

The Social and Cultural Inclusion within Vietnamese English Language Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

Social and cultural inclusion skills are one of essential requirements for higher education graduates, especially for those from the English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) programs. This paper, a part of our project, explores skills standards, including social and cultural skills, that Vietnamese ELTE programs prepared for graduates. A mixed method was applied with a survey and 33 interviews. The participants were ELTE students, lecturers, administrators, and instructional leaders from 11 institutions across all parts of Vietnam. The policy documents collected from institutional curriculum, outcomes, and national standards, issued since 2008 to date. The documents were analysed to construct a deeper understanding of the complexities of policy implementation. The findings revealed a high percentage of students who were not confident with social and cultural inclusion skills. They perceived poor skills of social and cultural inclusion were resulted from their limited English knowledge and proficiency skills. However, lecturers and instructional leaders reported different perceptions. The findings strongly confirmed earlier studies and contributed to the extant literature, in terms of both research topics and contexts. This paper will focus on ill-prepared graduates with social and cultural inclusion skills and a low level of alignment between policy and practice in the researched institutions. Suggestions to improve those essential skills will be provided. The paper will be meaningful not only for ELTE educators, instructors, and learners, but also for educational policy makers and managers. The findings can be applicable for ELTE programs in other countries which share the similar language teaching and learning conditions.

Keywords: cultural competence, policy, practice, skills, standards

List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
ELTE	English Language Teacher Education
ELP	English Language Proficiency
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training

1. Introduction

The English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) programs in Vietnam have been, for ages, considered to be problematic and heavy with more non-language courses than language courses and stronger focus on theory than practice. Many Vietnamese scholars commented on these programs with an imbalance between theory and practice as well as insufficient preparations of essential skills for graduate students (Nguyen, 2019).

Previous studies also stated that Vietnamese institutions failed to meet expectations of students and society, and there were constraints when institutions developed curriculum and outcomes approved by Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) (Dao & Hayden, 2010; Harman, Hayden, & Pham, 2010; N. T. Phan, 2015).

In the new era of internationalisation and globalisation, it is necessary to prepare students to meet higher expectations of the society to be able to integrate with other cultures and countries. However, it is reported that Vietnamese undergraduate students are insufficiently prepared with essential skills, especially cultural and employability skills (Tran, 2018; Truong, S. Laura, & Shaw, 2018).

ELTE programs in Vietnam are similar to those of other neighbouring ASEAN countries like Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand whose investment for developing English language teaching and learning is a response to the economic pressure. Yet, there remained challenges despite large investments. Vietnamese ELTE showed gaps between language policies and implementation. As a result, graduates had low English language proficiency (ELP) skills, and the teaching and learning faced many challenges as well. Graduates found not confident in either English language proficiency or culturally competent skills. Students are proposed to be prepared various skills to seek jobs; however, they are not fully compatible with the requirements of the labour market, or the level of provided skills is not satisfactory (V. T. T. Phan, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2022).

2. The requirements of knowledge and skills for ELTE graduate students

ELTE programs aim to provide students with knowledge, skills, and dispositions. These elements are crucial to their graduation and readiness for entering the educational teaching contexts.

The general areas which must be provided by any pre-service teacher education program are (i) knowledge of learners and their development within social contexts; (ii) conceptions of curriculum content and goals (an understanding of the subject matter and skills to be taught in light of the social purposes of education); and (iii) an understanding of teaching in light of the content and learners to be taught, as informed by assessment and supported by classrooms environments (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 10).

It cannot be denied that social and cultural inclusion skills are part of the skills areas. These skills are important for students to understand and then effectively apply into their teaching sites or working place after graduation. It is necessary to explore how students are prepared with social and cultural knowledge and skills. It will also help increase students' outcomes and evaluate programs' achievements.

3. ELTE programs

ELTE programs of the researched institutions ranged from 123 to 141 credits in length, complying with the core standards set out by MoET. The programs included foundation and professional knowledge courses. Foundation knowledge was a requirement for all majors which was instructed in Vietnamese language. Professional knowledge was typically varied respectively with specific majors. Professional knowledge was closely connected to employments after graduation (Nguyen, 2019).

