grammar & syntax; lexicology
ETE04	Female 42	PhD (Education)	Dean of the Faculty; 19 years of experience	ELT; micro-teaching; curriculum development; study skills; psychological counseling
ETE05	Male 32	MA (TESOL)	Teaching only; American; 9 years of experience	ELT; micro-teaching; English language skills

Data collection method and procedure

The study chose semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This method can gather rich, detailed data and offer flexibility for probing, clarification, and the emergence of unanticipated themes to explore ETEs' perspectives on SEL (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were built based on established, validated instruments such as those developed by Elias et al. (2003), Greenberg et al. (2003) and Buchanan et al. (2009), but they were adapted to the specific context of EFL teacher education in Vietnam. The interview protocol includes twelve open-ended questions, focusing on eliciting detailed responses from ETEs about their understanding of SEL, their perceptions of its relevance and benefits, their perceived roles in SEL implementation, their reported strategies for its integration, the barriers they face, and their recommendations for strengthening SEL integration in teacher education. To ensure that the protocol was clear, relevant, and practical enough, it was reviewed by two academic experts and then piloted with two experienced ETEs who were not included in the main study. Feedback from these review and piloting processes helped the researcher refine the question items, probing strategies, and the coherence of the whole protocol, ensuring that the questions were clear and aligned with the research aims.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the workplace of the selected ETEs to ensure that they felt comfortable in their familiar environments. This choice of interview format encouraged ETEs to share their experiences and perspectives through an open and reflective discussion. The participants could also choose either English or Vietnamese in the interviews based on their linguistic preference to minimize linguistic constraints and enhance clarity, expressiveness, and comfort during the interview. Four Vietnamese participants chose to be interviewed in Vietnamese, while the American participant chose to conduct the interview in

English. Depending on the participant's responses, each interview session lasted between one and two hours.

Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality procedures; written informed consent was then obtained. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic accuracy and contextual meaning, and only coded segments were translated into English for analysis and reporting. These coded segments include excerpts reflecting ETEs' beliefs about SEL, reported classroom practices, and reflections on challenges and training needs in EFL teacher education. Member checking was then used to ensure that the participants' perspectives were faithfully translated, analyzed and interpreted in the study.

Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed by the researcher using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This data analysis technique offers a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting recurring patterns and themes within the data. Thematic analysis followed the six-step procedure, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2022). MaxQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software was utilized to facilitate the data coding, organization, and management process.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive elements. Deductive categories were predefined based on the objectives of the study, including ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL, perspectives on the relevance and benefits of SEL in EFL education, perceived roles in SEL implementation, advocacy for developing SECs and SELIC among EPTs, perceived barriers to SEL integration in teacher education, and strategies proposed for promoting SEL within EFL teacher education programs. Inductively, additional codes and subthemes were generated directly from the data to explore unanticipated perspectives and reported practices related to SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. Throughout the analytic process, themes were reviewed, refined, and redefined to ensure their internal coherence and clear distinctions.

Results/Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with the five selected ETEs. The findings are organized into the categories of ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL, their perspectives on the relevance of SEL in EFL education, their perceived roles in developing SECs and SELIC for EPTs, their reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the barriers they faced, and finally their recommendations for enhancing SEL integration within EFL teacher education. All of these findings could provide a detailed exploration of how ETEs at the selected pedagogical university understand, value, and practice SEL within EFL teacher education.

ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL

The findings of the study indicate that, in general, ETEs are not familiar with the term SEL. They openly acknowledged their unfamiliarity with the term. For example, ETE05 admitted,

"I'm not familiar with this term specifically. S-E-L? No."

ETE03 also remarked,

"This is the first time I've been exposed to this term; before this, I did not have this topic

in mind."

Similarly, ETE04 described the concept as *"quite new to me."* These statements clearly indicate a concerning gap in ETEs' formal knowledge of SEL, implying that SEL has not yet been systematically conceptualized or labeled within their professional discourse.

Despite this initial unfamiliarity with the term SEL, after being provided with a brief introduction to SEL during the interview process, ETEs began to recognize some hidden aspects of SEL in their existing teaching practices. They admitted that they are acquainted with many of its basic principles, such as fostering collaboration and building positive classroom relationships. For instance, ETE04 reflected,

"I think I may have encountered the contents of the SEL concept somewhere."

This response implies that although the term itself is new, the principles behind it align with their existing teaching beliefs and practices. Similarly, ETE02 shared,

"Naming something like SEL is quite new to me. However, the contents are quite similar to what I know. For example, relationship skills are clearly reflected in group work activities and I see that group work is very effective in my classes."

This response indicates that although SEL as a formal framework is not explicitly addressed in their professional discourse, its practical applications, such as fostering teamwork and social interaction, are implicitly and intuitively integrated into their daily teaching practices.

It can be seen that although ETEs have limited familiarity with the formal term SEL, they are already familiar with many of its basic components and engaged in practices aligned with SEL principles without knowing that those practices are related to a formal SEL framework. In other words, without conceptual understanding, the interviewed ETEs still use implicit SEL-related concepts such as emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship skills. However, the limited awareness of SEL and the lack of formal knowledge about SEL prevent them from intentionally and explicitly designing, articulating, modeling, and assessing SEL for pre-service teachers. Actually, ETEs did not view these practices as intentional efforts to develop SECs for EPTs; instead, they described them as part of effective teaching strategies. This concerning gap indicates a need for more explicit, systematic training or professional development in SEL for teacher educators so that these intuitive practices can be intentionally designed, articulated and modeled within the EFL teacher education program.

ETEs' perspectives on the relevance and benefits of SEL in EFL teaching and learning

ETEs consistently emphasized the importance of SEL for effective EFL teaching and learning. Firstly, they stressed that emotional and social factors are foundational to successful language learning as they help create emotionally supportive classrooms that maximize student engagement and facilitate the language learning process. ETE05 illustrated this point:

"If I'm in a happy place, I'll be a much more effective learner. And if I'm in an uncomfortable place and angry or sad or stressed, yes, I cannot learn well."

This statement indicates that ETEs view SEL as an integral component of effective EFL teaching, not an optional element.

ETEs further advocated for SEL as a means of fostering greater student autonomy and at the same time reducing teacher workload. ETE04 observed,

"If our learners fully develop these competencies, the teacher's burden will decrease because students will be able to self-regulate; they will take responsibility for their own

learning.”

This perspective emphasizes that SEL helps students take greater responsibility for their learning, thereby reducing teachers' instructional burden. Conversely, ETE04 pointed out that students lacking SECs tend to avoid taking risks in learning tasks, which negatively affected their academic outcomes:

“Students with limited social skills usually don't achieve high academic results and often avoid taking risks in learning tasks.”

This reflection indicated the importance of SEL in preventing disengagement and enhancing learning outcomes.

Beside the immediate benefits for learning processes, SEL is also viewed as having cumulative and sustained benefits for teacher development, particularly in preparing pre-service teachers for their future teaching roles. ETE04 articulated this long-term impact:

“When EPTs are happy and satisfied with their learning, they will be successful learners, and in the future, when they become teachers, I'm sure they will be successful teachers.”

This perspective highlights the cyclical or downstream effect of SEL, where socially, emotionally competent EPTs are more likely to succeed as future teachers, who can sustain and amplify SEL practices in their own classrooms to foster SECs for their students.

ETEs also viewed SEL as an integrative approach rather than an isolated component of instruction. ETE05 explained,

“I would see it more as an approach they can look at to design teaching and learning activities.”

It means that SEL should be integrated into the teaching and learning processes, and should not be viewed as something to be taught separately in extra-curricular courses such as life-skills education. They also emphasize SEL's growing importance in modern technology-mediated educational contexts. ETE04 explained,

“I believe SEL will become a teaching approach, especially in a rapidly developing society like ours, where information technology is advancing rapidly and education can no longer focus solely on knowledge transmission.”

This advocacy for SEL as a holistic educational approach highlights the shift toward developing SECs that equip learners with the self-regulation, adaptability, collaboration, and ethical awareness to function productively in the contemporary digital age, where information overload, rapid changes, and increased social interaction demand more than content knowledge.

In addition, ETEs advocated for SEL's universal relevance beyond the EFL classroom. ETE04 remarked,

“I believe that all subjects are suitable for integrating SEL; teaching any subject must consider the social and emotional factors of the learners.”

This perspective highlights the belief that SEL is not confined to EFL education but serves as a fundamental element of effective teaching practices across diverse subjects such as Literature, History, and Arts.

Finally, ETEs recognized that SEL aligns with Vietnamese long-standing cultural values, and emphasized that it is relevant within the Vietnamese educational context. ETE03 highlighted this connection by referencing a very popular traditional saying in Vietnam: *“Tiên học lễ, hậu*

học văn” (First learn propriety, then learn knowledge). This cultural emphasis on respect, discipline, appropriate behaviors, relationships, and collective harmony aligns with SEL principles. It means that SEL not only addresses global educational trends but also remains relevant to Vietnamese culture.

ETEs’ perspectives on the roles of teachers in SEL implementation

The interviewed ETEs emphasized that educators are not just conveyors or transmitters of knowledge but also caretakers of students’ social-emotional development. ETE05 remarked,

“I think it is part of a teacher’s responsibility to instruct students how to behave with one another. Maybe they have some negative social, emotional attributes that I can help with as a teacher.”

ETEs also emphasize the lasting impact teachers can have on students’ emotional-social growth. ETE05 explained,

“Inside the classroom, we can try to create a safe, healthy and happy learning environment for our students. And hopefully, what we teach them, they’re able to use outside of the classroom in the future too, in terms of social-emotional development.”

This perspective highlights the role of teachers in equipping students with SECs needed to handle real-life challenges, not only academic tasks. In addition, ETEs describe the teacher-student relationship as a collaborative and supportive partnership essential for social-emotional growth. ETE04 likened teachers to *“a companion, someone who walks alongside, designs and helps construct these SECs for the learner.”* This metaphor indicated that teachers need to guide, support, and model SECs for students through ongoing interaction and everyday teaching practices rather than through isolated instruction in separate lessons.

ETEs’ perspectives on the need to develop SECs and SELIC for EPTs

ETEs emphasized the importance of equipping EPTs with SECs and SELIC. While SECs are viewed as personal competencies, SELIC is viewed as a professional teaching capacity which enables teachers to intentionally design, facilitate, and evaluate students’ SECs within EFL classrooms. ETEs emphasized that all of these competencies are essential for dealing with the social-emotional challenges that arise in EFL classrooms. As ETE05 observed,

“Socially, there’s always some students who are... it’s hard to get them involved... There’s bullying all over the world... You have to manage all of these social dynamics between learners and groups.”

This perspective highlights the need to foster SECs and SELIC for pre-service teachers so that they can foster emotionally safe learning environments where all students feel valued and supported.

ETEs also stressed the significant impact of a teacher’s emotional state on the whole classroom atmosphere and the learning processes, thereby confirming the need to equip EPTs with the skills to regulate their own emotions and model positive social-emotional behaviors. ETE02 observed,

“When the teacher is passionate and brings a lot of energy, that energy spreads to the students.”

Therefore, *“it’s essential to equip EPTs with the knowledge and skills to handle social-emotional issues,”* emphasized ETE01. Similarly, ETE05 reflected,

“If they are emotionally, socially competent, they will teach their students the same skills

and it just multiplies... very, very important.”

This perspective illustrates how equipping EPTs with SECs and SELIC creates a foundation for cultivating socially and emotionally competent learners in the next generation.

Balancing cognitive and non-cognitive skills is another recurring emphasis in the interviews with ETEs. While expertise in subject matter remains essential, ETEs argued that it must be complemented by SECs to address the complexities of modern classrooms. ETE03 remarked,

Both elements are equally important. We need teachers who are well-rounded, excellent in their expertise but also passionate about their students.”

This holistic perspective reflects the growing expectations for teachers to be able to not only deliver academic content but also manage the complex social-emotional dimensions of their classroom.

However, during the interviews, ETEs pointed out concerns about gaps in SEL training for EPTs. ETE05 shared,

“They need sufficient training in SEL. I graduated with my master's and I heard about this topic... not very in depth.”

This limited exposure to SEL in teacher education programs leaves EPTs underprepared to apply SEL intentionally and effectively in their teaching practices; consequently, they graduate, enter the teaching profession, but feel confused about how to address social-emotional issues in their classroom, and eventually get burnout. ETEs also stress that SEL training should extend beyond pre-service teacher education to continue throughout a teacher's professional career. ETE05 remarked,

“Every teacher should have more training in SEL, even teachers who have been teaching for 20 years.”

This highlights the need for continuous professional development to enhance and sustain SECs and SELIC for not only pre-service but also in-service teachers.

ETEs' reported strategies for integrating SEL into EFL teacher education

In the semi-structured interviews, ETEs reported different practical strategies that they associated with integrating SEL-related principles. These strategies include embedding SEL into existing coursework; modeling SECs through personal and professional practices; incorporating SEL-related criteria into assessment practice; utilizing group work, learning projects, extra-curricular activities and social media; continuous observation and responsiveness; and advancing SEL through continuous professional development. These strategies indicate that some practices compatible with SEL principles may already be present within the existing EFL teacher education program, but in an implicit and intuitive manner.

Embedding SEL naturally but implicitly in existing coursework

One of the primary strategies reported by ETEs involves embedding SEL-related principles naturally into existing courses instead of introducing it as separate or stand-alone lessons. ETEs suggested that some social-emotional elements might already be addressed implicitly in regular classroom activities, such as group work, discussion tasks, and other communicative activities. ETE05 illustrated this point:

“I think we can naturally incorporate emotional-social skills into our lessons because if we create a group of students and they don't have any of these skills, then it will be a disaster.”

In this context, social-emotional skills, such as collaboration, emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving, have become a natural or integral component of EFL teacher education. ETE05 reinforced this view:

"Even if we don't think about self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, we're still teaching them."

This point implies that even without conscious reference to SEL terminology, they are still fostering SECs for EPTs as part of normal teaching routines. ETE05 elaborated on how group work can foster these SECs such as collaboration, empathy and problem-solving:

"We can teach it passively by doing group work, seeing how students interact with each other."

This perspective highlights how SEL seamlessly aligns with academic objectives; therefore, it should be viewed as an essential condition for effective academic learning, not as an additional task.

Modeling SEL in EFL teacher education practices

Another reported strategy is to model SECs and SELIC for EPTs in everyday instructional practices. Through their behaviors and attitudes, such as respectful communication, emotional regulation in stressful situations, supportive feedback and problem-solving, teacher educators act as role models for pre-service teachers. ETE03 emphasized this role-modelling by referencing a very popular Vietnamese proverb, "*Thầy nào trò ấy*" ("like teacher, like student"), to illustrate how SECs and SELIC modeled by ETEs leave a lasting formative impact on EPTs. This highlights the cultural expectation in Vietnam that teacher educators need to lead by example. As ETE03 explained,

"Teacher educators, through their accumulated experience and knowledge, inevitably influence their pre-service teachers."

However, modeling SEL is often an unintentional and implicit process as ETEs naturally embody these skills without explicitly articulating them as SECs or SELIC. ETE05 reflected:

"I don't think I have explicitly told my students this, but just leading by example and hopefully, if they think I'm a good teacher, they will take the parts of me that they like and use it."

This highlights how EPTs may learn essential SECs and SELIC by observing how ETEs demonstrate them in authentic teaching contexts rather than by listening to formal instruction. Although modeling is, to some extent, effective and culturally appropriate, its implicit nature limits its transparent impacts. Without explicit articulation, EPTs may fail to fully understand the underlying principles or learn how to intentionally apply them in different teaching situations. This finding reinforces the study's central argument that implicit modeling, although effective, needs to be complemented by explicit instruction and reflection in order to support the systematic development of pre-service teachers' SECs and SELIC.

Incorporating SEL-related criteria into assessments

Integrating SEL-related criteria into assessment emerged as an effective strategy for fostering SECs for EPTs. ETE02 shared:

"When designing learning activities, I include and inform my students about the social-emotional criteria in the assessment rubric. Previously, the focus was on academic content, but now interaction and body language are also assessed, pushing students to

work on these skills.”

ETE02 observed that these changes encouraged EPTs to prioritize social-emotional skills like collaboration, leadership, and teamwork alongside academic objectives. ETE02 elaborated:

“Students began making more effort in group activities and leadership. For example, they now focus on how they work with others, not just on showing off their knowledge.”

This strategy fosters a deeper connection between academic tasks and social-emotional growth, making learning more relevant and meaningful for EPTs. It also indicates that assessment practices play an important role in legitimizing SEL as important learning outcomes alongside academic objectives.

Using group work, learning projects, and social media to develop SECs

In the context of large classes, where individualized attention may be constrained, group work becomes more important. ETE02 shared how group work could help overcome participation barriers:

“I’ve tried to address this by having students do more group work and participate in more projects.”

ETE05 reinforced this view,

“Whenever we have students work together in pairs or groups, all of these skills will be happening at the same time.”

Similarly, ETE02 highlighted its broader impact:

“Group work activities, in the classes I teach, are very effective. It doesn’t just build social skills but develops all of the skills in this SEL model. Group work not only enhances social awareness but also improves relationship skills.”

The collaborative nature of group work and learning projects may provide EPTs with opportunities to practice emotional intelligence, self-regulation, relationship skills and accountability. Social media platforms provide an additional channel for EPTs to develop SECs. ETE02 explained,

“I also create activities that encourage them to interact on social media, which provides more opportunities for them to practice and develop their skills.”

This strategy not only enhances communication and teamwork but also prepares EPTs to apply digital tools effectively in their own teaching and learning processes.

Using extracurricular activities to extend SEL opportunities

Extracurricular activities complement the formal curriculum by providing EPTs with opportunities to practice essential SECs such as social interaction, teamwork and emotional regulation in real-world environments. ETE04 emphasized the value of these opportunities:

“In addition to the formal content in the training program, we also have many activities, such as cultural performances and sports events, which I think contribute to the development of these competencies.”

Volunteer opportunities were also highlighted as instrumental in building SECs, offering real-world contexts for EPTs to apply SEL-related skills such as empathy, relationship-building and problem-solving. ETE04 elaborated on this point:

“Our students join these activities as volunteers, accompanying us to secondary schools

to help organize these activities.”

Additionally, the presence of different clubs and events within the university provides extra opportunities for EPTs to enhance their SECs. As ETE05 noted,

“The university is doing a good job of having clubs and events available to students so that they feel like more of a community together.”

These activities not only complement the academic curriculum but also foster a holistic approach to teacher preparation.

Fostering continuous observation and responsiveness

ETEs emphasized the important role of continuous observation and responsiveness in identifying and addressing students’ emotional and social needs during lessons. ETE03 highlighted this practice:

“During the lesson, I observe the students’ expressions and reactions to the content being taught.”

ETE02 further stressed,

“In every course I teach, I always pay attention to students’ emotions.”

Such attentiveness not only ensures that students feel recognized and understood but also creates a supportive learning environment. ETE05 also shared:

“My specific strategy is trying to connect with each student on a personal level to see what is going on in their life... I need to change my strategy with that specific student to try to connect with them so they learn as well as possible.”

