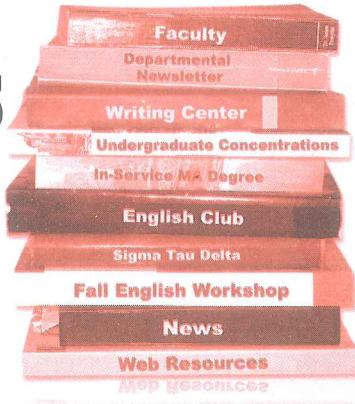




# TEACHING ENGLISH

## AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS HO CHI MINH CITY

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### Introduction

English is perhaps the most rapidly advancing language in the world today. Deep concerns about developments and controversies in English language instruction appear virtually every day in the media. When we look back at the history of language development, the quest for improved English teaching methods has been a major aspect of educational activity since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Technological development has brought the whole world so much closer. English language radio and television programs, videos, and films are readily available in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, along with newspapers and magazines. In addition, Internet usage now provides many opportunities to interact with English-speaking peers on various topics and to develop grammatical, discourse, and socio-cultural competence. World Wide Web sites can supply students with an almost infinite range of information. Teaching General English and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in a variety of professional fields is a developing major in Vietnamese universities - especially at University of Economics in HCMC (UEH). Designing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula and materials, conducting program evaluations, testing and organizing workshops and conferences, are of great importance to English instruction.

### Aims of Teaching English at University of Economics

English has developed as an official or secondary language in many regions other than the Britain, Australia, and North America. It is currently popular in the former colonies or territories of Great Britain and the United States, such as India, Singapore, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Ghana.

In Vietnam, foreign language is a compulsory subject in high schools and universities. In the 20th century, Vietnam rapidly developed in business and industrialization, and foreign investment activities increase every day. These factors lead to the country's education transformation, where English competence is required more than ever. There have been growing demands from students and society, so English language classes were among the top choices in the 2000s.

At UEH, English is one of the required subjects during students' academic years. Students take English subject, in which they work on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills as needed in a business environment. The aim of teaching specialty English for specific applications is to help students master the English language and become more knowledgeable experts. The combination of improved language skills and increased knowledge of specialized fields can enhance student's studies, work and ability to become more

active and highly motivated participants in their communities. Before graduation, students of UEH must concentrate on taking the TOEIC examination to get a certificate of 450 marks. ESP is very necessary for specialized students in their prospective careers; as a result, UEH now focuses on developing English speaking competence, so students have to pass a mid-term speaking test before attending a final-writing and listening test. These requirements have led to the syllabus assessments to be able to choose better materials and teaching methods which are more relevant to the students' English levels and needs. Self-assessment in practice English was considered in the 2000s. Since then, more and more assessment programs at the university level have integrated to estimate syllabus design in the ESP learning and teaching process.

Throughout Vietnam, English is considered to play an important role in shaping outstanding students and skillful citizens. Apparently, the course emphasis is to develop students' skills, improve their abilities by reading materials appropriate to their majors, and widely use English in business communication. In short, the general aim of the English program at UEH is to provide students with a subject-tool to develop their management of language that will help them in lifelong learning and in their future careers.

## **The students' needs and the faculty's goals**

At UEH, the four skills based on content-based syllabus were taught in the ESP program. The students are required to meet the following objectives upon completion of the course:

1. Students must be able to read and comprehend textbooks, articles, statements, advertisements on economics and other related fields. (Reading skill)

2. Students demonstrate the ability to write reports, memos, notices, messages and different types of business letters. (Writing skill)

3. Learners should be able to use the telephone in the office, discuss their work, communicate with customers, become familiar with job interviews, give opinions in company meetings, orally present reports, and business plans. (Speaking skill)

4. Students should understand office conversations about business reports, articles, general questions and requests and phone calls. (Listening

skill)

The students' needs are not contrary to the training goals of the faculty. Social development forces students to firmly grasp by themselves the language knowledge with which they can use in their future career and in their social relationships. After graduating university, students need to understand or explain the meaning of English specialized knowledge and special terms used in their workplace. They need to advance their careers or begin a new career with self-confidence. They want to be good in contact with office conversation. In addition, they like to have a good competency in job interviews to get a better job. Some of them need to continue studying English after finishing university.