Vietnamese ELTE programs share the centralised implementation with other South-East Asian countries; however, they identify different outcomes and standards at institutional level. Institutions have their own policy interpretations and further requirements to match their specific contexts.

MoET approved the core standards for the higher education programs (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010a). MoET stated that the general objectives of English pre-service teacher education programs are to prepare graduates to be qualified, professional, and ethical teachers of English at different levels. In addition, graduates could also become interpreters and translators in any industries where English language proficiency is a requirement (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010b).

Specifically, ELTE graduates' standards include knowledge, pedagogical skills, learning skills, and employability skills. The content knowledge covers Vietnamese culture, pedagogy, psychology, English knowledge, and language teaching methodology. Level 4/6 of the

Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) was required for English teachers at primary and secondary schools; Level 5/6 for those at high schools (Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008). Graduates are also required to achieve pedagogical skills. Learning skills include self-studying and research. Employability skills require students' abilities to successfully organise, mobilise, and collaborate with other school stakeholders (Directive No.2196/BGDĐT-GDDH, 2010).

ELTE programs' outcomes designed by institutions must be in accordance with MoET's standards but also with their specific missions. Institution often designed outcomes to match their scale, capacity, and their students' levels. For example, institutions varied interpretations of MoET's *English knowledge* standards as *English knowledge in language skills, grammar, semantics and translation*, or *capacity of handling proficient knowledge in the process of communication with foreigners, translation, teaching English at all levels* (Ho Chi Minh University of Education, 2010; Sai Gon University, 2012). In some institutions, apart from requirements of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, they added requirements of meeting the employability and student long-life learning standards. For example, Hanoi National University of Education identified qualities and competencies of graduates with specific requirements of (1) knowledge, (2) skills, (3) attitude, and (4) ability to improve their further learning after graduation. The institution also stated that the requirements would be added and modified regularly to match the teaching and learning contexts (Hanoi University of Education, 2009).

In summary, MoET approved the core national standards for pre-service teacher programs, identifying the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the graduate students. However, institutions might interpret MoET's standards in their own ways when designing outcomes to fit their specific context. Therefore, outcomes were varied from institution to institution because some sets of standards may have been ignored or interpreted differently from MoET's originality standards.

4. Methodology

From the teaching experience and investigating the policy documents, a mix-method study was conducted across all parts of Vietnam to explore how well ELTE students were prepared with social and cultural inclusion standards as required by MoET and at which level they have met the social expectations.

This study was to investigate the levels of alignment between ELTE programs and standards. The data sources consisted of documents (at both the ministry and institutional levels), a survey, and interviews to construct a deeper understanding of the complexities of ELTE policy implementation.

The study was conducted across 11 of the representatives of ELTE institutions from the north to the south of Vietnam. Four of which are provincial and seven are metropolitan institutions. The participating institutions are anonymous and reported as numbers, from Institution 1 to Institution 11.

The survey respondents and interviewees were students, lecturers, administrators, and instructional leaders from these 11 institutions. The policies were collected from the ministry and institutional documents related to curriculum, outcomes and standards issued since 2008 to date.

The policy documents were collected from online sources, institutional webpages, and the open access educational sources. Of these documents, the Law on Education and Law on Higher Education, regulations and joint circulars regarding curriculum and graduates' requirements, directives for the setting and publishing of outcomes, and two decisions closely related to ELP standards were paid much attention. The governmental documents were collected from official decisions, directives, guidelines, and speeches reported in multimedia.

5. Findings

As presented above, this paper will only focus on some major findings of our project.

5.1 Insufficient courses providing socio-cultural knowledge and skills

The policy documents analysis significantly revealed the following findings:

Knowledge and skills of Social and Cultural linguistics were provided via both compulsory and elective courses. For example, students may be provided with courses of Linguistic Acquisition, Social Linguistics, and Cultural Linguistics.

Although all institutions clearly identified social-cultural knowledge in their expected outcomes, namely British and American geography, civilization, culture, inter-culture, and arts, etc., the number of courses and credit hours allocated for this knowledge is quite limited.

On average, ELTE programs allocated 76.69% to the courses relating to English language knowledge and skills, including linguistic, culture, and language practices. Only 7.42% of the total program was allocated on cultural courses (9.91 credits out of 134 credits). There were only two out of 11 researched institutions to spend more than 10% of the total credit hours on cultural courses (Institutions 01 and 08).