This personalized approach not only demonstrates the importance of flexibility in teaching but also highlights the role of fostering a sense of connection and trust for effective learning.

In summary, ETEs reported a variety of practices that they associated with SEL integration in EFL teacher education. This reflects their attempts to prepare EPTs for the social-emotional dimensions of EFL teaching and learning. However, their strategies tend to be implicit, intuitive and fragmented without being anchored to a formal theoretical framework. This situation highlights the need for additional support to turn these personal aspirations into more systemic instructional design.

ETEs’ perceived barriers to SEL integration in EFL teacher education

Although the interviewed ETEs generally valued SEL, they encountered multiple barriers that could constrain the incorporation of SEL into EFL teacher education, including limited formal training, fragmented understanding, curriculum overload, limited instructional time, large class sizes, resistance to perceived additional responsibilities, and insufficient institutional support. One of the most significant barriers identified is the limited availability of training and professional development programs focused on SEL. ETE05 reflected on his own experience:

“As a younger teacher in the past, I think this might have been a huge challenge for me. Why is this student not learning? Why is this student more focused on something else instead of me?”

This quote highlights the challenges of newly graduated teachers in recognizing and addressing students’ social-emotional problems due to insufficient preparation in social-emotional dimensions of the classroom.

Balancing the dual demands of academic instruction and social-emotional development was

identified as another significant challenge. ETE05 described time constraints and curriculum pressure as limiting opportunities to attend to SEL:

“I think the biggest difficulty would be balancing time. You want them to develop these competencies socially and emotionally, but time management for teachers is a big challenge.”

Similarly, ETE01 acknowledged that academic requirements often take precedence over holistic approaches:

“Academic requirements will likely take precedence; SEL remains secondary.”

These comments highlight the systemic prioritization of academic outcomes, which leaves little room for ETEs to foster SECs for EPTs in daily classroom practices.

Educator resistance or reluctance to adopting new approaches or taking on additional responsibilities was identified as another barrier to SEL integration. ETE04 noted,

“The first challenge is the psychological resistance of teachers; they see it as adding to their burdens.”

ETE01 shared this opinion:

“At the start, teachers might see this as adding more work; their main task is to teach the subject matter, not focus on other factors like social-emotional skills.”

This resistance may come from a lack of understanding; these ETEs may fail to recognize that SEL can actually complement and support academic goals. In other words, SEL is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, not a separate element that adds instructional burdens. If educators view SEL as an add-on, they will regard it as an additional burden; consequently, they may hesitate or refuse to adopt SEL strategies. To overcome this barrier, it is necessary to provide professional development for ETEs to demonstrate the alignment between SEL principles and academic objectives.

Large class size is another significant challenge for ETEs when implementing SEL. ETEs reported that in a class with too many EPTs, they cannot address students' individual social-emotional needs. ETE02 raised this issue:

“In my class, there are more than fifty EPTs. I can't pay attention to all the emotions or problems of each pre-service teacher.”

This is a very common problem in Vietnamese education, where there are often too many students in a class. This condition was perceived as limiting opportunities for personalized social-emotional support.

Finally, limited resources could also hinder the integration of SEL in the EFL teacher education program. ETE04 suggested that

“We need to consider the resources we have to successfully implement SEL.”

It means that the successful integration of SEL requires not only suitable teaching materials and adequate training but also support from the institution and national policies. ETE04 further explained:

“Implementing SEL requires not only the willingness of teacher educators but also the support of the institution.”

This statement implies that without institutional support such as clear SEL policies, actionable guidelines, SEL-focused professional development, and sufficient funding, many ETEs may

find it hard to integrate SEL into the teacher education program.

ETEs' proposed recommendations for enhancing SEL integration in EFL teacher education

ETEs proposed a range of practical recommendations to address the challenges and opportunities to promote SEL in EFL teacher education programs. These recommendations reflect their commitment to fostering SEL competencies for EPTs.

Embedding explicit SEL instruction in teacher education curricula

Although SEL-related elements have already been naturally incorporated into the program, ETEs expressed concerns about the lack of explicit and formal focus on these elements. Current SEL-related practices tend to be implicit, fragmented and unintentional, relying on individual educators' personal beliefs, experiences and dispositions rather than intentional, systemic instructional design. ETE04 highlighted this issue:

"It's unfortunate that these elements are not clearly named or presented in the training program."

This lack of explicitness may result in SEL being undervalued in the curriculum. To address this gap, ETEs recommended more explicit attention to SEL within existing teacher education curricula. ETE04 elaborated,

"If we clearly outline these competencies in the curriculum, it would help both teacher educators and pre-service teachers focus on them more. It could shape many of the activities in the teaching plan."

This approach would not only validate SEL as an essential aspect of teacher preparation but also provide a clearer framework for incorporating these competencies into lesson planning, instructional strategies, assessment criteria, and other classroom interactions.

Raising awareness of SEL among teacher educators and pre-service teachers

To successfully integrate SEL into EFL teacher education programs, it is also necessary to raise awareness of SEL for ETEs and at the same time foster proactive engagement from EPTs. ETE04 emphasized that it is necessary to change instructors' perceptions through workshops or professional development programs to ensure that SEL becomes a core component of their teaching philosophy and practice. Equally important is the active involvement of EPTs. In the process of developing SECs and SELIC, pre-service teachers themselves must take ownership of their growth. ETE04 highlighted this responsibility:

"It is not just the training program that will shape and develop these competencies, the students themselves must be very active and proactive and must also recognize that developing these competencies is very important."

This idea reflects the belief that EPTs must internalize the value of SEL to ensure these competencies are fully internalized and effectively applied in their future teaching practices.

Advancing SEL through continuous professional development

Another recommendation made by ETEs for enhancing SEL competencies among EPTs is investing in continuous professional development. They argued that SECs and SELIC cannot be fully developed through pre-service training alone but require lifelong learning opportunities, such as mentoring, in-service training, and reflective communities of practice. ETE05 explained,

"I don't think any teacher who is starting is ever prepared enough; you learn a lot by

doing; they won't fully learn these skills until they have their own class and they're on their own."

This highlights the necessity for ongoing professional development opportunities that allow teachers to continually refine their SEL skills through repeated cycles of practice, challenges, reflection, and growth. Although pre-service training offers valuable early exposure to classroom dynamics, ETE05 emphasized that it cannot fully replicate the challenges of independently managing a classroom. ETE05 noted:

"The best way to learn these skills is just from doing it themselves and encountering the challenges, being self-aware of their triumphs and failures."

This iterative process of trial, reflection, and growth is integral to building SECs, and SEL is required for effective teaching.

Building collaborative partnerships to prioritize SEL in teacher education

In addition to individual commitment, the effective integration of SEL in teacher education requires strong collaborative partnerships among various stakeholders. ETE05 emphasized the need for this collaboration:

"I don't think we can say only teachers. I think teachers are a big factor in this process. Hopefully, the parents are helping, but maybe the third party would be a school counselor or a psychologist, I think it would take a team."

This statement indicates the need for shared responsibility and cooperation among teacher educators, parents, and other stakeholders in fostering SEL. ETE02 added:

"This isn't something that should fall on teachers alone but should be a collective effort of the entire educational community."

Similarly, ETE03 emphasized the essential role of the surrounding environment:

"The environment where EPTs practice and learn, such as schools and society, plays an essential role in developing their SECs."

This perspective indicates that effective SEL integration in EFL teacher education requires not only individual goodwill but also coherent, collaborative partnerships among all stakeholders across different levels of the education system and society as a whole.

Discussion

The findings of the current study reveal how ETEs understand, value, advocate, and implement SEL within the EFL teacher education program of a pedagogical university in Vietnam. The most noticeable finding is that despite their limited initial familiarity with SEL as a formally named framework, the interviewed ETEs generally perceived it as relevant and supported more explicit attention to it in EFL teacher education after receiving a brief explanation of the concept. In addition, they recognized potential roles for teacher educators in supporting SEL integration. Their positive perceptions are consistent with global research findings on SEL, which have demonstrated the great impacts of SEL on students' academic, social, and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). For example, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) claim that SEL can help build positive learning environments, where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to engage fully and actively in the learning process. At the same time, the findings complement existing research on teachers' beliefs and practices related to SEL by extending the focus from in-service school teachers to teacher educators.

Previous studies have shown that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward SEL and often incorporate SEL-related practices intuitively in their classrooms (Brackett et al., 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2013; Buchanan et al., 2009; Ee & Cheng, 2013; Yoder, 2014). The present study complements this line of research by demonstrating that similar patterns of strong advocacy coexist among EFL teacher educators, who play a formative role in shaping pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of SEL.

In the field of EFL instruction, the participating ETEs recognized the potential of SEL to address the social and emotional dimensions, such as communication, interaction, learner engagement, and confidence, that can significantly influence language acquisition. Their view aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that language learning is inherently social and mediated through interaction (Vygotsky, 1986). They understand that language learning is inherently social; therefore, they frequently utilize activities like group discussions, peer collaboration, and interactive tasks to build not only linguistic skills but also social skills for EPTs. They also believe SEL helps PTEs manage emotional or affective factors such as anxiety, stress, and fear of failure, which encourages PTEs to take risks, persist through challenges, and remain engaged in the language learning process (Arnold & Brown, 1999; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Tran & Le, 2023; Vo, 2025). This perspective aligns with affective theories of second language acquisition, which emphasize the important role of positive emotions in sustaining learner motivation and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Vo, 2025). For ETEs, SEL is not perceived as an additional workload or a separate lesson but as an essential component of effective EFL instruction that enhances, not detracts from, language learning (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023). This perception challenges a common concern that SEL integration may increase teachers' workload (Buchanan et al., 2009; Ee & Cheng, 2013). Instead, the findings suggest that SEL needs to be woven into EFL instruction to facilitate language acquisition and enhance SECs for EPTs.

The participating ETEs not only expressed support for SEL in their interview responses but also described a range of instructional practices that they subsequently associated with SEL principles. They reported using various strategies that combine cultural traditions with global best practices to promote SEL-related elements within the EFL teacher education program. The strategies they use include integrating SEL into existing teacher education courses, modeling SECs and SELIC for EPTs, using group work, using digital tools, and organizing extracurricular activities. These practices reflect their commitment to transforming teacher education so that future educators (EPTs) can support both the academic and social-emotional development of their students. These practices are consistent with international recommendations emphasizing curriculum integration, teacher modeling, and whole-program approaches to SEL in teacher education (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Although ETEs advocate for SEL, most of their conceptual understanding and classroom practices are intuitive and implicit rather than formalized and explicit. In other words, although ETEs recognize the importance of social and emotional factors in education and already incorporate SEL-related practices in their daily instructional routines, they do so implicitly, without being guided by official frameworks, shared terminology, or explicit learning objectives. Actually, without sufficient conceptual understanding and continuous professional development in SEL, their current SEL practices remain fragmented, uneven, and dependent on individual commitment rather than structured implementation. This pattern suggests that SEL in Vietnamese EFL teacher education is not absent, but it is not formalized, explicitly addressed, guided, or evaluated.

These findings complement previous studies showing that teachers often implement SEL intuitively through everyday teaching practices without explicitly articulating or linking it to a formal framework or approach (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013; Yoder, 2014). This implicit nature of SEL integration is a notable gap within the EFL teacher education program, where SEL risks being rendered as an “add-on” rather than a core component, especially in achievement-oriented contexts like Vietnam (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran & Le, 2023). Consequently, EPTs may develop fragmented or inconsistent understandings of how to design, implement, and assess SEL in their future classrooms (Huynh et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025). This problem supports Schonert-Reichl’s (2015) concern that implicit training may limit EPTs’ ability to recognize, articulate, and intentionally implement SEL in their future classrooms. This issue, again, emphasizes the importance of explicit professional development in SEL for ETEs to enable them to integrate SEL intentionally and explicitly into the teacher education program (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025).

It is also interesting to find that, in this study, ETEs frequently relate SEL to Vietnamese cultural values and assert its compatibility with the country’s long-standing educational traditions. They cite the Vietnamese proverb “*Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*” (First learn propriety, then learn knowledge) to demonstrate that SEL principles align with the educational values of the country. This recognition is significant because it means that ETEs do not view SEL as an external or foreign concept but as a continuation or expansion of national educational values to meet the evolving demands of contemporary education (MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023). It indicates ETEs’ acceptance of integrating SEL in culturally acceptable ways. However, a closer examination reveals a conceptual confusion or misalignment, where “*lễ*” encompasses externally regulated behaviors like respect, obedience, and appropriate conduct, while SEL involves internal competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). This confusion is particularly problematic, since if pre-service teachers are led to believe that traditional propriety already encompasses SEL, they may no longer perceive the need for training in SECs and SELIC. Therefore, it is necessary to provide explicit professional development in SEL for ETEs to strengthen their conceptual understanding of SEL, especially the differentiation between “*lễ*” and SEL.

Finally, a very encouraging theme emerging from the study is the strong openness and willingness among ETEs to engage in professional development in SEL so that they can integrate SEL more effectively, explicitly, and systematically into EFL teacher education. This willingness indicates the important role of formal guidance and targeted professional development in equipping teacher educators with the essential formal theories, specific skills, and practical strategies to implement SEL effectively within the EFL teacher education program (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Talvio et al., 2013). If ETEs are provided with adequate professional development in SEL, they can turn intuitive SEL efforts into intentional, explicit, and impactful practices within the EFL teacher education program, thereby strengthening the development of SECs and SELIC for EPTs, and then the long-term academic, social, and emotional outcomes of future learners (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Talvio et al., 2013).

In summary, the findings suggest that integrating SEL into EFL teacher education in Vietnam is both necessary and achievable. Strong advocacy for SEL, cultural alignment, and professional willingness provide a fertile foundation for sustainable and effective SEL integration. What is now required is institutional support and structured professional development targeted at formal SEL frameworks and best practices to transform existing SEL integration from implicit, intuitive, and fragmented practices to explicit, intentional, and

systemic instructional design. These reforms have the potential to create a meaningful and lasting impact, preparing future EFL teachers to foster both linguistic proficiency and social-emotional skills for students.

Conclusion

This study investigated EFL teacher educators' perspectives on integrating SEL into the EFL teacher education program of a pedagogical university in Vietnam. Guided by a constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design along with semi-structured interviews with five purposefully selected ETEs, the study explored their understanding, beliefs, reported practices and proposed recommendations for promoting SEL within the EFL teacher education program. A key finding of the study is the strong advocacy of ETEs for SEL as an essential framework for holistic EFL teacher education despite their unfamiliarity with the formal term of SEL. Interestingly, ETEs also demonstrated how SEL aligns with the country's cultural values and educational traditions such as moral education, respect, and social harmony. These perspectives indicate a promising vision for EFL education in Vietnam. Their positive attitudes and advocacy for SEL have the potential to transform EFL teacher education, promoting a more holistic and effective approach to EFL teaching and learning.

ETEs also reported a range of practices that they associated with SEL-related principles in teacher education. These include embedding SEL implicitly in existing coursework, modeling SECs for pre-service teachers, incorporating SEL into assessment criteria, using group work, social media and extracurricular activities. These practices indicate that ETEs, to some extent, already integrate SEL principles into the EFL teacher education program; however, these practices are largely intuitive, implicit, and fragmented. Despite their strong advocacy for SEL, they faced significant barriers in implementing SEL. These barriers include limited SEL training, time constraints, teacher educators' resistance, resource limitations, large class sizes, and insufficient institutional support. Aware of these barriers, they expressed strong willingness for targeted professional development in SEL to enhance their capacity to integrate SEL into teacher education.

These findings have important implications for EFL teacher education in Vietnam. First, it indicates the need to provide SEL-focused professional development opportunities for teacher educators to enhance their theoretical understanding of SEL and their practical capacity to teach and assess it. This will help transform their intuitive SEL practices into an impactful, intentional instructional approach. Second, it highlights the importance of adapting SEL to the country's cultural values to make SEL more relevant for educators and learners. This cultural alignment would reduce resistance to SEL integration, as it respects the country's long-standing cultural and educational traditions while addressing contemporary educational demands. Finally, the study suggests the need for collaboration among key stakeholders, including teacher educators, curriculum designers, institutional leaders, and policymakers, to foster shared responsibility and coherence in SEL implementation. These changes would help prepare future EFL teachers who can foster students' social and emotional development alongside linguistic proficiency, thereby contributing to the realization of the country's holistic education goals and keeping pace with global educational trends.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

Despite its significant contributions, the study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. The first limitation is related to the small sample size of five ETEs purposefully selected from only one pedagogical university in Vietnam. Although purposive sampling and

maximum variation could ensure the collection of diverse perspectives within this specific context, the findings remain context-bound, neither transferable to other teacher education institutions nor representative of all EFL teacher education programs in Vietnam. Future research, therefore, should expand the sample size and include more ETEs from other teacher education institutions across the country to provide a more comprehensive understanding of SEL integration in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. Another limitation involves the exclusive reliance on self-reported data collected from semi-structured interviews, which represent ETEs' stated perspectives and reported practices, not verified or observed actual behaviors. This type of data can be subject to potential biases such as social desirability and selective recall, hence limiting the credibility of the findings. To address this limitation, future research should adopt a triangulated research design by combining interview data with other data sources such as classroom observations, curriculum analysis and surveys with other stakeholders.

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Biodata

Tran Thi Yen is a lecturer at Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam. She has over 15 years of teaching experience in TESOL and teacher education. Her research interests include teaching methodology, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and integrating SEL into EFL teaching practices. She is dedicated to promoting holistic development in education.

Nguyen Thi Mai Huong is an Associate Professor at the University of Languages and International Studies - Vietnam National University, Hanoi. With a PhD in Teacher Education from the University of Nottingham, UK, she specializes in English teacher education and

professional development. She has taught MA courses in Vietnam and abroad and led numerous teacher-training workshops nationwide.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by VNU University of Languages and International Studies (VNU-ULIS) in the project No. N.25.08.

Lexical and Syntactic Complexity across Adjacent IELTS Writing Task 2 Band Levels: A Corpus-Based Study

Truong Van Uyen^{1*}

¹Independent researcher, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: uyntrg3321@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8693-939X>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26632>

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Received: 16/01/2026

Revision: 18/07/2026

Accepted: 01/08/2026

Online: 12/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: IELTS Writing Task 2; lexical diversity; lexical sophistication; syntactic complexity; learner corpus

Lexical and syntactic complexity are important indicators of second language writing proficiency, particularly in assessment-oriented contexts such as IELTS Writing Task 2. However, limited attention has examined whether selected complexity measures can distinguish closely related IELTS band levels. A small-scale learner corpus of 30 essays, with 10 essays per band level, was analyzed quantitatively. Lexical diversity was measured using the Measure of Textual Lexical Diversity (MTLD), lexical sophistication was operationalized as the percentage of Academic Word List (AWL) items, and syntactic complexity was assessed through mean sentence length (MSL). One-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in lexical diversity, whereas AWL percentage and MSL showed non-significant upward trends. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the significant MTLD difference occurred between Bands 6 and 8 rather than between immediately adjacent bands. Because the corpus consists of band-labeled instructional essays, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable evidence of IELTS band distinctions.