The English level of Vietnamese students has risen year after year. From the change of environment, society and person, the needs of language learning are affected in the 2000s. In Vietnam, the movement of developing and renewing the syllabus has been generated within many universities during this period. As Nunan (1999: 72) has put it "syllabus design has to do with selecting and sequencing content, methodology with selecting and sequencing appropriate learning experiences, and evaluation with appraising learners and determining the effectiveness of the curriculum as a whole." The role of the syllabus is a complex one, so it plays an important part in the teaching program for the ESP students at UEH.

## **The English syllabus and suitable materials**

In terms of language development, materials which students are taught must be relevant to their interests and language level. The UEH students have come from many different places in the country, mainly from Southern provinces. As we have known, the conditions of teaching and learning English in remote areas are poor and dissimilar. As a result, the students' English skills are not at the same level. In order to meet the requirement of the university, the teaching staff has to select additional materials to develop the four skills, particularly, the textbooks to address business exercises and specialized knowledge which are needed in the study program. Thus the teaching staff of UEH has to compile necessary materials entitled Practice Book 1, Practice Book 2, Practice Book 3 and Practice Book 4 which are

being applied to teach in the current English program. As we have known, "Practice Book" used for ESP students at UEH satisfied these following characteristics:

1. Has a comprehensive list of content items (words, structures and topics) and process items (tasks, methods).
2. Is ordered (easier, more essential items first).
3. Selects from existing materials and references.
4. Indicates a time schedule and teaching approach.

Through much practice and discussion, the course textbook chosen for the Business English majors is Market Leader (Elementary and Pre-intermediate level) of these authors: David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent. The purpose of textbook range "Market Leader" is to provide students with basic functional knowledge, grammar and structures as well as business vocabulary. The textbook content breaks down into manageable units and sequences in a way that is designed to lead from the familiar to the unfamiliar and from easier to more difficult items. The textbook is accompanied by a tape recording and the texts are read aloud by some native speakers of English so that learners can relate the sound of the spoken words to the written words. The exercises are good and reflect different types of texts. Students should learn to see the texts as a whole message rather than as a series of words.

The aim of using this book is to familiarize students with Basic Business English as the foundation on which their knowledge of specialist English will be built. The course objectives are to provide students with the skills and activities they need to use inside and outside the classroom. An effective seminar to train the teaching method for new textbook Market Leader was held for all teachers who will be in charge of teaching English in the classes. This demonstrated the great interest of the university administrators in assuring quality instruction.

The English teaching program is limited to 270 periods over four semesters at UEH. The first stage takes two terms and requires a Business English course that lasts 150 periods (a period is 45 minutes). The total time for the second stage

of the ESP content was 120 periods also in two terms. The English course may be divided into two phases due to the requirements of faculty as well as the students' needs.

1. The first phase: Semesters one and two are at an elementary level that includes a focus on four skills and the content of Business English. Students have to finish twelve units in the textbook Market Leader of elementary level and materials Practice Book I & II during 150 periods. These semesters are like a background for collecting specialized terms and mastering the skills needed to develop students' knowledge in the next phase.
2. The second phase: In semesters three and four - the 120 teaching periods - the course permanently clarifies the nature of specialized documents, situations and fieldwork. In this phase, the textbook Market Leader for pre-intermediate level and Practice Book III & IV are the main contents for students to learn. Students also focus on texts which very specifically address many different activities, concepts and criteria of different fields in business, marketing, and tourism, etc.

The students should pass pre-intermediate level English and get TOEIC certificate, resulting in 450 marks before they graduate from the university. Acquisition of communication skills is required in the first phase. It forces students to actively take part in any interviews, build their self-confidence and become sufficiently knowledgeable in business English jargon. When studying in the university, students have mastered some knowledge of the various specialties besides English. The students don't have enough time to devote themselves to English study, so most of them need to make more efforts when learning this subject. Timeframe allocated in the teaching program actively contributes in the success or failure of the learners. Time allocation has to be associated with the material teaching. Teachers need enough time to explain the content of each unit in the classroom. If time is reduced, the teacher cannot fulfill the teaching aims, so the materials used in the syllabus should be revised to comply with time change. Thus the university administrators and experienced teachers should permanently evaluate textbooks and materials for the current English language syllabus. Teachers or administrators must carefully and critically select materials before adopting them for teaching to ensure that

they fit the proficiency levels and needs of their students and the goals of the syllabus process. All of the above factors seem to point towards the need to upgrade the students' level in language teaching.