One Southern provincial institution allocated only a 2 credit-hour course (1.43%) in the total program to provide students with cultural knowledge and skills. The interviewed lecturers from this institution concerned how to provide students with knowledge and skills of social and cultural inclusion within only 2 credit-hours. They claimed they could not have time to even introduce the importance or objectives of the course. They further said there was no time to conduct activities which help students familiarise with cultural inclusion situations.

The number of courses and credit-hours allocated for cultural knowledge and skills are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: The ELTE Curriculum in researched institutions

Names of institutions	Total credits	Cultural courses	% of the cultural courses in the total program
Institution 01	136	14	10.29%
Institution 02	135	8	5.93%
Institution 03	136	12	8.82%
Institution 04	131	10	7.63%
Institution 05	132	9	6.82%
Institution 06	141	10	7.09%
Institution 07	139	8	5.76%
Institution 08	135	18	13.33%
Institution 09	140	2	1.43%
Institution 10	126	8	6.35%
Institution 11	123	10	8.13%
Average	134	9.91	7.42%

ELTE programs provided students with knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture and people. The related courses, i.e. Literature of English-Speaking Countries, Language-Culture and Society, American and British Civilization, American and British Culture, British-American Countries Studies, and Inter-Cultural Communication, made up 7.42% (on average) of the total program. A large metropolitan institution and one provincial institution offered one more course named 'Introduction to Southeast Asian Cultures' into their programs (Institutions 03 and 01).

5.2 Limited socio-cultural courses but high-aim objectives

ELTE programs allocated limited number of courses and credit hours providing students with socio-cultural knowledge and skills. However, the findings showed high expectations of curriculum designers and educators from students' outcomes.

For example, the course 'Cultures within English language speaking countries' from Institution 9 clearly identified its outcomes, stating:

By the end of the course, students will achieve knowledge of:

- *Cultural dimensions within English language speaking countries*

- Cultural typical dimensions of each specific country
- The popularity of English language all over the world.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Compare and explain the cultural dimensions of English Language Speaking countries
- Critically develop their mind to analyse the cultural dimensions of English Language Speaking countries
- Develop the presentation skills
- Develop self-studying skills

By the end of the course, students will improve their awareness and dispositions of:

- The importance of knowledge of inter-cultures
- The importance of knowledge of cultural dimensions
- The positive awareness of the cultural diversity
- The self-confidence in communication with people from other English Language speaking countries

The course's time allocation was so little, but its objectives were highly aimed with a variety of achievements specifically grouped in knowledge, skills, awareness, and dispositions.

5.3 Students were not confident with social and cultural skills

The findings revealed a high percentage of ELTE students being unconfident with social and cultural skills. They perceived that limited social and cultural inclusion skills were resulted from their poor English knowledge and proficiency skills.

A student from a provincial institution (Institution 4) said:

I am the fourth year student. Not only me but a lot of friends in our cohort had the same belief that we could only try to achieve English language proficiency standard rather than spending time on culture or cultural inclusive matters. Because our ELP was much lower than the required standards, we could not learn or perform cultural inclusion well. As you may know, if we cannot achieve the required ELP standards, we will not be awarded the program graduation degree, but we still can receive degree without cultural inclusion skills.

Another student from a large provincial institution (Institution 9) said:

I think most of my friends know what is the most important to prepare and try to achieve. Cultural inclusion skills are for those who have higher levels of ELP, not for the lower level ones, including me. More importantly, when we can improve ELP skills, our social and cultural skills will be developed paralelly, maybe without attempting to achieve. Our major purpose now is to imprpove ELP, not the other skills.

A student from a metropolitan institution showed his positive perception about the necessity of preparation for these essential skills, noting:

I think in the globalisation era, we need to prepare, by ourselves, social and cultural inclusion skills. We do not hope to be prepared everything within our ELTE program because of its limitation in time and credit hours. Many friends are only paying attention to the courses providing English Language Proficiency, but they are not focusing on oher courses. Our lecturers did not provide practical activities during cultural courses; therefore these courses are not motivating. Most of my friends blamed for their

poor ELP which prevented them from being culturally competent. But I do believe that despite having low levels of ELP, we still could attempt to improve our cultural skills if we wished to.