Introduction

In recent years, learning and preparing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), a widely recognized test of English language proficiency, has become increasingly popular (Tran, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020). The test assesses four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is one of the most vital skills in second language acquisition (Khudaverdiyeva, 2025). In the IELTS writing component, candidates are evaluated based on lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy, task achievement, and coherence and cohesion, as linguistic characteristics play a major role in assigning band scores (IELTS, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to identify the linguistic features that meaningfully distinguish levels of writing achievement in both research settings and assessment contexts (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Related evidence from the Vietnamese EFL context indicates that postgraduate learners also experience lexical and grammatical problems in academic writing, although these

difficulties were examined in a broader academic-writing context rather than specifically in IELTS assessment (Ho, 2024).

In second language (L2) writing research, lexical and syntactic complexity are widely regarded as key elements of writing development and proficiency (Ortega, 2003; Bulté & Housen, 2012). Based on Communicative Language Ability theory (Canale & Swain, 1980), and the Complexity–Accuracy–Fluency (CAF) framework (Housen et al., 2012), several studies consistently indicate that more proficient writers use a wide range of vocabulary and more elaborated grammatical structures (Bulté & Housen, 2012; Kyle & Crossley, 2015; O'Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022). Corpus-based research further confirms the importance of lexical diversity (LD), lexical sophistication (LS), and syntactic complexity (SC) in accounting for variation in L2 writing quality, particularly in academic and assessment contexts (Dinh, 2025).

Literature Review

Communicative Language Ability (CLA)

The theoretical basis of this research is Communicative Language Ability (CLA) (Canale & Swain, 1980), which was further established into a complete model in 1983 by Canale. According to Canale (1983), communicative competence is a complex concept, and it can be quantified by four principles, namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This theoretical premise fully explains language learners' motivation to use language effectively and appropriately in both oral and written forms (Bachman, 1990).

The use of CLA in L2 writing research has also gained much importance. Writing is no longer considered a mechanical process but communicative language use (Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Hyland, 2003). Consequently, current studies define L2 writing ability as learners' potential for accessing linguistic means for communicative purposes in written discourse (Hyland, 2003; Ortega, 2012). Recent advances in theory have extended this approach further, incorporating dynamic system models that consider grammatical competence as part of an overall, constantly changing system that includes all the features that contribute to communicative competence (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). The abandonment of fixed, module-style trait models has emphasized the symbiotic acquisition of lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels, rather than treating grammatical competence as isolated from the others (Zhang et al., 2022).

While all four components of CLA possess theoretical relevance, empirical investigations do not invariably operationalize the entire model simultaneously. The selection of specific components is typically determined by research objectives and the nature of available data. In corpus-based investigations of written language, grammatical competence has received the most sustained empirical attention owing to its direct observability in textual output and the availability of established linguistic operationalizations (Ortega, 2003; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). In contrast, sociolinguistic competence exhibits high context-dependency, discourse competence necessitates discourse-level analysis of coherence and cohesion mechanisms, and strategic competence manifests predominantly through interactional and real-time communication strategies. These latter components consequently present methodological challenges for corpus-based analysis of written texts and extend beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Accordingly, grammatical competence is a core component of CLA theory. Canale and Swain (1980) defined grammatical competence as "knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology,

syntax, sentence grammar semantics, and phonology". These elements constitute the linguistic foundation of writing. Empirical evidence demonstrates that development in L2 writing has been captured consistently by lexical and syntactic complexity (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998; Ortega, 2003). Several recent corpus-based studies continue to underscore the significance of lexical and syntactic features in differentiating proficiency levels in L2 writing (Biber et al., 2016; Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Khushik & Huhta, 2020).

In the present study, CLA is therefore used in a restricted and focused way. The study does not attempt to measure the full construct of communicative language ability; rather, it draws specifically on grammatical competence to justify the analysis of lexical and syntactic features in written texts. This restricted focus is directly aligned with the purpose of the study, which is to compare IELTS Writing Task 2 essays across band-labelled levels. Accordingly, lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and syntactic complexity are treated as observable textual indicators of selected aspects of grammatical competence that may contribute to band-level distinctions.

The Complexity–Accuracy–Fluency (CAF) framework

Grammatical competence is investigated using the linguistic complexity measures in the Complexity-Accuracy-Fluency (CAF) model. This offers an analytical systematic framework of assessing grammatical proficiency by presenting the expansion of lexical and syntactic resources in the writing production of the learner. Within this framework, Ellis (2003) explained that complexity was associated with the extent to which learners employed a broad scope of vocabulary and detailed grammatical patterns.

CAF framework has become extremely popular in the field of L2 writing research because it is a multidimensional, task-sensitive method of performance analysis (Housen et al., 2012). Recent empirical studies have shown that the framework is robust in a variety of settings and is sensitive to instructional manipulations. For example, Phuoc and Barrot (2022) used CAF measures (18) on L2 writing and recorded similarities as well as L1-based differences in CAF profiles, which are highly sensitive to learners' backgrounds and the genre of text. Imaz Agirre et al. (2025) reported that an academic-language intervention produced measurable improvements in SC and accuracy indices among secondary-school multilingual writers, as captured through automated extraction tools. Moreover, experimental research has depicted the expected CAF trade-offs in pedagogical settings and how various types of practice produced varying outcomes regarding their impact on the aspects of complexity, fluency, and accuracy (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020).

In the context of the present study, the CAF framework is particularly relevant because it provides a widely used basis for examining linguistic performance in L2 writing. However, the study does not seek to assess all three CAF dimensions. Its focus is placed on complexity, as the main concern is whether IELTS Writing Task 2 essays at different band levels display measurable differences in lexical and syntactic development. This focus is consistent with the purpose of the study, which is not to evaluate overall writing quality, but to examine whether selected textual features can help distinguish essays labeled as Bands 6, 7, and 8.

Accordingly, complexity is operationalized through three corpus-based indicators: lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and syntactic complexity. Lexical diversity reflects the range of vocabulary used in a text, lexical sophistication captures the use of academic or advanced vocabulary, and syntactic complexity represents the structural elaboration of sentences. By narrowing the CAF framework to these observable complexity-related features, the study

maintains a clear connection between theory, measurement, and its specific aim of band-level text comparison.

Lexical Complexity: Diversity and sophistication

Within the broader construct of linguistic complexity, lexical and syntactic complexity are recognized as two focal and complementary dimensions in which grammatical competence is assessed in written production. Lexical knowledge has been extensively conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing distinct but interrelated facets of vocabulary deployment (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Read, 2000). This multidimensional element has led to the distinction between LD and LS, which together reflect the breadth and depth of lexical resources used in language performance (Bulté & Housen, 2012; Kyle & Crossley, 2015).

McCarthy & Jarvis (2007) defined LD as "the range and variety of vocabulary deployed in a text". Although there are several indices to quantify LD, MTLTD was selected for this study due to its demonstrated independence from text length (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010; Crossley & McNamara, 2012). MTLTD has been proven to be a reliable and stable estimate of LD across texts of varying lengths and demonstrates robust performance with learner language data, even with relatively brief and structurally uneven texts (Crossley & McNamara, 2012; Jarvis, 2013). Theoretically, MTLTD operationalizes LD through the rate at which new lexical items are used in a text, thereby capturing the sustained lexical variation characteristic of proficient writing (Jarvis, 2013). Many recent corpus-based studies continue to employ LD indices to track developmental patterns and instructional effects, with studies documenting developmental trajectories and competitive relationships between lexical and syntactic growth at specific proficiency stages (O'Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022).

LS, in contrast, captures the degree to which learners employ advanced, low-frequency, or academic vocabulary, thereby reflecting the depth and quality of lexical knowledge (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Read, 2000). Critically, LD and LS represent complementary yet distinct dimensions of lexical ability: a text may exhibit substantial LD through frequent variation of high-frequency vocabulary while remaining low in sophistication, or conversely, may employ a narrower lexical range with a higher proportion of advanced lexical items (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Read, 2000). In empirical L2 writing research, LS has been predominantly operationalized using frequency-based measures, particularly the proportion of vocabulary drawn from academic or low-frequency word lists. One widely adopted approach employs the Academic Word List (AWL), which captures learners' use of vocabulary beyond the most frequent word families and demonstrates strong associations with academic language proficiency (Coxhead, 2000). Previous investigations have established that AWL-based measures of LS effectively discriminate between proficiency levels in learner writing and distinguish higher- and lower-level academic texts (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Kyle & Crossley, 2015). Recent scholarship continues to document the contextual situatedness of LS, emphasizing that frequency-based and academic-vocabulary indices must be interpreted against genre and task constraints (O'Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022). Thus, the current research operationalizes LS as the content of AWLs in learners' written texts as a percentage, which is also compliant with practices in the field.

Syntactic Complexity

Together with lexical complexity, SC can be defined as the degree to which students use elaborated grammatical patterns in writing and is commonly considered to be one of the key pointers to L2 writing development (Ortega, 2003). It indicates learners' capacity to generate lengthy and complex structural sentences and clauses, thereby indicating grammatical

competence in written performance. Within CAF-oriented research, SC is commonly operationalized using observable structural features of texts, such as MSL and subordination indices (Bulté & Housen, 2012).

Although several indices have been proposed, this study adopts MSL as a main indicator of SC due to its robustness, widespread use in proficiency research, and suitability for small-scale learner corpora (Ortega, 2003; Bulté & Housen, 2012). Given the exploratory nature of the study, this selection is appropriate for reliable cross-band comparison while acknowledging that more fine-grained measures may capture additional dimensions of syntactic development.

Previous corpus-based research supports the discriminative value of SC measures across proficiency levels. For example, Khushik and Huhta (2020) found that length-based and clause-level indices distinguish lower CEFR levels, whereas phrasal and clause-level measures are more effective at higher proficiency bands. Similarly, proficiency-related variation in sentence and clause length, and subordination patterns, was also observed by Panagopoulos et al. (2024). Longitudinal studies also show that SC is dynamically developed over time and is associated with lexical complexity, which is indicative of trade-offs in how a learner assigns cognitive resources in the writing process (O’Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Theoretical integration

The present study adopts a theoretical position in which lexical knowledge is viewed as a multidimensional construct involving both diversity and sophistication. This position is consistent with research on lexical richness and with CAF-based approaches to L2 writing, as it provides a theoretically grounded basis for examining the lexical aspects of grammatical competence in written production (Bulté & Housen, 2012; Kyle & Crossley, 2015). The study also situates lexical and syntactic complexity within the broader CLA framework, in which grammatical competence is understood as a key component of communicative language ability. Accordingly, MTLD, AWL percentage, and MSL are used as corpus-based indicators of selected lexical and syntactic dimensions of IELTS Writing Task 2 performance.

Despite this increasing trend of research, several knowledge gaps remain to be addressed. Previous research has primarily explored broad proficiency contrasts, such as beginning versus advanced learners, or general proficiency differences across wider developmental stages (Ortega, 2003; Khushik & Huhta, 2020). However, in IELTS preparation contexts, teachers and learners are often concerned with movement from Band 6 to Band 7 or from Band 7 to Band 8. While there is a growing body of research on IELTS writing and related linguistic features, including phrasal and syntactic complexity (Wu, 2025), research that investigates adjacent higher IELTS Writing Task 2 band levels remain limited.

Second, while lexical complexity and syntactic complexity are frequently investigated together, their relative sensitivity to proficiency variation in IELTS-specific contexts is still underexplored. Emerging evidence suggests that lexical measures, particularly those capturing diversity and sophistication, may be more responsive to proficiency differences than broad length-based syntactic indices when band levels are close (Biber et al., 2016). Studies have shown that lexical diversity, academic vocabulary use, and phraseological competence can contribute to distinctions in IELTS and academic writing performance (Estaji & Hashemi, 2022). However, direct comparisons of LD, LS, and SC across Bands 6, 7, and 8 remain limited, especially in learner data from specific L2 backgrounds.

Third, IELTS writing research has often prioritized rating reliability, examiner consistency, and task effects, with comparatively less attention to corpus-based analyses of linguistic features underlying band distinctions (Hawkey, 2006; Du et al., 2025; Ilyas et al., 2025). Although

previous studies have examined aspects such as cohesion, rater agreement, and automated evaluation, there remains a need for empirically grounded studies linking measurable linguistic features to band-labeled writing performance. Methodological constraints, including small or unbalanced corpora and limited representation of higher bands, also restrict the generalizability of existing findings (Wu, 2025).

To address these gaps, the present study employs corpus-based quantitative methods to examine LD, LS, and SC in IELTS Writing Task 2 essays labeled as Bands 6, 7, and 8. It draws on Communicative Language Ability theory (Canale & Swain, 1980) and the CAF framework (Housen et al., 2012), operationalizing complexity using three measures: the Measure of Textual Lexical Diversity (MTLD) for LD (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010), Academic Word List (AWL) percentage for LS (Coxhead, 2000), and Mean Sentence Length (MSL) for SC (Ortega, 2003). This multi-index approach responds to calls for more fine-grained corpus-based studies of writing proficiency (Khushik & Huhta, 2020; Wu, 2025).

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does LD significantly differentiate IELTS Writing Task 2 essays across Bands 6, 7, and 8?
2. Is LS, measured by the proportion of AWL items, sensitive to differences between adjacent IELTS band levels?
3. Does MSL provide meaningful distinctions in SC across these band levels?

Through these research questions, the study aims to provide exploratory evidence on the linguistic features that may help distinguish IELTS Writing Task 2 essays across closely related band levels and to inform future corpus-based research on IELTS-oriented writing assessment.

Methods

Research design

The present study employed a quantitative small-scale learner corpus design to examine lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and syntactic complexity across IELTS Writing Task 2 essays labeled as Bands 6, 7, and 8. A corpus-based design was selected because it allows systematic measurement of textual features and comparison of linguistic patterns across proficiency-related band labels. Given the modest size of the corpus, the study is intended as an exploratory analysis rather than a large-scale generalizable investigation of IELTS writing performance. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as evidence of linguistic variation within a small set of band-labeled IELTS Task 2 essays, rather than as definitive evidence of certified IELTS proficiency development.

The use of three adjacent band levels was motivated by the pedagogical relevance of Band 6, Band 7, and Band 8 in IELTS preparation contexts. These levels represent commonly targeted stages for learners seeking to improve their writing performance. The design therefore enables a focused examination of whether selected corpus-based indices are sensitive to relatively fine-grained differences between higher-intermediate and advanced band-labeled essays.

Corpus and data selection

The dataset consisted of 30 IELTS Writing Task 2 sample essays, with 10 essays at each band level: Band 6, Band 7, and Band 8. The essays were collected from major Vietnamese IELTS preparation platforms, including DOL IELTS and KTDC IELTS, which provide sample

responses categorized by band level for instructional purposes. These sources were selected because they are widely used by IELTS candidates and teachers in Vietnamese IELTS preparation contexts.

The band scores used in this study should be understood as instructional band labels rather than independently verified official IELTS scores. The essays were not obtained from official IELTS examination scripts, and the study did not have access to examiner rating sheets, double-rating procedures, or inter-rater reliability statistics. Therefore, the band labels were treated as secondary source classifications assigned or reported by the preparation platforms. To reduce inconsistency, only essays explicitly labeled with a band score and presented as IELTS Writing Task 2 responses were included. Nevertheless, because the reliability of the original rating procedures could not be independently verified, band reliability is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

The corpus is therefore best characterized as a collection of publicly available, band-labeled instructional IELTS Writing Task 2 sample essays rather than a corpus of authenticated test-taker scripts. As such, the findings are most directly relevant to linguistic patterns represented in IELTS preparation materials and should not be generalized uncritically to official IELTS test performance. The essays were selected from Task 2 argumentative or opinion-based writing prompts that were comparable in genre and task demands. Although the prompts were not identical across all essays, they were all consistent with IELTS Writing Task 2 requirements, requiring candidates to develop an extended written response to a social, educational, or general-interest issue. Prompt comparability was therefore addressed at the level of task type and genre rather than through the use of a single shared prompt.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were performed first in order to set up an initial characterization regarding the different lexical and grammatical variables across bands. Subsequently, one-way ANOVA was employed in each case in order to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between three independent groups (bands 6, 7, 8). All statistical analyses were carried out in Stata, version 17. Using one-way ANOVA was appropriate in this case, since the independent variable (band level) was categorical and had more than two levels. Additionally, one-way ANOVA was preferred because, compared to multiple t-test analyses, it is safer in terms of Type I error rates, while still offering an adequate framework for group comparisons in learner corpora. Apart from significance, effect sizes were calculated in terms of partial eta squared in order to provide an adequate characterization regarding differences in lexical and grammatical variables between different bands. Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests were employed where appropriate to check differences among bands, while taking into account family-wise error rates.

Results

This section reports descriptive and inferential statistics for LD, LS, and SC across IELTS Writing Task 2 essays at Bands 6, 7, and 8. Means and standard deviations are presented first, followed by one-way ANOVA results and Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics by IELTS band level

Measure	Band 6 (n = 10)	Band 7 (n = 10)	Band 8 (n = 10)
MTLD	89.888 (23.213)	106.703 (14.904)	127.19 (44.575)
AWL (%)	7.261 (3.225)	8.92 (2.745)	10.07 (3.441)
MSL	18.668 (2.40)	19.981 (3.062)	21.16 (2.417)

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the three linguistic features across the three band-labeled groups. For LD, the mean MTLD score increased from Band 6 ($M = 89.888$, $SD = 23.213$) to Band 7 ($M = 106.703$, $SD = 14.904$) and Band 8 ($M = 127.190$, $SD = 44.575$). The relatively large standard deviation for MTLD in the Band 8 group suggests greater variability in lexical diversity among essays labeled as Band 8. A similar descriptive pattern was observed for LS. AWL percentage increased from 7.261% ($SD = 3.225$) at Band 6 to 8.920% ($SD = 2.745$) at Band 7 and 10.071% ($SD = 3.441$) at Band 8. For SC, MSL also increased slightly from 18.668 words ($SD = 2.400$) at Band 6 to 19.981 words ($SD = 3.062$) at Band 7 and 21.164 words ($SD = 2.417$) at Band 8. Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest upward trends across the three band-labeled groups, with the largest descriptive increase observed for MTLD.

Table 2.

