

English Proficiency as a University Graduation Requirement in Vietnam: The Key to Economic Development and Prosperity?

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews Vietnam's university English proficiency graduation requirement under the National Foreign Languages Project (NFLP) 2020, which mandates non-English majors to reach a B1 level on the CEFR for the country's future global development. It examines the policy in the context of English proficiency and national economic development or prosperity. Existing research shows that Outer-Circle countries tend to be less economically developed or prosperous than their Expanding-Circle counterparts. The Philippines serves as a cautionary example. High English proficiency has made the country a hub of the BPO industry and a major provider of overseas workers, which does not necessarily contribute to the country's long-term and further economic growth. Vietnam might face a similar risk: while English may enable short-term gains by improving the BPO industry and increasing the number of overseas Vietnamese workers, this focus may detract from efforts to cultivate talent for domestic development. Furthermore, the 2022 PISA results revealed a decline in Vietnamese students' performance, with drops in mathematics, reading, and science scores compared to previous assessments. This could imply the potential consequences of prioritizing English over core academic skills. Any government should remember that many other factors contribute to a country's economic growth and prosperity. Moreover, AI-powered language tools have lessened the necessity for a one-size-fits-all English education policy. English proficiency should not be prioritized over other factors, including STEM subjects, which drive economic development. English serves only as support, not the main focus. A well-rounded approach that emphasizes multiple factors of national development is crucial.

Keywords: AI, BPO industry, education policy reform, STEM, the Philippines