Some lecturers reported that they were not sure about the contents and skills in the cultural courses. They said prior to conducting those courses, they had no understandings of contents. An experienced lecturer from a northern provincial institution said:

I completed my ELTE Bachelor program nearly twenty years ago which had no courses of cultures nor cultural competence. Since teaching in this institution, I have only been teaching ELP skills, and had no ideas about cultural competence. I think, but many other teachers like me could not find confident to teach students the courses relating to cultures, nor can we prepare students with cultural competence. We do not often have any discussion about social and cultural inclusion because we find unfamiliar and difficult.

Some other lecturers complained they just could briefly introduce the countries, people and only a few significant cultural symbols of the countries referred to in the course syllabus, because of limited courses and allocated credit hours.

It was concerning to find that a large number of lecturers said they found challenging when teaching these courses as students did not want to get involved. Students attended the courses only for their attendance mark, not aiming to obtain knowledge or skills, therefore they showed little engagement. Lecturers thus did not want to waste time preparing activities or supplementary reading materials, which they found meaningless.

6. Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The interviews and documents data analysis revealed lecturers' concerns about ill-preparation of their programs for students regarding soft skills, including social and cultural competence. This is confirmed by earlier studies reporting a lack of skills development in Vietnamese tertiary curriculum (Bodewig, Badiani-Magnusson, Macdonad, Newhouse, & Rutkowski, 2014; L. H. N. Tran, 2018b; T. T. Tran, 2013).

The findings showed an imbalance of courses within ELTE programs and imbalanced credit-hours among courses. Previous researchers said that the poor curriculum weighting could not demonstrate good practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Peacock, 2009). A high-quality curriculum offers sufficient and balanced time allocation for each course or learning area for students to develop knowledge, skills, and values (Menken & Antunez, 2001; Seufert et al., 2005; Stabback, 2016, p. 22).

Earlier studies say that Vietnamese higher education curriculum tends to focus largely on equipping students with theoretical and scholastic knowledge (T. L. Tran, Le, & Nguyen, 2014). The findings of this study confirmed that ELTE programs offered minimal time for social cultural skills. In other words, students were not well-prepared for these skills.

To improve ELTE programs' outcomes in general, and to have a more effective preparation for graduates with socio-cultural competence skills in particular, different suggestions for both faculty and institutional levels are provided.

The first and most important suggestion is to revise programs to meet the rapid change of socio-economy and educational approach in the current globalization context. It should be noted that in the globalisation era, students are not limited to study in their home country, but they have a great number of chances to study abroad. Therefore, socio-cultural competence and inclusion should be considered and paid more attention. If possible, more courses, either compulsory or elective, providing social and cultural inclusion knowledge and skills should be considered to add in the curriculum.

At faculty and institution level, lecturers may consider organising workshops or seminars regarding social and cultural inclusion, where the cultural incidents can be discussed to find out the best ways to avoid culture shocks and to communicate culturally competently. For examples, four or five different cultural incidents may be chosen to discuss in each seminar. Attendees will have chances to discuss and find out critical ways to solve the given problems/incidents. This may help students get more familiar with cultural competence skills. Gradually they will find cultural competence necessary not only for their studying programs but also for their language teaching contexts after graduation.

Curriculum designers and teachers may consider providing supplementary materials closely relating to social and cultural inclusion which students can use as extensive reading materials. Supplementary materials are not limited to reading resources, but they could be reliable videos or websites which are authentic.

For institutions where they have English clubs, it is recommended to train and motivate English club members to prepare more social and cultural activities and performance. This may help students study and join in cultural or multi-cultural contexts at the same time.

Preparing students with necessary knowledge and skills are always the crucial objectives of any programs. Based on this study findings, regarding insufficient preparations social and cultural inclusion knowledge and skills, lecturers and administrators are aware of the gap between the ministry policy standards and their institutional practice. These suggestions and recommendations will be helpful to address this gap. They will be meaningful to prepare students with intercultural competence knowledge and skills which they can apply in teaching sites and working places after graduation.

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