ANOVA assumption checks

Measure	Shapiro-Wilk p Band 6	Shapiro-Wilk p Band 7	Shapiro-Wilk p Band 8	Brown-Forsythe p
MTLD	.883	.132	< .001	.544
AWL (%)	.830	.807	.339	.855
MSL	.297	.845	.065	.573

Before conducting the one-way ANOVA tests, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were examined. The results are reported in Table 2. Normality was assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests within each band group. AWL percentage met the normality assumption across all three band-labeled groups, with p-values of .830 for Band 6, .807 for Band 7, and .339 for Band 8. MSL also met the normality assumption across the three groups, with p-values of .297, .845, and .065, respectively. Although the p-value for MSL in Band 8 was close to the conventional .05 threshold, it remained above this level. For MTLD, the normality assumption was met for Band 6 ($p = .883$) and Band 7 ($p = .132$), but not for Band 8 ($p < .001$). This suggests that MTLD scores in the Band 8 group were not normally distributed in this small sample. This result should be interpreted cautiously because each band group contained only 10 essays. Homogeneity of variance was assessed using the Brown-Forsythe test. The results did not indicate significant heterogeneity of variance for MTLD, $p = .544$, AWL percentage, $p = .855$, or MSL, $p = .573$. Therefore, the homogeneity assumption was considered acceptable for the purposes of the subsequent ANOVA tests. Given the small sample size and the non-normal distribution of MTLD in the Band 8 group, Kruskal-Wallis tests were also conducted as non-parametric robustness checks. These tests were used to examine whether the pattern of results remained broadly consistent when a distribution-free test was applied.

Table 3.

One-way ANOVA results and Kruskal-Wallis robustness checks

Measure	ANOVA F(df)	ANOVA p	Eta-squared	Kruskal-Wallis chi-square(df)	Kruskal-Wallis p
MTLD	F(2,27) = 3.81	.0349	.2201	chi-square(2) = 7.719	.0211
AWL (%)	F(2,27) = 2.01	.1535	.1296	chi-square(2) = 2.550	.2795
MSL	F(2,27) = 2.23	.1270	.1418	chi-square(2) = 3.631	.1628

Table 3 presents the one-way ANOVA results together with the Kruskal-Wallis robustness checks. For lexical diversity, the ANOVA result showed a statistically significant difference in MTLD across the three band-labeled groups, $F(2, 27) = 3.81$, $p = .0349$, $\eta^2 = .2201$. This indicates that MTLD varied across the groups in the present corpus. The effect size suggests that band label accounted for approximately 22% of the variance in MTLD scores, although this estimate should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size. The Kruskal-Wallis test produced a similar result, $\chi^2(2) = 7.719$, $p = .0211$, suggesting that the MTLD finding was not solely dependent on the parametric ANOVA procedure. For lexical sophistication, measured by AWL percentage, the ANOVA result was not statistically significant, $F(2, 27) = 2.01$, $p = .1535$, $\eta^2 = .1296$. The Kruskal-Wallis result was also non-significant, $\chi^2(2) = 2.550$, $p = .2795$. Although AWL percentage increased descriptively from Band 6 to Band 8, these results do not provide sufficient evidence that AWL percentage differed reliably across the three groups in this dataset. For syntactic complexity, measured by MSL, the ANOVA result was also non-significant, $F(2, 27) = 2.23$, $p = .1270$, $\eta^2 = .1418$. The Kruskal-Wallis result was likewise non-significant, $\chi^2(2) = 3.631$, $p = .1628$. Therefore, although MSL showed a gradual descriptive increase across the band-labeled groups, the statistical tests did not provide sufficient evidence of a reliable group difference. Overall, the inferential results suggest that MTLD showed the clearest evidence of variation across the three band-labeled groups in this corpus. By contrast, AWL percentage and MSL showed only descriptive upward trends and did not reach statistical significance.

Table 4.

Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons

Measure	Comparison	Mean difference	Tukey-adjusted p	95% CI
MTLD	Band 7 vs Band 6	16.815	.439	[-16.744, 50.374]
MTLD	Band 8 vs Band 6	37.302	.027	[3.743, 70.861]
MTLD	Band 8 vs Band 7	20.487	.301	[-13.072, 54.046]
AWL (%)	Band 7 vs Band 6	1.659	.476	[-1.834, 5.152]
AWL (%)	Band 8 vs Band 6	2.810	.133	[-0.683, 6.303]
AWL (%)	Band 8 vs Band 7	1.151	.696	[-2.342, 4.644]
MSL	Band 7 vs Band 6	1.313	.516	[-1.619, 4.245]
MSL	Band 8 vs Band 6	2.496	.106	[-0.436, 5.428]
MSL	Band 8 vs Band 7	1.183	.583	[-1.749, 4.115]

Note. Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Tukey's HSD test. *p*-values are Tukey-adjusted for multiple comparisons.

Table 4 reports the Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons. These comparisons were conducted to identify which specific group differences contributed to the ANOVA results. Importantly, none of the immediately adjacent band comparisons, namely Band 6–Band 7 and Band 7–Band 8, reached statistical significance for any of the three measures.

For MTLT, the only statistically significant pairwise difference was found between Band 8 and Band 6. Essays labeled as Band 8 had higher MTLT scores than essays labeled as Band 6, mean difference = 37.302, $p = .027$, 95% CI [3.743, 70.861]. The difference between Band 7 and Band 6 was not statistically significant, mean difference = 16.815, $p = .439$, 95% CI [-16.744, 50.374]. The difference between Band 8 and Band 7 was also non-significant, mean difference = 20.487, $p = .301$, 95% CI [-13.072, 54.046]. This indicates that the MTLT result was mainly associated with the wider Band 6–Band 8 contrast, rather than with consistent differences between immediately adjacent band levels.

For AWL percentage, none of the pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance. The largest difference was between Band 8 and Band 6, mean difference = 2.810, $p = .133$, 95% CI [-0.683, 6.303]. The Band 7–Band 6 comparison, $p = .476$, and the Band 8–Band 7 comparison, $p = .696$, were also non-significant. These results suggest that AWL percentage did not provide clear evidence of pairwise differences among the three band-labeled groups.

For MSL, the post-hoc results also showed no statistically significant pairwise differences. The largest difference was observed between Band 8 and Band 6, mean difference = 2.496, $p = .106$, 95% CI [-0.436, 5.428]. The Band 7–Band 6 comparison, $p = .516$, and the Band 8–Band 7 comparison, $p = .583$, were likewise non-significant. Thus, MSL showed only a descriptive upward pattern and did not provide clear evidence of pairwise group differences in this corpus.

Taken together, the post-hoc results indicate that the only statistically significant pairwise difference was the MTLT difference between Band 6 and Band 8. The findings therefore should not be interpreted as showing that any of the three measures consistently separates adjacent IELTS band-labeled groups. A more cautious interpretation is that MTLT appeared relatively more sensitive to broader differences in this small set of band-labeled IELTS Writing Task 2 essays, whereas AWL percentage and MSL did not show statistically reliable group differences.

Discussion

This study examined the extent to which LD, LS, and SC vary across IELTS Writing Task 2 essays labeled as Bands 6, 7, and 8. The results indicate that LD is relatively more sensitive to band-level textual variation, whereas LS and SC show limited discriminative power across adjacent band levels. Given the small size of the corpus and the use of band-labeled instructional essays, these findings should be interpreted as exploratory evidence of textual variation rather than as conclusive evidence of IELTS band distinctions.

The disparity in LD, particularly in the Band 8–6 comparison, suggests that essays labeled as Band 8 tend to show greater vocabulary range and less lexical repetition than those labeled as Band 6. This finding is broadly in line with recent evidence that LD is associated with EFL writing quality and perceived writing quality (Yang et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). Yang et al. (2023) found that noun variation and other lexical richness indices contributed to the prediction of writing quality. However, the present finding should not be taken to mean that LD directly determines IELTS band scores. Rather, it suggests that MTLT may be more responsive than AWL percentage and MSL in capturing broader differences between lower- and higher-labeled essays in this dataset. The fact that the significant difference was found between Bands 6 and 8, but not between Bands 6 and 7 or Bands 7 and 8, also suggests that LD may reflect wider proficiency-related textual differences more clearly than fine-grained adjacent band differences.

LS, measured by AWL percentage, did not differ significantly across the band levels, although there was an upward trend. This could be because essays across IELTS preparation contexts may draw on similar academic or topic-related vocabulary, making frequency-based measures less discriminatory. As stated by Truong (2024), task-related variance in AWL coverage was also significant, which implies that task nature may contribute to academic vocabulary use alongside proficiency. A narrower interpretation is that AWL percentage may capture the presence of academic vocabulary, but it may not capture how appropriately, flexibly, or accurately such vocabulary is used in context. Therefore, the non-significant result does not imply that LS is unimportant in IELTS writing. It only suggests that AWL percentage alone may be too broad to distinguish closely related band-labeled essays in the present corpus. In addition, the small sample size may have limited statistical power. Future studies could therefore complement AWL-based measures with more fine-grained indicators, such as collocational accuracy and phraseological sophistication indices (Kim et al., 2025). This extension is particularly relevant to Vietnamese EFL writing because verb–noun and adjective–noun combinations have been identified as two common sources of lexical collocation errors among Vietnamese learners (Do & Le, 2023). This interpretation remains cautious, as the present study did not directly measure collocation, phraseological sophistication, or vocabulary accuracy.

The results showed no significant differences between bands in SC, which suggests that sentence length may not be a sufficiently sensitive indicator of structural sophistication in the present dataset. This cautious interpretation is also supported by research on Vietnamese EFL argumentative writing, which shows that syntactic difficulty often appears through specific error patterns, such as run-on sentences, preposition errors, article errors, sentence fragments, and pronoun errors, rather than through sentence length alone (Pham & Pham, 2024). Lahuerta Martínez (2024) suggested that longer sentences may sometimes result from coordination rather than subordination. This author also indicated that SC may plateau at higher levels while lexical complexity continues to develop. In comparison, Polat et al. (2024) found that sentence length was predictive of GPA among graduate students, indicating that sentence length may still have contextual relevance in some academic settings. In the present study, however, MSL increased gradually across Bands 6, 7, and 8, but this increase was not statistically significant. This suggests that sentence length alone may not be sufficiently sensitive to capture syntactic differences across closely related IELTS band levels. Longer sentences may result from coordination, repetition, or simple expansion, and therefore cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of more advanced syntactic control. Future studies could use more specific measures, such as subordination ratios and phrasal elaboration, to examine syntactic complexity in greater detail (Polat et al., 2024). The present result should therefore be understood as a limitation of MSL as a single syntactic index, rather than as evidence that SC has no role in IELTS writing performance.

Taken together, the findings suggest a modest and measure-specific pattern. Among the three indices examined, MTLT showed the clearest statistical difference, whereas AWL percentage and MSL showed only non-significant upward tendencies. This pattern supports the view that complexity is multidimensional and that different complexity measures may not be equally sensitive to band-level text comparison. In particular, LD may be more visible in broader Band 6–Band 8 differences, while LS and SC may require more fine-grained measures to capture adjacent band-level variation.

Pedagogical implications

The pedagogical implications of the study should be interpreted cautiously because the study did not directly test instructional practices. The findings only suggest that IELTS writing instruction may usefully draw learners' attention to lexical variety and unnecessary repetition, since LD showed the clearest difference in this dataset. However, this should not be understood as encouraging students to insert difficult or academic vocabulary mechanically. The non-significant AWL result suggests that simply increasing the proportion of academic words may not be sufficient. Instead, vocabulary development may need to focus on appropriate word choice, paraphrasing, and context-sensitive use.

This cautious implication is broadly consistent with vocabulary-focused studies that emphasize contextual and phrase-based vocabulary development rather than isolated word-list learning. For example, Aljburi and Khaghaninejad (2024) discussed the value of associative vocabulary teaching strategies, while Boers et al. (2017) highlighted the relevance of phrase-focused vocabulary work. In relation to the present study, these studies should be understood only as pedagogical support for a cautious emphasis on meaningful vocabulary use. They are not direct evidence from the current dataset, which did not measure instructional effects, collocational accuracy, or phraseological development.

Besides, educators need to rethink suggestions that encourage longer sentences as a simple indicator of proficiency. According to Ayadi (2023), instructional attention may be placed on syntactic variety and functional constructions, such as controlled subordination and nominalization. This point is consistent with the non-significant MSL finding in the present study, which suggests that longer sentences should not be treated as a direct route to higher-band writing. A more reasonable pedagogical implication is that learners may benefit from clearer sentence control, more purposeful clause relationships, and more accurate expression of complex ideas, rather than from increasing sentence length alone.

Finally, corpus-informed feedback may have a limited role in helping learners notice lexical repetition and vocabulary range. Huong and Phuc (2023) suggested that lexical features are relevant to the quality of Vietnamese EFL students' online English writing. In an IELTS-oriented Vietnamese university context, lecturers perceived Google Docs-based writing e-portfolios as facilitating writing correction, peer review, collaborative learning, and learner engagement, while also reporting concerns about dependence on automatic correction and technological constraints (Le & Pham, 2026). In the present study, this point should be limited to lexical awareness only. Since MTLTD was the only measure showing a significant difference, the current data do not support broader claims about technology-mediated learning or overall IELTS score improvement.

Overall, the study provides exploratory evidence that LD may be more responsive than AWL-based LS and sentence-length-based SC in describing differences among the band-labeled essays examined here. The contribution of the study is not to establish fixed linguistic thresholds for IELTS bands, but to show that selected complexity measures vary in their usefulness for describing textual differences across Bands 6, 7, and 8. Future research should test these patterns with larger and more authentic IELTS datasets and employ finer-grained measures, including phraseological sophistication, subordination ratios, and clausal embedding, to provide a more comprehensive account of linguistic development across IELTS proficiency levels.

Conclusion

The study examined whether lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and syntactic complexity help distinguish IELTS Writing Task 2 essays labeled as Bands 6, 7, and 8. The findings showed that lexical diversity, measured by MTLD, differed significantly across the three groups, with the only significant pairwise difference occurring between Bands 6 and 8. By contrast, AWL percentage and mean sentence length showed only non-significant upward trends. These findings suggest that MTLD may be more responsive than AWL percentage and sentence length in capturing broader proficiency-related differences in this small corpus, but they do not show that the selected measures consistently distinguish immediately adjacent band levels.

The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory evidence rather than as generalizable evidence of IELTS band distinctions. Pedagogically, the results suggest that IELTS writing instruction may benefit from encouraging lexical variety and reducing unnecessary repetition, while avoiding the mechanical insertion of academic vocabulary or the simple expansion of sentence length. However, because the study did not test instructional interventions, these implications should be treated as tentative. Future research should use larger samples, authenticated IELTS scripts, independently verified ratings, and finer-grained measures of lexical and syntactic development, such as phraseological sophistication, collocational accuracy, subordination ratios, and clausal embedding.

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Biodata

Truong Van Uyen is an independent researcher. She holds an MA in Education from Leeds Beckett University, UK, and a BA in Business English from Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam. Her research interests include English language teaching methodology and course evaluation.

English-Majored Students' Perceptions of Using 4English for Reading Comprehension Development: A Case Study at Van Lang University

Loi Gia An¹, Nguyen Ngoc Man Nhi¹, Truong Phu Sy^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: sy.tp@vlu.edu.vn

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6023-3306>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26633>

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Received: 23/05/2026

Revision: 31/07/2026

Accepted: 01/08/2026

Online: 12/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Reading comprehension, 4English, mobile application, Perceptions

Although 4English, a mobile application, has gained attention for helping learners develop four language skills, few studies of 4English have been done. The main objective of this study is to explore English-majored students' perceptions of using 4English application to develop reading comprehension skills. The study involved 53 English-majored students at Van Lang University (VLU) adopting 4English to improve English reading comprehension. Data was collected through a survey completed by all participants and semi-structured interviews with five volunteers from the questionnaire respondents for in-depth insights. The findings revealed the participants' positive attitudes towards the application such as broadening their vocabulary, improving their ability to recognize more words in a sentence and supporting their perceived improvements in reading skills. Additionally, some challenges were identified including advanced vocabulary challenges, interface limitations and financial barriers. Consequently, 4English is recommended as an effective auxiliary tool for reinforcing reading skills beyond the classroom.

Introduction

Background to the study

With the advent of handheld mobile technologies, the integration of digital tools into everyday life has become increasingly common. As smartphones become more popular, the number of people owning these devices has significantly increased. The rapid development of mobile technologies, such as smartphones and tablets, has transformed the way people learn a second language (L2) (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2017). In many situations, mobile devices extend traditional phrase-learning, allowing learners to make autonomous decisions about where, when, and how to study an L2 (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Vietnamese students are no exception to this trend. Since classroom instruction alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for language practice, many students seek alternative

approaches to learning independently. In this context, the application of technology to English language learning has been considered both beneficial and effective (Le, 2022). Consequently, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has gained increasing attention and is highly recommended for integration into English teaching and learning practices at Vietnamese universities (Tran & Vuong, 2024).

Statement of the problem

As undergraduates at the university, the researchers realize that English-majored students at VLU are required to comprehend a large amount of English material. However, many students still have difficulty reading and understanding documents in English, especially difficult, specialized, and complex texts. Therefore, a lack of ability to understand written English will pose a challenge to their university education. Since the cultivation of reading comprehension skills is a long-term process, students must seek additional practice outside, often turning to technology for support. One of their efforts is practicing through the application on their mobile phones. A notable tool in this endeavor is the mobile application 4English, which is considered to assist students in improving their reading proficiency.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of English-majored students at VLU regarding the use of 4English in developing English reading comprehension and the challenges experienced while using the application to practice reading skills. The research results can be beneficial to the university students first, and they are expected to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the 4English application as an additional tool for practicing English reading skills. Moreover, they are anticipated to serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the educational utility of 4English.

Literature Review

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of linking text information to the reader's own prior knowledge and experiences to create meaning (McNamara, 2007). In other words, a text is not solely a source of information for readers. Instead, they actively connect new information with what they know to understand the writer's intention. Perfetti and Adlof (2012) argue that comprehension is a process in which readers construct varying mental models of narrating information from various sources of knowledge. This means that successful comprehension involves creating a meaningful understanding of a text rather than merely recognising individual words and sentences. In addition, readers need to make connections between ideas and infer information that is not explicitly stated in the text. To do so, they draw on relevant background knowledge to develop a coherent understanding of what they read (van den Broek & Espin, 2012).

In addition, reading comprehension is a complex process that involves not only word recognition but also vocabulary knowledge, grammatical understanding, memory and inferential thinking (Oakhill et al., 2014). This process begins with recognising words and understanding sentence structures so that readers can grasp the basic information presented in a text. Readers then retain important ideas in memory and connect them with information encountered later in the reading process. At the same time, they make inferences to identify relationships between ideas and understand information that is implied rather than directly stated.

Reading Comprehension in EFL contexts

Reading instruction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms has traditionally been characterized by teacher-centered approaches in which learners are often expected to read aloud, translate texts, learn vocabulary explicitly and answer comprehension questions after reading (Wallace, 2001). Such approaches tend to emphasize product over process, limiting learners' opportunities for active engagement with texts. Consequently, language learning scholars have increasingly advocated learning in authentic and meaningful contexts beyond the classroom (Widdowson, 1978).

In addition, time constraints in classroom settings may limit opportunities for sustained reading practice in many EFL contexts (Men & Heng, 2026). As a result, learners often require additional opportunities to engage with reading materials outside formal instructional hours. In response to this need, technology-enhanced learning approaches have gained increasing attention as a means of extending learning beyond the classroom. Numerous studies have reported the growing use of mobile technology in education, collectively referring to these approaches as mobile learning (Hwang & Tsai, 2011). Mobile technologies offer learners convenient access to learning resources regardless of time and location, thereby supporting autonomous and continuous learning.

This approach is particularly relevant to reading development, as reading comprehension requires regular exposure to texts and frequent practice. Evidence from a Vietnamese EFL context supports the effectiveness of out-of-class reading activities. In a 10-week online extensive reading program, Bui and Macalister (2021) found that first-year university students increased their reading speed by approximately 20% and developed more positive attitudes towards reading. These findings suggest that providing learners with accessible reading opportunities beyond classroom boundaries can contribute to the development of reading comprehension. Therefore, technology-enhanced learning approaches, particularly those delivered through mobile devices, offer a promising solution for supporting reading practice in EFL contexts.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as a significant approach in language education due to the widespread use of mobile devices and the increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Although the concept of mobile learning has been defined in various ways, existing definitions generally fall into two main perspectives: learner mobility and device mobility (Burston, 2014).

Mobile learning technology has been widely recognized as particularly effective for learning activities conducted outside the classroom, as it allows learning to be more closely connected to real-world contexts and learners' everyday experiences. One of its key advantages is the ability to maximize learners' use of free time, enabling them to engage in language learning even while on the move (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005).

Empirically, Hossain (2018) investigated the use of mobile applications in English learning and found that the majority of students reported using smartphones and learning apps to support their study. The study further revealed that students who used English learning applications achieved higher performance in English proficiency tests compared to those who did not. Similarly, Darsih and Asikin (2020) examined EFL learners' perceptions of MALL and found that all participants used mobile applications for English learning and considered them both beneficial and convenient in enhancing their learning experience. In line with these findings, Metruk (2021) reported that Slovak EFL students frequently used smartphone applications to

support vocabulary acquisition and overall language skill development, and generally held positive attitudes toward mobile-based learning.

Overall, these studies indicate that mobile-assisted language learning is not only effective in improving language performance but also widely accepted by learners due to its flexibility, convenience, and ability to support continuous learning beyond the classroom.

Previous Studies

In relation to the current study, Vu et al. (2023) conducted an experimental study and found a positive impact of using 4English on secondary students' reading performance. Consequently, they recommended that teachers adopt the application to engage students in reading activities in class. This research serves as a basis for the current study to further explore the subject of English-majored university students.

In addition, Abdollahpour and Maleki (2012) demonstrated the efficacy of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in enhancing vocabulary development. This helps confirm the effectiveness of using mobile apps in learning English, although the study did not focus on reading comprehension. Furthermore, mobile-based learning programs may lead to superior vocabulary acquisition compared to traditional tools, such as physical flashcards (Basoglu and Akdemir, 2010). The researchers emphasized that mobile phones bring considerable pedagogical benefits by enabling learning outside the classroom.

With regard to reading comprehension, Khubyari and Narafshan (2016) reported that EFL learners preferred reading via mobile phones because of the convenience provided by their portability and accessibility. The findings suggested that mobile devices could create favorable conditions for reading practice by allowing learners to access learning materials anytime and anywhere. Collectively, these studies highlighted the educational potential of mobile-assisted learning and support the integration of mobile applications into English language learning.

However, despite the growing recognition of the benefits of mobile technology in language learning, relatively few studies have specifically focused on MALL in relation to reading comprehension. In particular, although Vu et al. (2023) reported positive outcomes regarding secondary students' attitudes toward the use of the 4English application in enhancing reading comprehension, their study was limited to secondary school learners and did not investigate English-majored university students. This indicates a gap in understanding how higher education learners perceive and experience the use of 4English for reading practice. Therefore, to bridge this gap, the present study aims to explore English-majored university students' perceptions of using the 4English application to practice and improve their reading skills.

Research Questions

The focus of this research is to explore the perceptions of VLU's English-majored students about using 4English as a tool to practice their ability to comprehend English. The research aims to answer the questions:

1. What are the English-majored students' perceptions towards the use of 4English to enhance reading comprehension?
2. What are the challenges experienced by English-majored students while using 4English to practice reading skills?

Methods

Mixed method

This study was conducted using mixed methods. Mixed methods research encompasses the collection, analysis, and integration of both qualitative and quantitative data within a single study (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). While quantitative research focuses on measuring phenomena and generalizing findings through numbers ("how long," "how many," etc.), qualitative research delves into the quality of experiences, exploring explanations, motivations, and individual perceptions of the world (Ghanad, 2023, p. 3794). According to Gilbert and Stoneman (2016), researchers employ mixed methods to refine their research tools for greater accuracy. By using mixed methods, this study aims to leverage the strengths of both approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of English-majored students' perceptions of using the 4English application to develop reading comprehension skills.

Population and sample of the study

The target population of this study consisted of English-majored students at VLU, who regularly engage with English academic materials, making reading comprehension an essential skill for their academic success. Participants were required to have prior experience using the free version of the 4English application voluntarily as a self-directed tool for reading practice outside the classroom. This is because the use was not required by the courses, but it was suggested for further practice. However, the duration of app usage was not considered an inclusion criterion, as the study focused on exploring students' perceptions of the application rather than examining its effectiveness over time.

For this study, the researchers aimed to conduct a small-scale, classroom-based study to explore students' perceptions within a specific educational context. The surveyed case was a group of English-majored students at VLU who were participating in a course of research methodology at the time of this study. Accordingly, 53 second-year students who used 4English for learning English responded to the questionnaire. Subsequently, five students from the surveyed group were chosen on a voluntary basis for follow-up interviews to explore the challenges students faced when using the application to practice their reading skills.

Tools of data collection

For this study, the data were gathered using a questionnaire and interviews.

Questionnaire:

To gather quantitative data, the researchers created a questionnaire based on the five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), to Strongly Disagree (1), allowing participants to choose the rating that best reflected their perceptions. This questionnaire was adapted from the most related study (Vu et al., 2023), and it was reviewed by a research methods instructor at the university to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items for the research objectives before data collection. These helped to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. The survey includes 8 questions, which are separated into two sections. The first section is to discover the individuals' attitudes towards the accessibility of 4English based on their personal experiences. The second section aims to find out whether students find that 4English effectively assists their reading proficiency. It was distributed using Google Forms to students who are practicing English through 4English. Additionally, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure full understanding by participants.

Interviews:

To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with five English-majored students who were selected from the survey participants on a voluntary basis. The interviews were carried out face-to-face on the VLU campus, with an average duration of approximately 3-4 minutes per participant. This interview method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to use a list of predetermined questions while also asking spontaneous follow-up questions to clarify participants' responses when necessary. To explore the challenges students experienced while using 4English to practice reading skills, one main interview question was employed: *"What are the challenges you faced while using 4English to practice your reading skills?"* This question was also adapted from the most related previous study (Vu et al., 2023). Before addressing the main question, participants were asked for permission to record the interview and were asked to respond to several lead-in questions. Conducted in Vietnamese and audio-recorded with participants' consent, the interviews focused on students' actual experiences using the 4English application for reading practice, particularly the challenges, limitations, and negative experiences they encountered. The recordings were later transcribed and translated into English for data analysis.

Data collection procedures

The data collection process was conducted over one week (June 29–July 4, 2025) during the third term of the 2024–2025 academic year. To ensure that participants had relevant experience with the application, students who had used 4English for learning English were first identified. They were then informed of the research purposes, and their consent was obtained to ensure ethical compliance and voluntary participation. Once permission was granted, a questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions of using 4English to develop their reading comprehension skills. Over the first five days of the data collection period, 53 valid responses were obtained and used for analysis. Subsequently, during the final two days, participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews on a voluntary basis. Five students from the 53 respondents volunteered and were interviewed face-to-face to provide their insights into challenges experienced regarding the use of 4English for reading practice. The interviews were recorded for qualitative data analysis, and all participants remained anonymous throughout the study.

Data analysis

The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS Software to determine the means and standard deviations to gain a clearer view of participants' attitudes. The researchers also used the software to determine the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire:

Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
1	.681	3
2	.749	5

The internal consistency reliability of the two scales was 0.681 and 0.749, respectively, both exceeding 0.6. This proved the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

Item-Total Statistics

Item	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Q1	.504	.583
Q2	.498	.588
Q3	.491	.591
Q4	.540	.696
Q5	.622	.665
Q6	.506	.712
Q7	.464	.725
Q8	.461	.726

All items had Corrected item total correlation > 0.3 , meaning that all of the question items were kept.

The interviews were transcribed into written words for analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all interview responses were reviewed and statements related to the students' challenges in using the application were identified. Then these statements were coded using keywords representing common issues reported. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently developed into themes.

Results/Findings**Research question 1: Students' Perceptions of Using 4English for Reading Comprehension Improvement****Table 1**

Easiness and usefulness of using the 4English application

Perception statements	Frequency (N=53)						
	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD
1. I think 4English is easy to access	18 (34)	28 (52.8)	7 (13.2)	0	0	4.19	.652
2. I can use 4English without others' directions	11 (20.8)	31 (58.5)	7 (13.2)	4 (7.5)	0	3.92	.805
3. I think 4English is a useful approach of studying English outside the classroom	20 (37.7)	25 (47.2)	7 (13.2)	1 (1.9)	0	4.21	.743

(Notes: SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree)

Table 1 revealed that most participants showed positive attitudes while using 4English. A large number of the participants agreed that 4English was easy to use without directions. In particular, 42 students (or 79.3%) concurred with the idea of being able to use 4English independently, and 46 students (or 87%) thought that 4English provided convenience in accessing the platform. Significantly, the highest mean of this theme ($M = 4.21$) indicated that 4English was a useful method to learn English outside the classroom.

Overall, the high percentage of agreement and mean score indicated that the 4English application was both accessible and useful for students' learning needs. The data suggested that students perceived the application as useful in providing a convenient learning experience outside the traditional classroom setting.

Table 2

Students' reading engagement and perceived benefits of using 4English

Perception statements	Frequency (N=53)						
	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD
4. I practice reading through 4English	11 (20.8)	33 (62.3)	6 (11.3)	3 (5.7)	0	3.98	.747
5. I think 4English motivates me to read news in English	7 (13.2)	30 (56.6)	14 (26.4)	1 (1.9)	1 (1.9)	3.77	.767
6. I learn new vocabulary to support understanding written English through 4English	13 (24.5)	37 (69.8)	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	0	4.17	.580
7. After using 4English, I can understand most of the words in one sentence while reading English texts	8 (15.1)	30 (56.6)	12 (22.6)	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	3.83	.849
8. I think using 4English helps improve my academic scores in VLU's reading courses	8 (15.1)	35 (66)	8 (15.1)	1 (1.9)	1 (1.9)	3.91	.741

(Notes: SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree)

Table 2 demonstrated students' reading engagement and perceived benefits of using 4English. The data showed that the highest mean was 4.17, indicating that using 4English could enrich their vocabulary. The expanded vocabulary was likely the most significant benefit, as it could have the greatest impact on participants' reading abilities. Additionally, 83% of students considered it a tool to practice reading comprehension, which engaged them with reading activities.

Besides, they also stated that using 4English improved their ability to comprehend nearly all the vocabulary within an English sentence (38/53 or 71.7%). Finally, using 4English has a positive effect on their perceived reading performance at VLU (81.1%).

Another point is that the response to the idea that 4English motivated participants to read English news is 69.8% (37 of 53 students), while over 26% of the participants were neutral. In general, it can be seen that the 4English application is well-received by the majority of participants for effectively developing their reading proficiency.

Research question 2: Students' Challenges in Using 4English for Reading Practice

To answer research question 2, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants. The data were then presented and discussed based on encoded keywords from the students' perspectives.

Interview question: "What are the challenges you faced while using 4English to practice your reading skills?"

Through this process, three major themes emerged: (1) advanced vocabulary challenges, (2) interface limitations, and (3) financial barriers. Representative excerpts from the interviews were selected to illustrate each theme and support the interpretation of the findings.

Advanced Vocabulary Challenges

The application is effective for improving my reading comprehension, but its vocabulary level is often too advanced for beginners. (Student 1, interview extract)

I appreciate the variety of vocabulary available, but it's quite challenging for beginners to understand the content. (Student 2, interview extract)

Interviewees appreciated the extensive range of vocabulary available in the application, regarding it as a valuable resource for expanding their lexical knowledge and enhancing their reading comprehension. However, the interviewees showed that the vocabulary in the application was too advanced for their current English level, which created a gap between the linguistic demands of the content and their existing vocabulary knowledge. This may increase learners' cognitive load because they need to make substantial effort to understand unfamiliar words before they can focus on comprehending the reading content.

Interface Limitations

The interface is decent but not as attractive or engaging as other popular language learning applications like Duolingo. It contains a lot of text and lacks engaging images, which can make the learning experience less appealing. (Student 3, interview extract)

Adding more visuals and interactive elements could enhance user engagement and make the application more effective for learners. (Student 4, interview extract)

While the interface is functional, the lack of engaging and interactive elements makes the learning experience less stimulating, potentially reducing the long-term use and effectiveness of the application. The finding suggested that students expected educational applications to provide experiences that were not only informative but also interactive. Features such as gamification, personalized challenges, or interactive exercises may help increase their sense of involvement and accomplishment.

Financial Barriers

The free version of the application does not allow access to all materials, which limits its usefulness. (Student 5, interview extract)

I hesitate to buy the PRO version to access all the features of the application since I'm still a student with limited financial resources. (Student 2, interview extract)

The finding showed that the free version significantly limited the accessibility and usefulness of the application, as many students were unable to afford the PRO version, thereby restricting their ability to fully utilize all the features and materials available.

To explore this further, the researcher asked a follow-up question: "Which limitations of the free version affect your reading practice the most?"

Frequent pop-up advertisements were identified as the biggest problem because they interrupted students' reading. As Student 2 explained, *"The advertisements appeared too often, and they distracted me while I was reading."* Similarly, Student 5 answered, *"The pop-up ads were annoying because they interrupted my concentration when they appeared."*

To sum up, while the free version was still useful, financial barriers and ads prevented students from fully experiencing the application's advanced learning features.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that 4English serves as a useful tool for facilitating autonomous reading practice beyond the formal classroom environment. Participants characterized the application as intuitive and user-friendly, requiring neither specialized technical instruction nor rigorous external supervision to be effective. This ease of use facilitates independent learning, as it lowers the barrier to entry for extracurricular engagement.

Data gathered from active users revealed highly positive attitudes toward vocabulary acquisition during the practice process. These results align with the work of Abdollapour and Maleki (2012), who showed the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in improving vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the current study reinforces the findings of Basoglu and Akdemir (2010), whose research indicated that mobile-based learning systems could facilitate enhanced vocabulary acquisition in comparison to conventional resources, such as physical flashcards. However, a notable contribution of this study lies in the participants' greater awareness of reading strategies. By taking ownership of their learning process, students were becoming more independent learners. Consequently, this shift toward self-regulated learning suggests that 4English provides an auxiliary pathway to improved reading ability.

In comparison to Vu et al. (2023), the current study aims to explore the subject of English-major students while they focus on a secondary education context (10th graders). As a result, beyond the common positive attitudes toward using the app to improve reading skills, the current research reveals more difficulties faced by the participants, such as advanced vocabulary challenges, interface limitations, and financial barriers. These findings suggest that students' experiences with the application include both perceived benefits and practical constraints. Moreover, Vu et al. (2023) recommend that the app should be adopted to engage students in reading activities in class, whereas this study suggests that 4English can serve as an auxiliary tool for reinforcing reading comprehension beyond the classroom.

While the current study demonstrates the potential of 4English as a useful tool for autonomous reading and vocabulary acquisition, several avenues for future investigation remain. Given that the lack of gamified engagement and the restricted content of the application's free version may result in intermittent usage, future research should explore the long-term sustainability of student engagement with non-premium mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools. Specifically, further studies could investigate the role of goal-setting interventions in mitigating "aimless learning." Research is needed to determine whether providing students with structured frameworks for identifying specific learning objectives—such as targeted vocabulary

expansion or specific comprehension benchmarks—significantly enhances their persistence and motivation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the relationship between regular self-assessment and academic performance. Understanding how students' metacognitive awareness of their progress influences their consistent use of the application would provide deeper insights into the transition from passive users to self-regulated, independent learners. Finally, future inquiries might compare the effectiveness of 4English across different proficiency levels to see if the "limited materials" barrier affects advanced learners differently than beginners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the opinions of VLU's English-majored students towards the use of 4English to self-practice reading comprehension skills. By collecting data on students' points of view, the research provides a clearer picture of how 4English users find that it effectively assists their learning process. On the whole, students had positive perspectives on the effectiveness of 4English. Most participants were satisfied with its user-friendly interface and accessibility benefits. Moreover, it is acknowledged for enhancing students' English-studying process, as reflected in their self-reported perceptions. The majority of participants noted significant improvements in their vocabulary enrichment, which led to a better understanding of an English sentence. Accordingly, they perceived that the application had a positive impact on their performance in Reading subjects at the university.

Despite these benefits, the application also presents several challenges, as identified in research question 2. The vocabulary level is often too advanced for beginners, making it difficult for them to understand the content. Additionally, the application's interface, while functional, lacks the engaging elements found in other popular language learning applications. Financial barriers and ads also pose a significant challenge because the free version does not provide access to all materials and disrupts reading, which limits its usefulness for students with budget constraints. These limitations can cause students to feel less enthusiastic and discouraged.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that 4English be used as an effective tool for learning English outside the classroom. Students can also use the app to improve their reading skills. It is also suggested that the usefulness of the 4English application in learning English should be further explored to maximize the benefits and overcome the application's limitations in English learning.

Limitations and further research

The study has certain limitations in terms of its research methodology. This is a small-scale study with the engagement of only 53 English-majored students at VLU. Thus, the findings cannot be extended to a larger population. Moreover, only self-reported data were used. Hence, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted with larger sample sizes, with a focus on students' learning motivation and learner autonomy, while using 4English to assess English reading ability, to yield more reliable and in-depth findings in this area. Future studies can implement 4English into action research to examine its effects on reading comprehension.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Van Lang University at 69/68 Dang Thuy Tram Street, Binh Loi Trung Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

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Biodata

Loi Gia An is an undergraduate of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She discusses the use of mobile applications as an additional approach to developing English proficiency for EFL students, especially reading comprehension ability. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where she is currently conducting her research.

Nguyen Ngoc Man Nhi is an undergraduate at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She discusses the use of mobile applications as an additional approach to developing English proficiency for EFL students, especially reading

comprehension. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where she is currently conducting her research.

Truong Phu Sy is a lecturer of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Vietnam. He holds an M.A in TESOL from Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. He has 22 years of teaching English to Vietnamese learners at many levels. His research interests include teaching language skills, discourse analysis, and business English.

IELTS washback on teaching methods and materials

Meisam Khalilnejad^{1*}

¹ University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Department of English, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA

*Corresponding author's email: Meisam.khalilnejad1@louisiana.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7992-7006>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26634>

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Received: 29/04/2026

Revision: 14/08/2026

Accepted: 24/08/2026

Online: 26/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: washback, IELTS, course alignment, TESOL, communicative language teaching, language testing

International language proficiency tests have become increasingly important due to the requirements of academic institutions and immigration authorities worldwide. The influence of tests on teaching content, materials, and instructional practices is commonly referred to as washback or backwash. This paper presents a conceptual analysis of IELTS washback, drawing on previous research and theoretical discussions to examine its implications for teaching methods and instructional materials. It argues that certain forms of course alignment may enhance the efficiency of IELTS preparation. These proposed alignments, which may diverge from some dominant assumptions associated with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), are discussed across the four language skills of speaking, writing, reading, and listening, as well as in relation to vocabulary and grammar instruction. Based on this analysis, the paper offers pedagogical recommendations for IELTS preparation courses and contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the relationship between language testing and language teaching.

Introduction

One of the primary incentives for learning English globally is the pursuit of academic or professional opportunities abroad, both of which typically require validation via international English competence examinations. This demand has catalyzed significant growth in the commercial scale of high-stakes assessments, including TOEFL, PTE, Duolingo, CELPIP, and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). High-stakes tests are defined as those whose results serve as "the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect the student" (Cheng et al., 2004, p. 43). Among these, IELTS—established in 1989 and jointly managed by the British Council, IDP, and Cambridge English—is one of the world's most widely recognized English-language proficiency tests (International English Language Testing System, n.d.) and is accepted by organizations in more than 140 countries (International English Language Testing System, n.d.). The test comprises two modules: one (academic) evaluates English competence for formal education, while the other (general) assesses English competence in the labor market and everyday life. There is no

pass/fail, and the test uses a 1-9 band score. Academic institutions and immigration organizations have varying band score requirements, but typically, for academic admission, many universities require a band score of 6.5, with a minimum of 6 in each skill.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of IELTS washback for course design, teaching methods, and instructional materials. Rather than offering an empirical description of classroom practices, this paper argues that specific forms of course alignment can improve the efficiency of IELTS preparation. Specifically, it posits that strategic, skill-specific departures from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies may enable learners to prepare more effectively for IELTS within limited instructional time. The pedagogical frameworks proposed herein are particularly significant for instructional designers and educators, especially in contexts where exam maximization rather than general linguistic acquisition is the primary driver of ESL enrollment.

Theoretical framework and background

This paper is informed by two theoretical perspectives: Washback Theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Washback Theory explains how high-stakes examinations shape teaching and learning, whereas CLT represents a dominant pedagogical approach in language education. The paper's conceptual framework emerges from examining the relationship between these perspectives and considering the extent to which IELTS demands may justify instructional practices that differ from conventional CLT approaches.

Research on course alignment in the context of high-stakes language testing is generally conducted within the framework of washback studies. The impact of tests on teaching and learning is called washback or backwash and has been studied in diverse ways over the past decades. According to Hughes (1989, p. 1), “the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash and can be harmful or beneficial.” While the term backwash is used by Hughes, in applied linguistics, washback is more common (Brown, 1995; Weir, 1993). It has also been called test impact (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and measurement-driven instruction (Popham, 1983). Washback studies are of critical importance because examinations not only assess learning outcomes but also actively shape the processes of teaching and learning within educational contexts. Understanding the mechanisms and effects of washback enables researchers and educators to evaluate the extent to which assessments support or undermine pedagogical objectives. As Eckstein and Noah (1992, 1993) contend, washback is an intrinsic property of any form of assessment, particularly when examination results have significant implications for individuals’ futures, irrespective of the quality of the examination itself. In fact, according to Cheng et al. (2004, p. 26), the influence of testing on instructional practices is predicated on the principle that assessments are intended to guide teaching and learning. Achieving this objective typically involves fostering curriculum alignment, in which the content and format of the assessment are closely matched to the curriculum. As noted earlier in this section, both washback and backwash have been used to refer to these effects. While washback cannot be found in dictionaries, backwash is defined as ‘the unwelcome repercussions of some social action’ by the New Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, and ‘unpleasant after-effects of an event or situation’ by Collin’s Cobuild Dictionary of English Language (Cheng et al., 2004, p. 27). Biggs (1995, p. 12) employs the term ‘backwash’ to describe the phenomenon whereby testing shapes not only the curriculum but also teaching methods and students’ approaches to learning (Crooks, 1988; Frederiksen, 1984). However, Spolsky (1994, p. 55), after citing definitions of backwash from the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English Language, argued that the term is more appropriately used to

refer to unintended side effects of examinations rather than to the deliberate effects that arise when the primary purpose of an exam is to control the curriculum. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 115) note that while the idea that testing affects teaching is commonly referred to as 'backwash' in general educational discourse, it has become known as 'washback' among British applied linguists, although they find no semantic or practical reason to prefer one term over the other.

Washback effects can be both positive and negative. Negative washback refers to the negative effects of tests on teaching and learning, and this is what language tests have often been criticized for (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p. 115). This is partly because teachers often ignore subjects and activities unrelated to the exam (Vernon, 1940). Alderson & Wall (1993, p. 5) define negative washback as the undesirable effect of a particular test on teaching and learning. For example, Davies et al. (1999, p. 225) mention the possibility of negative washback: "If, for example, the skill of writing is tested only by multiple choice items then there is great pressure to practice such items rather than to practice the skill of writing itself".

On the other hand, others see the possibility of "bringing about the beneficial change in language teaching by changing examinations. This is called positive washback. For instance, Hughes (1989, p. 2) discusses his experience developing an English language test that led to positive changes in the syllabus, the selection of new textbooks, and teaching methods. Also, Allen (2016) investigates the washback effect of IELTS on learners' performance in Japan. According to this survey, the test had a positive washback specifically regarding productive skills (speaking and writing). However, determining whether washback is positive or negative is highly complex and heavily context-dependent. For this reason, Cheng et al. (2004, p. 30) argue that the nature of the test should first be examined, followed by the washback effect itself and the conditions under which washback operates. Whether positive or negative washback, in the view of Pearson (1988, p. 107), the connection between testing and teaching is so strong that he considers a good test to be one that is more or less directly usable in teaching-learning activities. Similarly, good teaching-learning tasks will be more or less directly usable for testing purposes, even though practical or financial constraints limit the possibilities. Research on washback has generally been conducted in two broad directions. Many studies have examined the phenomenon from a theoretical perspective, whereas others have analyzed washback effects within certain educational contexts. In this paper, IELTS washback is examined irrespective of a specific educational context. This does not imply that I believe such effects function uniformly across all contexts. Rather, it suggests that the test's general framework influences teaching methods and content in this way, and that these changes can enhance efficiency and lead to better outcomes in less time, although in practice, each class and country may necessitate particular adjustments in applying these methodological changes.

There are several features that distinguish this paper from other washback studies. First, the majority of them do not address the IELTS test. In fact, some of them do not even discuss large-scale tests and instead focus on local programs or tests (Burrows, 2004; Stecher et al., 2004). Second, studies related to IELTS (Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Allen, 2016; Riswandi & Wahyudi, 2018; Lewthwaite, 2007; Nguyen, 2025) or other exams (Cheng et al., 2004; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026) that examined the washback effect on teaching methodology and content mainly focused on reporting what actually occurred in classroom practice. In contrast, the purpose of this paper is to explore what kinds of changes can enhance classroom effectiveness in preparing students for the IELTS test. In other words, this study differs from previous research in that it does not examine changes that have already occurred in teaching and learning as a result of IELTS in a specific context. Instead, it focuses on identifying potential pedagogical adjustments that may improve the efficiency of IELTS preparation courses, as well as general English

courses at lower proficiency levels for learners intending to take the IELTS exam. Finally, some of them (Kunnan, 2000) that address the impact of IELTS and other large-scale tests discuss the kind of impact categorized as consequential validity in TESOL. They look at the broader impacts that language tests can have on students and society. For example, in part of their paper, Saville and Hawkey (2004) investigate the effects on other stakeholders, such as school owners and government agencies.

Taken together, washback theory and Communicative Language Teaching provide the conceptual foundation for the pedagogical recommendations developed in the following sections. Washback theory predicts that high-stakes assessments influence curriculum, instructional content, and classroom practices through the principle of curriculum alignment. Consequently, where the linguistic and cognitive demands of IELTS differ from the primary objectives of general communicative language instruction, preparation courses can benefit from strategically adjusting instructional priorities. The pedagogical recommendations presented in this paper should therefore not be interpreted as a rejection of CLT. Rather, they represent context-specific adaptations intended to improve instructional efficiency in intensive IELTS preparation courses while remaining consistent with the broader principle that teaching should align with assessment objectives.

IELTS and communicative language teaching

In recent decades, second language acquisition has seen significant changes, often aligned with developments in linguistics, psychology, and other human sciences, and it seems to share some characteristics. These changes were a kind of “search for more effective ways of teaching second or foreign languages” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 244). Despite having different subfields, CLT is considered the dominant approach in teaching English.

Mainstream language teaching on both sides of the Atlantic, however, opted for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the recommended basis for language teaching methodology in the 1980s, and it remains the most plausible basis for language teaching today. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 244)

Despite some differences, recent methods and approaches in SLA seem to share certain characteristics. One of these shared features of CLT is that teachers' talk time has declined. A teacher in the grammar-translation or direct method was expected to talk more than students. However, in approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT), students are expected to have more speaking time in the classroom. Another feature is that recent approaches tend to emphasize an inductive approach to teaching grammar, whereas in the past the deductive approach was more common. Jack C. Richards states that “grammar is not taught in isolation but often arises out of a communicative task, thus creating a need for specific items of grammar. Students might carry out a task and then reflect on some of the linguistic characteristics of their performance” (2006, p. 23).

There has also been a tendency towards creating real-world situations rather than idealized, abstract contexts. For example, according to Clarke and Silberstein, “Classroom activities should parallel the “real world” as closely as possible. Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not the medium” (1977, p. 51). Similarly, teaching materials in reading and listening come from authentic sources. As Richards states:

Since the advent of CLT, textbooks and other teaching materials have taken on a much more “authentic” look; reading passages are designed to look like magazine articles (if they are not in fact adapted from magazine articles), and textbooks are designed to a

similar standard of production as real-world sources such as popular magazines. (2006, p. 21)

Also, though some recent approaches emphasize skill integration, in practice the priority in English classes has been speaking, and teachers use a reading or listening passage to elicit more speaking in class. For example, in TBI (Task-based Instruction), “the task is done by Ss (in pairs or groups) and gives Ss a chance to use whatever language they already have to express themselves and say whatever they want to say. This may be in response to reading a text or hearing a recording” (Richards, 2006, p. 33).

However, English language classes for students intending to take international exams such as the IELTS require changes to the principles and priorities of language teaching, as discussed in the previous section and further elaborated below. This is especially true in countries with a high demand for such tests. Several factors explain why these tests necessitate specialized instructional approaches. First, time plays a key role in test preparation courses. A person who aims to study abroad needs to consider university application deadlines. For those who need IELTS for non-academic purposes, time is also important, since they may want to apply quickly for a job opportunity or are worried about changes in immigration laws. Also, a considerable number of them are employed and have little free time. This contrasts with those who want to acquire a new language and have few time constraints. If time is an important consideration, the quality of learning matters insofar as learning takes place before the deadline. This time limitation has some important consequences.

Second, despite claims by IELTS organizations, none of the tasks in the exam resemble real situations. New methods of teaching a second language rely on the reflection of real, everyday situations, yet one can hardly find them in international tests. For example, a real conversation is different from a conversation between a test taker and the examiner, where the latter has a list of questions and merely asks the test taker one by one, whereas in real conversation both sides comment and reflect on the content of each other’s utterances.

For the reasons above, some changes to teaching methods are necessary. For instance, a more direct method of teaching grammar and vocabulary is required, and if teachers and students share a native language, greater use of L1 is recommended to improve performance and save time. In the following section, these effects are discussed in detail in relation to four skills in IELTS.

The washback impacts of IELTS on teaching methods and materials

The following analyses apply the theoretical framework developed earlier by examining how the principle of curriculum alignment provides a theoretical basis for context-specific adaptations to CLT in IELTS preparation courses.

READING

The reading section in IELTS includes 40 questions from three passages, which gradually become more sophisticated. It is the most difficult part for many IELTS test takers. Nevertheless, in many general English courses, classroom instruction places considerable emphasis on speaking activities designed to promote communicative competence, with the primary aim of enhancing learners' ability to speak in different contexts. Also, reading passages in many general English coursebooks are typically shorter and linguistically less demanding than those found in IELTS academic reading materials, and are used merely as topics for further conversation or to learn some vocabulary. This is why students need to read other kinds of books, such as *Focus on Vocabulary* (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2011) and *Active Skill for Reading* (Anderson, 2014), to be better prepared for exams such as the IELTS. In these books, the texts

are longer and possess greater semantic complexity, since they resemble an academic style more closely and cover subjects related to various fields such as psychology, economics, agriculture, geology, archaeology, and so on.

One of the most significant factors in test takers' reading competence is vocabulary knowledge and consequently has been widely investigated. Anderson and Freebody (1982) divided the knowledge into vocabulary breadth and depth. Many studies (Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Laufer, 1992; Jun Zhang & Bin Anual, 2008) focused on the impact of vocabulary breadth on reading comprehension, but recently there has been an emphasis on the significance of vocabulary depth in reading comprehension (Cakir et al 2016; Li & Kirby, 2014). Also, Chen and Liu (2020) examine how these types of vocabulary knowledge can help IELTS test takers in answering different question types in the reading section. They claim that whereas there was a more significant correlation between vocabulary breadth and True/ False/ Not Given questions, vocabulary depth correlates more with multiple-choice, matching headings, and sentence-completion reading question types. Regardless of the type of vocabulary knowledge, one cannot ignore the importance of academic vocabulary in understanding reading passages in IELTS. While typical English learning books focus on vocabulary in themes such as sport, food, and clothes, succeeding in IELTS reading requires academic vocabulary like assumption, enhance, and consequence, which are not often found or emphasized in English language teaching books. A good example of these vocabularies can be found in AWL (Academic word List) by Coxhead (2000). Developing this type of vocabulary may require instructional practices that place greater emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction than is typically associated with communicative language teaching (CLT), which often prioritizes authentic communication through everyday lexical items.

An analysis of IELTS reading question types reveals that two general types of questions can be identified: detail questions and main idea (content) questions. The first type evaluates test takers' abilities to comprehend the main ideas presented in the passage, while the second type assesses how well they can spot and comprehend details in a passage. The first one can be found more in question types such as Sentence Completion, True/ False/ Not given, Summary Completion, Table Completion, and Labeling a Diagram, whereas the latter can be found more in Matching Headings and Multiple-choice questions. Learning test-taking techniques such as identifying signal words and keywords can be extremely helpful, especially for answering detail questions. This means that a considerable percentage of reading questions can be answered correctly even though the test taker does not understand the main claims in the passage. For example, Test 1 in *Cambridge IELTS 7* (Cambridge ESOL, 2009, pp. 18–21) illustrates this point. Questions 12 and 13 can be answered alongside the final paragraph of the passage, which contains the relevant information. Although this example is taken from an earlier practice test, similar detail-oriented question formats continue to appear in more recent IELTS materials.

The Sonar and Radar pioneers didn't know it then, but all the world now knows that bats, or rather natural selection working on bats, had perfected the system tens of millions of years earlier, and their 'radar' achieves feats of detection and navigation that would strike an engineer dumb with admiration. It is technically incorrect to talk about bat 'radar', since they do not use radio waves. It is sonar. But the underlying mathematical theories of radar and sonar are very similar, and much of our scientific understanding of the details of what bats are doing has come from applying radar theory to them. The American zoologist Donald Griffin, who was largely responsible for the discovery of sonar in bats, coined the term 'echolocation' to cover both sonar and radar, whether used by animals or by human instruments.

12 Radar and sonar are based on similar

13 The word ‘echolocation’ was first used by someone working as a

In these two questions, the test-taker only needs to quickly scan the text to find the words radar and sonar, and echolocation. Then, for question 13, they look for a job title, and in that sentence, there is just one: zoologist, which is the correct answer. For question 12, they can quickly find radar and sonar in the passage and see what similar things radar and sonar are based on. In this passage, the answer is mathematical theories. The text is about why bats hunt at night and the mechanism that allows them to move in the dark. To answer questions 12 and 13 (and even almost half of the questions in this passage), understanding these main points in the text is not crucial; the questions can be answered without fully grasping them. Even paragraph-level understanding (for example, the last paragraph containing the sentences with the answers) or the sentences immediately before or after the answers is not very important. What matters is primarily the exact sentence where the answer is located. It should also be acknowledged that some questions heavily rely on reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, these examples suggest that familiarity with test-taking techniques can improve both accuracy and efficiency for certain question types.

Teaching these techniques has several pedagogical implications, one of which is that they may be taught more efficiently in L1 over a shorter period, since learning how to answer the questions is more significant. Also, in IELTS preparation courses, instructional time devoted to the explicit teaching of reading strategies is likely to contribute more directly to reading test performance than activities such as pair work, which are primarily designed to promote communicative interaction. Both effects conflict with contemporary CLT teaching methods.

WRITING

In IELTS, writing skill is assessed in two different tasks. In the academic module, task 1 asks the test takers to describe a diagram in 20 minutes using at least 150 words, while task 2 asks them to argue something in 40 minutes using at least 250 words, and is more effective in the writing score. The band score is determined by four criteria (Task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, and grammatical range and accuracy). Like the reading section, test awareness can play a significant role in gaining a better score. In academic task 1, students can practice and master specific vocabulary, which helps them get a better score for lexical resources. For instance, various trend collocations such as “show an upward/downward trend”, “a sharp rise/decline”, and “remain stable” can be systematically practiced by students. Also, in the general writing task 1, test-takers are expected to write a letter. In this case as well, learning the vocabulary and phrases used at the opening and closing of a letter, as well as expressions that can be used for making requests, asking for information, apologizing, thanking, etc., is important. This is why teachers can teach them more directly in the class, which departs from more recent indirect approaches to vocabulary teaching. This way of teaching also demands more teacher talk time, which contrasts with contemporary trends in communicative teaching approaches that encourage more student talk time in class.

Another important consideration is that in writing tasks, everyday vocabulary is not a primary focus of assessment. In both general and academic modules, writing task 2 is similar, and test takers are expected to develop and support an argument. The type of topic in the writing section does not allow test takers to use everyday vocabulary much, and knowing academic vocabulary can be much more influential. For example, words such as enhance, consequence, awareness, convince, and (beneficial/adverse) impacts can be much more effective than lexical items such

as the names of fruits or pieces of clothing. This can be illustrated by the following IELTS Writing Task 2 prompt:

Some people think that parents should teach children how to be a good member of society. Others, however, believe that school is the place to learn this. Discuss both these views and give your own opinion (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2011, p. 31).

In some cultures, children are often told that they can achieve anything if they try hard enough. What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving children this message? (IELTS Academic, 2021, p. 94)

As can be seen, the topics are abstract and different from everyday conversations. I understand that each writing question relates to one or two specific topics; however, the questions' level of abstraction means they mostly require general academic vocabulary, along with a smaller number of topic-related words. The time and word limit are also important. The expectation of using topic-related vocabulary can be met by using a limited number of topic-related words, which is not difficult for many test takers, and they can use general academic vocabulary in most parts of the writing. Unlike general English classes, which often emphasize communicative competence and everyday expressions, IELTS preparation demands a more focused and strategic use of language.

Also, since grammatical accuracy and range play a role in the evaluation of the Writing score, part of the IELTS writing class can focus on commonly used and effective grammar points. In this regard as well, the teaching method differs from that of typical English language classes. While teaching grammar, in CLT, language instruction should not be based on “controlled language practice”; instead, “learners must identify with their roles in the interaction more (Littlewood, 1981, p. 50). Nevertheless, in an IELTS preparation classroom, some useful grammar (e.g, adjective clauses) can be taught in a much more direct way, and if possible, with L1 explanations. Then, controlled practice questions can be given, accompanied by examples of how this grammar can be used to construct sentences in writing and how it can help them understand sentences in the reading and listening sections.

Additionally, in the writing section, rhetorical control is important in addition to lexical accuracy and range. Students must be able to organize their ideas logically, present clear arguments, and use appropriate register—all within a strict time constraint. These requirements necessitate that instructors prioritize skill-based practice, guided feedback, and exposure to model essays. Unlike typical English classes, these activities can also be explained in L1 to save more time and to help students understand them better. Overall, given the format of the IELTS writing test, recent teaching methods fail to provide an appropriate framework for teaching such English classes.

SPEAKING

The speaking test in IELTS includes an interview by an examiner, which normally takes around 13 minutes, and is divided into three parts. Although IELTS claims to insist on keeping this format to emphasize its resemblance to real conversation, in practice the interview is not similar to real conversations. The standardized interview format intentionally constrains examiner participation, limiting opportunities for spontaneous conversational negotiation. Consequently, activities designed primarily to simulate everyday conversational exchanges may be less directly aligned with the communicative demands of the IELTS speaking interview than activities targeting extended responses, argumentation, and opinion development. For instance, while there might be questions such as “What sorts of food do you like eating most?” or “In general, do you prefer eating out or eating at home?” (Cambridge English Language

Assessment, 2016, p. 32), they are not asked to role-play a customer/waiter conversation, which is practiced in typical language classes. In part 3 of the speaking test, the questions become much more general and abstract. Take this as an example about the topic of food: “Why do you think people go to restaurants when they want to celebrate something?” Or “Do you think there will be a greater choice of food available in shops in the future, or will there be less choice?” (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2011, p. 55).

These examples suggest that answering these questions does not require the kind of language used in role-play conversations practiced in English classes. In most general English courses, speaking activities often focus on functional language, such as ordering food, asking for directions, or making small talk. These are useful for everyday communication but do not help students with the abstract, speculative, or opinion-based questions found in the IELTS speaking test. The speaking questions also demand a higher level of cognitive engagement. Candidates are expected to express opinions, justify their views, speculate about the future, and compare and contrast ideas. This requires not only a broad vocabulary but also the ability to structure responses coherently and fluently under time pressure. Therefore, IELTS preparation must focus on developing these academic and analytical speaking skills, which are often overlooked in communicative language teaching methods.

IELTS speaking instruction cannot rely solely on everyday topics and role-play conversations conducted through pair-work activities. This point can be illustrated by the following speaking questions drawn from the three parts of the IELTS Speaking test. The first group is taken from Part 3:

Why do many people today keep buying things which they do not need?

Do you believe the benefits of a consumer society outweigh the disadvantages?

How possible is it to avoid the culture of consumerism? (*IELTS 15 Academic*, 2020, p. 51)

As can be seen, these questions need a significant level of abstraction and strong critical thinking skills to answer. This is why, as in the reading and writing sections, the role of academic vocabulary for answering these questions cannot be denied. To answer such questions, a person relies much more on academic vocabulary than on everyday words, yet the teaching of this academic vocabulary is usually not emphasized in English language classes. Focusing on academic vocabulary requires changes in the teaching approach and in the selection of reading and listening materials, so that learners are exposed to these words more often. Although the first and second parts may involve less abstraction than the third part, they still demand a degree of abstract thinking that goes beyond what is typically found in real-life English conversation classes. The following is an example from part 2 (cue cards):

Describe a website that you bought something from.

You should say:

What the website is

What you bought from this website

How satisfied you were with what you bought

And explain what you liked or disliked about using this website. (IELTS 15 Academic, 2020, p. 51)

It could be argued that a good range of topic-related vocabulary is required to perform such speaking tasks, and, as a result, general academic lexical resources are insufficient. However, this can be handled with simple collocations such as user-friendly, simple design, and up-to-date information, unless one needs to achieve a band score of 7+, which is not the target score for most test takers. Possible examples of these academic lexical items can be “in terms of”, “convenient”, “reliable”, “meet my expectations”, “significantly enhance my satisfaction,” and so on. These phrases allow candidates to structure their ideas logically, express nuanced opinions, and transition smoothly between points. Therefore, while topic-specific words are useful, mastery of general academic vocabulary truly elevates performance in the IELTS Speaking section.

Another significant consideration is that current approaches place an emphasis on pair/group work. In fact, most of the classroom time is dedicated to pair work. After explaining some activity types in CLT, including task-competition activities and information-gathering activities, Richards (2006, p. 19) states that “most of the activities discussed above reflect an important aspect of classroom tasks in CLT, namely that they are designed to be carried out in pairs or small groups”. He also believes that “real communication is a defining characteristic of CLT” (p. 20). CLT is perceived to be heavily reliant on pair work as it can “help learners to link language forms with (a) communicative function and (b) specific functional meanings” (Littlewood, 1981, p. 12). Pair work tasks also help them “begin to interact as equal partners in an exchange rather than merely reacting to stimuli (Littlewood, 1981, p.12). Nevertheless, in the IELTS exam, there is not such interaction, and the examiner merely asks questions from a list. Therefore, while pair-work activities designed to simulate real-life communication remain valuable for developing communicative competence, IELTS preparation courses can place greater emphasis on exam-specific speaking skills. Such instructions can focus on idea generation and development, supporting responses with relevant examples and details, and developing the lexical and grammatical resources required for successful performance on the IELTS speaking test.

LISTENING

The listening section in the IELTS includes 40 questions, divided into four sections of 10 each. The questions tend to be more difficult in the final two sections, which have more academic content. The fact that test takers can listen only once and that it uses a read-listen-write format has made it challenging (Alavi et al., 2018; Field, 2012). However, statistics on the official IELTS website show that in many countries it is the highest score, or at least the second-highest. While there are different factors in raising the score in IELTS listening, many studies (Ha, 2021; Lange & Matthews, 2020; Cheng & Matthews, 2018; Stæhr, 2008, 2009; Van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013) have shown that the larger the knowledge of vocabulary, the better the score in this section. However, as discussed in previous sections, much of the vocabulary assessed extends beyond everyday communicative contexts. Phung and Ha (2022, p. 1) have shown that “3,000 most frequent word families in the British National Corpus/Corpus of Contemporary American English (BNC/COCA) word list were necessary to safely gain 95% coverage of all four sections in the test”. The study also emphasizes the importance of the Academic Word List (AWL). Therefore, instructional materials that primarily emphasize everyday conversational vocabulary, such as *Tactics for Listening* (Richards, 2010) and *Tune In* (Jones et al., 2006), may not fully reflect the lexical demands of the IELTS Listening test, particularly in Sections 3 and 4. Accordingly, IELTS preparation courses can supplement these materials with resources emphasizing academic vocabulary in listening contexts, such as *Open Forum* (Blackwell & Naber, 2007), to provide learners with greater exposure to the academic lexical items commonly encountered in lectures and discussions. One of the main concerns in language teaching is the

selection of appropriate content. In communicative language teaching (CLT), a strong emphasis is placed on the functional and situational use of language. This focus requires a more needs-based and context-sensitive approach to content selection. As Littlewood (1981, p. 4) points out, "It can therefore help us to match the content more closely with the actual communicative uses that the learners will have to make of the foreign language." In this view, language instruction becomes more meaningful and practical, as it aims to equip learners with the communicative competence necessary for real-life interaction. This includes the ability to use language for specific purposes such as requesting information, expressing opinions, or participating in social exchanges. However, in parts three and four of the IELTS listening section, academic listening comprehension is assessed. In part four, for example, candidates are exposed to an academic lecture. Consequently, instructional materials focusing exclusively on everyday conversational interactions may not provide sufficient preparation for the academic listening demands of the later sections of the IELTS Listening test. Another necessary change is that, rather than spending time before and after a listening in the classroom on speaking activities, the time can be spent raising students' awareness of the different question types and how to approach them on exam day. While speaking activities for listening can be done in pair work, raising test awareness is best done by the teacher and, if necessary, can be done in L1 to help with understanding and save time.

Conclusion

The sharp growth in large-scale English tests requires in-depth washback studies to identify changes in curriculum design and teaching methods, as well as to recognize potentially useful and necessary changes to be implemented in these two areas. Unlike most washback studies, which focus on how a specific test has altered course content and teaching methods, this paper explores which types of changes can actually make classroom instruction more effective in preparing students for the IELTS exam. The analysis suggests that the teaching methods proposed in this research are not aligned with recent approaches to CLT across all four skills. The main changes include a different selection of textbooks, greater emphasis on academic vocabulary, a more direct approach to teaching vocabulary and grammar, less reliance on typical classroom activities such as pair work, and, where appropriate, the use of L1 in instruction. While this paper establishes a conceptually grounded rationale for strategic curriculum alignment in IELTS preparation courses, one practical limitation warrants acknowledgment. Moving away from standard, generalized CLT models toward targeted, test-specific pedagogical interventions demands that instructors possess a deep, granular understanding of IELTS band descriptors and washback mechanisms. Without rigorous professional development, there is a distinct operational risk that teachers may misinterpret strategic, high-efficiency alignment as a license to default to low-quality "drill-and-kill" test preparation. Furthermore, while the proposed pedagogical modifications may contribute to more efficient IELTS preparation courses, the precise scale and type of these adjustments may vary based on contextual contingencies. For example, student demographics—such as whether learners share a homogeneous first language (L1) or operate in a multilingual classroom—alongside other context-specific variables, will dictate the extent to which these curricular alignments can be effectively implemented. Although the discussion in this paper is confined to IELTS, similar pedagogical considerations may also be relevant to other large-scale English proficiency tests such as TOEFL, PTE, Duolingo, and CELPIP, through comparative analyses of test constructs, preparation courses, and learner outcomes. Future studies may also investigate specific skill areas separately—for example, evaluating the impact of explicit grammar instruction on IELTS Writing and Speaking scores. Finally, the arguments advanced

in this paper should not be interpreted as suggesting weaknesses in the design or question types of the IELTS examination. Rather, they are intended to raise awareness among teachers and learners of pedagogical approaches that may contribute to more efficient test preparation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

This paper is based on published literature and does not involve human participants, animals, or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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Biodata

Meisam Khalilnejad is a doctoral student in the Department of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA. He previously studied Language Sciences at Stockholm University and holds an MA in Linguistics from Shahid Beheshti University. His research interests include semantics, discourse analysis, and TESOL.

English-Majored Students' Perceptions of Business English Speaking for Future Employment: A Case Study at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking

Nguyen Tuong Thien Lac¹, Nguyen Van Nguyen^{1*}

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: nguyennv@hub.edu.vn

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2869-6351>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26635>

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Received: 07/11/2025

Revision: 20/08/2026

Accepted: 24/08/2026

Online: 26/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Business English, English speaking, English for Specific Purposes

Both English language proficiency and business communication skills are increasingly valued in many countries, and Vietnam is no exception. While some universities focus primarily on general English instruction, business-specialized institutions offer EFL programs that integrate foundational business knowledge alongside English language learning. This study investigated how English-majored students perceived the importance of Business English speaking for their future employment. Twelve third-year students participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research applies a qualitative method with thematic analysis. The findings indicated that all participants recognized Business English speaking as an essential skill for their professional futures. Participants also offered practical suggestions for improving Business English instruction, particularly through activities that simulate real workplace communication.

Introduction

English is recognized as the international language because it provides access to many career opportunities, academic interests, and promising future pathways. According to the International Center for Language Studies (ICLS, 2024), English has approximately 1.5 billion users worldwide, with 75% of them being non-native speakers. As global demand for English continues to grow, the language has been increasingly differentiated into specialized branches designed to meet specific learner needs. One particular example is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), broadly defined as an approach to language instruction tailored to the communicative requirements of particular occupational or academic contexts (Farmati et al., 2022). Business English, a branch of ESP under English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), has attracted growing attention due to its direct relevance to workplace communication and graduate employability. Business English is formally defined as the teaching and use of English in business contexts and professional organizations (Zhang, 2005).

Within Business English, speaking is widely recognized as one of the most critical skills for

professional contexts. Effective oral communication enables individuals to perform essential workplace functions such as negotiation, client interactions, and team collaboration, contexts in which spoken fluency and professional vocabulary intersect in ways that general English instruction does not always address (Qasim, 2021). Despite this, research suggests that EFL learners frequently identify speaking as their most challenging skill to develop, due to factors such as limited confidence, fear of making errors, and insufficient opportunities for authentic practice (Putri et al., 2020). This tension between the perceived importance of Business English speaking and the challenges learners face in developing it raises meaningful questions about how students themselves perceive its role in their futures.

At some business-specialized universities in Vietnam, where EFL programs blend general English with foundational business knowledge, students occupy a distinctive position: they are simultaneously developing language skills and business awareness, yet their perceptions of how these combine to shape their employment prospects remain underexplored. This study aims to investigate how English-majored students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB) perceive the importance of Business English speaking for their future employment. HUB represents a relevant and specific context for this inquiry, as its English Studies program integrates both general English instruction and business-oriented language courses throughout the curriculum. By focusing on students' perceptions, this study seeks to contribute a learner perspective to the existing literature on Business English education in Vietnam, and to offer insights that may be of practical value to lecturers seeking to align their instruction more closely with students' expectations and the course objectives.

Literature Review

The role of English speaking

Speaking is one of the four fundamental language skills, along with writing, reading, and listening. Speaking is also one of the two productive skills, besides writing. According to several foreign learners, regardless of age, speaking is often considered the most challenging skill to master due to certain factors such as the fear of making mistakes, incorrect pronunciation, and low confidence (Putri et al., 2020). Several EFL learners might perceive that learning speaking skills would consume an enormous amount of time. Despite years of practicing, some learners are still unable to speak English fluently (Houn & Em, 2022; Ork et al., 2024). This might result in the idea that speaking should be the least prioritized. In fact, speaking is believed to be the most important skill because it is used far more frequently than the other three skills, namely writing, listening, and reading. People speak daily, anytime, and anywhere, from ordinary conversations to school, work, and so on. Speaking occurs everywhere, whether in formal or informal contexts (Rahayu, 2015). Having good oral communication skills would be beneficial in terms of building personal confidence and professional relationships (Zanola, 2015). In the current era of ever-increasing globalization, trade, and commerce, the importance of obtaining effective communication skills is more crucial than ever in fostering international collaboration, thereby contributing to the growth of organizations (My & Thao, 2025). In response to this, a new model of English has been

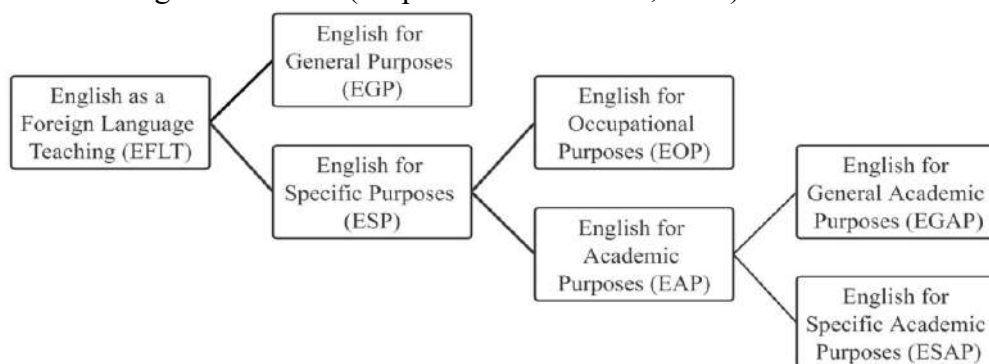
introduced for teaching, known as “Business English”.

The development and significance of Business English

Business English has been around for a long time, with an estimated duration of more than 50 years. Even so, the first emergence of Business English was considered late. Kutateladze (2014) mentions that Business English emerged after its two brothers, English for Academic Purposes and English for Science and Technology. This late emergence of Business English was attributed by Kutateladze to the growing popularity of technology and science around the mid-19th century. Kutateladze also suggests that Business English is a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Regarding ESP, this is a more specific approach to using English to meet learners’ needs in the workplace, where English is tailored to include topic-related vocabulary and skills (Wulandari, 2023). Previous studies have shown that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) had already drawn considerable attention in the late 1960s; some people briefly defined ESP as using English in realistic situations (Lamri, 2016; Rahman, 2015; Garcia García Laborda & Litzler, 2015), as the classification of English branches is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Classification of English branches (adapted from Liu et al., 2023).



English is categorized into distinct sections, with the two most noticeable aspects being English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for General Purposes (EGP). While ESP represents the use of English in organizational settings, EGP refers to learning English to enhance students’ overall efficiency in schools or universities (Huang & Tsai, 2024). Business English, a branch of ESP, is classified into English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), along with some related fields such as English for Medical Purposes and English for Media Purposes. Individuals who use Business English as their primary means of communication at work are likely to work in fields such as banking, finance, investing, or trading (Sharma, 2020). Business English, integrated with explicit communication skills, is experiencing high demand from companies and offers a range of opportunities. Therefore, it is crucial that universities invest in Business English speaking courses to ensure students have opportunities to work in various business-related fields, such as banking, marketing, and others (Xi, 2018). Vietnamese universities are no exception, specifically business-specialized universities, where an emphasis on business communication is growing.

Business English in Vietnamese higher education

There are Vietnamese universities that offer non-English majors Business English courses

ranging from basic to advanced levels. For English-majored students at business-specialized universities, their English skill courses are a blend of business and English learning. There are several coursebooks to choose from; the two most popular for Business English among English-majored students are *Market Leader* and *Business Advantage* (Pham, 2015). The two commonly used coursebooks for Business English instruction at HUB are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.

Supplementary coursebooks used for English language and Business English instruction (*Market Leader* and *Business Advantage*).



Source: Course syllabus of English Major, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB); images retrieved from Google Images.

These materials help build a solid foundation by providing an introduction to the vocabulary used in organizations. Beyond the courses' learning materials, students' engagement with the subject is extremely important to ensure an effective lesson. To enhance this aspect, activities such as role-plays, presentations, and other teamwork-based activities are used (Landa, 2010; Razali & Ismail, 2017). The same approaches can also be integrated into Business English learning; English-majored students will be exposed to situations where they are in meetings, delivering speeches on company growth and statistics. These teamwork activities, even though they last only minutes, significantly improve learners' communication skills (Ishak & Aziz, 2022). Notably, speaking is the skill that receives the most attention and emphasis. In practice, activities such as teamwork on a presentation are essential and widely used in many courses (Thuy, 2025). Subjects such as reading, writing, and listening are no exception; presentations appear in most courses, which indirectly helps foster speaking skills. Therefore, in terms of communication skills, it is clear that the students are equipped with the main speaking courses and, to some extent, from other subjects' presentation activities.

Previous studies on Business English

Several studies have explored learners' and stakeholders' perceptions of Business English and its relationship to employability. Wu (2012) examined the views of students and employers on Business English instruction and found that listening and speaking were the two skills most in need of further development. The study also highlighted the importance of incorporating tasks

that reflect real workplace situations, so that learners can apply their knowledge more effectively in professional contexts. Furthermore, Zainuddin et al. (2019) found that English proficiency, particularly oral communication, is a key factor driving graduate employability. Both employees and students in their study agreed that candidates with strong English-speaking skills are viewed more favorably by employers, particularly in roles that involve meetings, negotiations, and international collaboration.

Similarly, Chan (2014) and Thomas et al. (2016) examined employer perspectives on communication skills in Hong Kong and Bahrain, respectively, finding consistent agreement that effective business communication, beyond general fluency, is a valued and increasingly expected professional attribute. At the learner level, Ratnaningsih (2024) investigated entrepreneurship students and found that their attitudes toward English speaking improved as they recognized its practical relevance to business contexts. Tipmontree and Tasanameelarp (2018) similarly found that among 45 Thai EFL university students, the majority viewed Business English as more directly linked to employment prospects than general English, though some noted a need for more scaffolded instruction to keep pace with course content. This further suggests that Business English plays such a vital role that no learner can ignore it, but must follow it carefully.

Research gaps

Several studies have examined the necessity of English proficiency for students, especially EFL learners (Rao, 2019). Recently, in Vietnam, Le and Le (2022) explored university students' awareness of the role of English. The paper demonstrates that Vietnamese students recognize that English is an indispensable tool that provides benefits for foreign learners. So far, there have been positive views of English as a crucial package for EFL learners in many countries, not just Vietnam. However, studies that specifically examine Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of Business English speaking in a business-specialized university context remain comparatively limited. Moreover, most existing studies tend to rely on quantitative approaches or focus on general attitudes toward English, rather than exploring learners' qualitative perceptions of a specific skill within a professional employability framework. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how English-majored students at HUB perceive the role of Business English speaking in their future employment.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do English-majored students perceive the importance of Business English speaking skills?
2. To what extent do students believe Business English speaking contributes to their future employability?

Methods

Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach involving twelve third-year English-majored

students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB). Participants were selected through convenience sampling with purposive criteria; specifically, all participants were required to have completed the Business English speaking courses offered within the English Studies program. This criterion was considered appropriate because students who had completed these courses would have sufficient first-hand experience to reflect meaningfully on the role of Business English speaking in their future employment. Hammarberg et al. (2016) note that qualitative methods are well suited to perception-based studies, as they prioritize individual insights and allow participants to express their thoughts in depth. The twelve participants were aged 20 to 22. Even though all of them claimed to have been learning English for more than 10 years, their English proficiency levels varied widely. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), participants' English proficiency ranged from B1 (intermediate) to C1 (advanced). This self-assessment was based on their scores in English subjects, and one participant obtained an IELTS band score of 7.0, equivalent to level C1 (Advanced).

Data collection

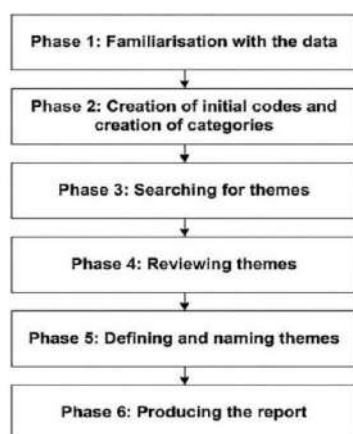
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, chosen because this format allows flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions (Fylan, 2005). Each interview consisted of 10 questions, including 3 closed-ended warm-up questions to gather background information and 7 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of Business English speaking and its relevance to future employment. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to express their thoughts comfortably and in full, without the added pressure of responding in English. Interviews were recorded with verbal informed consent obtained from each participant prior to recording. Participants were also given time to prepare before their interviews to ensure thoughtful responses.

Data analysis

This study applies a thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) analysis framework, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis.



The process involves: (1) analyzing the answers, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming and explaining each theme, and (6) producing the report. The answers were gathered via a recording. Initially, they were fully translated from the source language, Vietnamese, into the target language, English. Besides, the translation process ensured trustworthiness and maintained an unbiased spirit among all participants. Each extract was concisely translated into English to avoid distorting the respondents' original meanings. The translated excerpts were subsequently reviewed by the authors to verify accuracy and minimize the risk of meaning distortion. To further strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the coding process, regularly revisiting the data to ensure that emerging themes were grounded in participants' responses rather than in the researcher's assumptions. Codes were reviewed iteratively until no new themes emerged from the data.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. All participants provided verbal informed consent prior to their involvement and were assured of confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no institutional ethical approval was formally required for this study, as it involved no sensitive personal data and posed no risk to participants. The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Results

This section presents the background information of the twelve participants involved in the study. As shown in Figures 4 and 5 below, the group consisted of an equal number of male and female students, with varying levels of English proficiency ranging from B1 to C1 based on the CEFR framework

Figure 4.

Background information of the participants

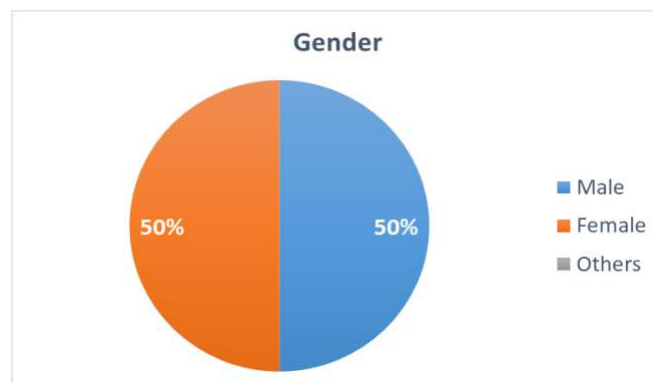
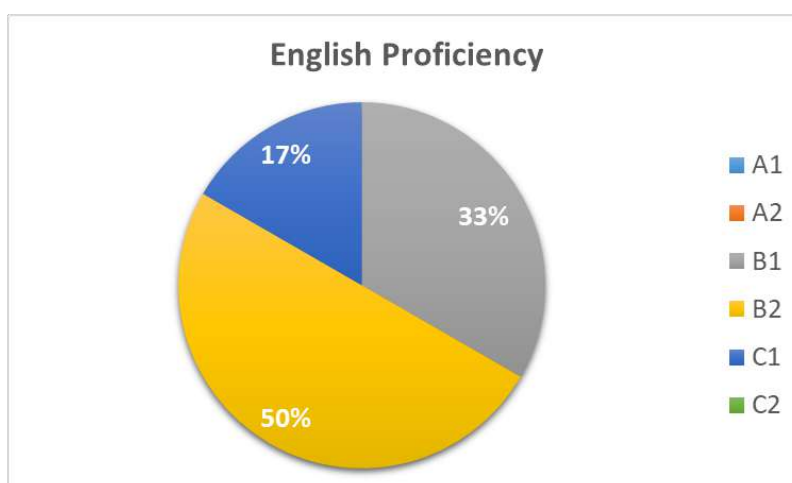


Figure 5.

English proficiency of the participants



The students' English proficiency is categorized according to the CEFR levels, ranging from A1, which is basic, to C2, which denotes an expert user. Half of the participants said that their proficiency is B2, which means upper-intermediate. At this level, they can use English for basic communication and decent writing with minimal difficulty. 33% claimed their level is B1, which is intermediate. This level indicates that users can use decent English, but with rather basic, low-accuracy language. The remaining 17% reported being at the C1 level (advanced), meaning they can communicate fluently and understand most reading and listening materials in English.

Results from thematic analysis

Through the thematic analysis process of the twelve interviews, the findings display five major themes: (1) Perceived importance of Business English speaking, (2) Limited practice opportunities in current courses, (3) Business English speaking and employability, (4) Motivation and factors affecting learning, and (5) Suggested improvements for Business English courses.

Theme 1: Perceived importance of Business English speaking

All twelve participants consistently identified speaking as the most critical skill in Business English, particularly for future employment. Their responses centered on two interconnected ideas: that effective speaking creates immediate professional impressions, and that it directly enables core workplace functions such as negotiations, meetings, and client communication.

"In my opinion, speaking skill is the most important in Business English because most of the communication in business is usually interactive through conversations, meetings or negotiations....., it helps to show confidence and create an impression in the working environment for me later. So I am trying to develop this skill as much as possible." (P7, translated)

“.....for students majoring in business English, speaking is very important in communicating and negotiating with employers.....knowing about the principles and terminology in business helps us to apply and brainstorm new ideas and get promoted.” (P1, translated)

“In my opinion, speaking skills are the most important, because communication plays a key role in the working environment. Speaking well helps to convey ideas clearly and create a professional impression.” (P10, translated)

These responses suggest that participants do not view Business English speaking as an isolated language skill, but rather as a practical tool for employability, one that shapes how they are perceived in professional contexts before any other qualification is considered. The unanimity of this view among all twelve participants, regardless of their proficiency level, indicates that this perception is shaped not by individual language ability alone but by a shared awareness of what the job market demands.

Theme 2: Limited practice opportunities in current courses

Despite having completed all required speaking courses, including Advanced Speaking and the Business English course, participants consistently noted a gap between what they had learned in class and what they felt was needed for real workplace communication. Two recurring concerns emerged: the theoretical nature of course content, and the lack of authentic, context-based practice opportunities.

“Courses at school also equip students with many things, such as vocabulary and business sentences, but practically it is hard to visualize because there are lots of new words and only theory.” (P2, translated)

While P2 found the content difficult due to its complexity, others felt the opposite, that lessons were quite basic to be practically useful. P9 acknowledged that current courses provide a foundational understanding of workplace communication but noted they fall short of reflecting real situations. P1 similarly characterized the courses as introductory, useful as preparation but insufficient for in-depth professional application.

“Not enough because we are just skimming and memorizing, also not understanding much about commerce and how it works.” (P3, translated)

“Just at the basic level because as I said, we learn basic knowledge so that we can prepare better so that we can study in depth about the field we want to work in the future, but it would not be easy.” (P1, translated)

Overall, these responses point to a shared perception that current Business English courses, while providing useful foundational knowledge, do not adequately prepare students for the communicative demands of actual workplace environments. This perceived gap between classroom learning and professional reality appears to heighten participants' awareness of what

they still need to develop before entering the job market.

Theme 3: Business English speaking and employability

All twelve participants agreed that Business English speaking skills would meaningfully improve their employment prospects after graduation. Their responses consistently framed speaking proficiency not merely as a language skill, but as a competitive advantage in the job market.

“Being able to speak English well is a big advantage, it can help communicate with business partners, which can open up more development opportunities.” (P8, translated)

“Good communication in the commercial field will help me connect with many international businesses, opening up many great opportunities.” (P9, translated)

“Interviews are easier, easier to impress because I know business terms, and if I am fluent, my chances of getting accepted will be significantly higher.” (P5, translated)

A common thread across all responses was the belief that fluency in Business English speaking, combined with solid business knowledge, significantly increases the likelihood of being hired by international organizations and larger companies. P4 further acknowledged the importance of continued self-directed practice, recognizing that professional-level speaking requires ongoing exposure beyond what courses currently provide. This suggests that participants view Business English speaking not as an academic requirement, but as a direct investment in their professional futures.

Theme 4: Motivation and factors affecting learning

While employability emerged as a primary motivator, participants identified a range of additional factors that sustained their effort to develop Business English speaking skills. Two factors appeared most frequently: lecturers' roles and the learning environment's influence.

“I would say career demands, learning environment, confidence in speaking English and teacher teaching style.” (P12, translated)

“It’s the teaching method from the teacher. Because this subject has a lot of difficult specialized vocabulary, the teacher needs to point out which words should be learned and explain further for students to understand.” (P7, translated)

More than half of the participants (N=8) indicated that their lecturers were among the most significant sources of motivation. Several others (N=5) pointed to the peer environment as equally motivating; being surrounded by confident and ambitious classmates encouraged them to push themselves further.

“I think the first thing is the learning environment. If everyone around me is good, I will also have the motivation to learn, and I think the most important thing is that I myself

must try to study well for my future.” (P4, translated)

These findings suggest that motivation to develop Business English speaking skills is shaped by both external factors, particularly teacher quality and peer influence, and internal drive linked to future career goals. The interplay between these factors points to the importance of both classroom dynamics and individual agency in sustaining long-term language development.

Theme 5: Suggested improvements for Business English courses

Participants offered concrete suggestions for improving Business English speaking instruction, with the majority (N=7) emphasizing the need for more authentic, simulation-based activities that reflect real workplace scenarios.

“Teachers should create more situations in the business environment for students to get used to. Moreover, they can consider inviting business experts or foreign speakers to share so that students have the opportunity to learn more.” (P2, translated)

“I think we should let students practice real-life situations like simulations for businesses so that students can understand and get used to the professional environment, like playing roleplay to see how they handle situations.” (P4, translated)

Role-playing activities were the most frequently mentioned suggestion, with participants describing them as an effective way to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. P9 called for increased time dedicated to practical speaking practice, including role-plays and talks with real business professionals. P6 suggested incorporating more business-related activities into the curriculum to help students become familiar with real-world operating models and industry-specific terminology.

“I hope the school can increase the time for practical speaking practice, such as role-playing work situations or organizing talks with real businesspeople. This will help students learn more naturally and confidently.” (P9, translated)

These suggestions reflect participants’ broader awareness that the current curriculum, while providing a useful foundation, needs greater emphasis on experiential learning to better prepare them for professional communication in real-world business environments.

Table 1.

Summary of themes identified from the thematic analysis

The five themes identified from the thematic analysis are summarized in Table 1 below.

Main Theme	Description	Participants Supporting (N)	Illustrative Quote
1. Perceived importance of Business English speaking	Students viewed speaking as the key to employability and confidence in business contexts.	12	“Speaking skill is the most important... it helps to show confidence.” (P7)
2. Limited practice opportunities in current courses	Lessons focus on theory rather than authentic practice.	12	“We are just memorizing... not understanding much about commerce.” (P3)
3. Business English speaking and employability	Speaking skills enhance job prospects and professional image.	12	“Good communication helps me connect with international businesses.” (P9)
4. Motivation and factors affecting learning	Motivation arises from teachers and the environment.	8	“Teacher’s method and learning environment motivate me.” (P4)
5. Suggested improvements for Business English courses	Students propose role-plays and inviting business experts to enhance practice.	7	“Teachers should create real-life business situations.” (P2)

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on Business English and employability (Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018; Ratnaningsih, 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2019), which have similarly confirmed that speaking in Business English plays an important role in helping graduates access better job opportunities. Most prior studies focused on young entrepreneurs or students from non-language majors, whereas this study examines EFL students whose curricula already blend general English with foundational business knowledge, a context that has received limited attention in the literature.

All twelve participants expressed that they value what they have learned through their Business English courses at HUB. They recognized that their program, which integrates both general English and business-oriented language instruction, provided them with preparation that EFL programs without a business focus typically do not offer. As several participants noted, general English proficiency alone would not be sufficient to meet the demands of the job market after graduation; the additional specialized language that Business English provides was seen as genuinely valuable. This awareness likely explains why their responses were detailed and thoughtful, and why they were willing to suggest improvements not just for their own benefit but for the university as a whole.

It is also worth noting that while participants were positive about the role of Business English speaking in their future careers, they were equally aware of the gap between their current level and what the workplace actually demands. They acknowledged that their courses have given them a useful foundation, but felt that more practice in realistic, job-related situations would help them feel more prepared and confident. This suggests that for Business English speaking to truly contribute to employability, it is not enough to teach vocabulary and communication theory alone; students also need opportunities to use the language in ways that reflect real professional demands, such as through role-plays, mock negotiations, or interactions with working professionals (Rojas & Villafuerte, 2018; Krebt, 2017).

This study contributes to research on Business English education in Vietnam by offering a learner-centered view from a group that has not been widely studied: English-majored students at a business-specialized university. The findings highlight that these students are not passive learners; they actively reflect on how their language skills relate to their career prospects and have clear ideas about what they need. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus. The findings represent the views of 12 students at HUB and cannot be generalized beyond that group. It is encouraged that future research involving larger samples across different universities, or using experimental methods to test the actual impact of Business English speaking instruction on employment outcomes, would help build a more complete understanding of this relationship.

Conclusion

This study explored how twelve English-majored students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking perceive the role of Business English speaking in their future employment. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the findings indicate that participants consistently viewed Business English speaking as a skill that would directly benefit their career prospects, helping them perform better in job interviews, communicate more professionally at work, and connect with international business partners.

These findings contribute a learner-centered perspective to the existing literature on Business English education in Vietnam, particularly from students at a business-specialized university, a group that has not been widely studied. The study is limited in scope, and the voices of 12 participants from a single institution cannot be generalized broadly. Future research with larger samples and experimental designs would help build a stronger evidence base, and both students and educators may benefit from keeping employability at the center of how Business English speaking is taught, not just as a language skill, but as a genuine professional tool.

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Biodata

Nguyen Tuong Thien Lac is a fourth-year student majoring in English Studies at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam. He works part-time as an English teacher for IELTS and high school students. His research interests include English language teaching, Business English, and language learning motivation, with a particular focus on integrating AI and innovative methods to improve English proficiency.

Dr. Nguyen Van Nguyen is working at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam. He earned a PhD in English Language Studies from Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. His research interests include genre analysis, corpus linguistics, ESP, EMI, and ELF.

Vol. 6, No. 3 (2026): TESOL & Education

Doi: <https://doi.org/1054855/ijte.2663>

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3233-457X>

Publisher: ICTE Press

Address: 2520 Panhandle St., Denton, Texas 76201, USA

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Country of Publication: Texas, United States

Publisher: ICTE Press, <https://i-cte.org/press>

Website: <https://i-jte.org>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@ictepress>

Open Access: Yes

ISSN: 2768-4563

Frequency: 4 issues per year

Publication Dates: February, May, August, and November

Language: English

Scope: TESOL, Languages & Linguistics, Education, Pedagogies & Language Teaching, Translation & Interpretation, Cultural studies, Quality Assurance in Education

Article Processing Charges: \$70

Types of Journal: Academic/Scholarly Journals

Indexed: Google Scholar, ORCID, Crossref, DOI, Library of Congress, PKP PN, LOCKSS, CLOCKSS, Semantic Scholar, ROAD, EuroPub, J-Gate,

Policy: Double blind peer review

Plagiarism check: Turnitin

Contact: publishing@i-cte.org; editor@i-jte.org