### **The assessment of current syllabus and materials**

We can consider the university as a supermarket; the students are like the customers. The customers go to the market to buy daily necessities and students go to the university to get more knowledge which is their wants and needs. If the supermarket offers a lot of desirable items which satisfy the customer's demands, it will assure its future growth. When the students satisfy their educational needs and wants, their abilities will develop. To respond to the university's aims and students' needs, a suitable structural framework for the language's development must be established through concrete circumstances of large size classes and the learners' different levels.

Published assessment, which occurs during the analysis of ESP demand, is a widely used means of judging the progress and achievements of the English syllabus. The assessment results can assist in improving teaching and learning practices, help teachers and learners better understand the goals of the program, and review their work and performances during the course. The results will also help to furnish information for faculty members to use in assessing course content. Learners also benefit from recognizing their progress. Teachers can plan better when learning results are assessed. Teachers and learners both can benefit from assessments by modifying their teaching or learning strategies, thus improving their activities. The results of this assessment may help administrators decide such matters as ranking and promoting teachers or funding programs. The ESP section-administrator may receive background information and material contents in order to monitor progress. Also, some outside organizations can use this assessment to determine whether or not graduate students meet their new employees' needs. The main purpose of evaluation here is to provide the student body with a voice in developing and maintaining an effective material, and to provide data that may assist in making syllabus decisions.



Educational materials that have been effectively designed will facilitate the achievement of desired learning outcomes for students. Effective design of syllabus connected with textbook and material focuses on paying attention to the provision of a rich learning activity, providing meaningful opportunities for student reflection and ensuring that the design is suitable for the context in which it will be used. There must be a general link between material Practice Book and textbook Market Leader in the language course that the designers have taken account of in their teaching program. Especially, the up-to-date knowledge and information of the studying course are students' desire, because of this demanding task, the teaching staff has always tried to select and supply different kinds of newly-published contents to their students in the classrooms, "syllabus designers begin by choosing language content and learning experiences that match the needs of learners as users of language beyond the classroom. In design-

ing courses they are guided by specified communicative tasks that learners can perform at the end of their period of learning." (Nunan, 1999:72). This process involves in needs analysis, situational analysis, planning learning outcome and teaching methodology, preparing and selecting teaching materials, providing for effective teaching and evaluation. The choice of a particular approach to content selection, estimating learners' proficiency levels, acknowledging institution's requirements and the learning outcome desire should depend on teacher and administrator evaluation.

As we have known, the university administrators look forward to training the students of a pre-intermediate English level after two semesters and the graduates of the intermediate level, but this ambition is constrained at this time. At present, the textbook Market Leader used at the elementary level is not suitable for use with higher level of students at UEH. Students might therefore feel bored in some classes when a teacher-oriented methodology is used for the textbook lessons; consequently, teaching lower content leads to students' passiveness in learning. To make the course more efficient, it is necessary that the teachers be open minded as to what the students are interested in and match their instruction to the students' background, interests and needs. Before teaching the textbook, teachers should refer to other details that relate to the text to guide students in the classroom. It is impractical to cram too much new English language knowledge into students during the English teaching program's limited time. In my opinion, the first semester of English textbook in pre-intermediate level will give students opportunities to expand their awareness and enrich their experience. Current students' higher English level and the requirement to obtain a TOEIC certificate of 450 marks at the end of the course both will force students to study hard and achieve excellent results. It can provide students with a chance to brush up on their English from a new point of view. The textbook needs to be appropriate to students' level and age, their linguistic background and educational culture. It is also linguistically challenging, so Market Leader in the pre- intermediate level is the most suitable textbook and should be taught in the first semester for UEH's students.

Students in the third and fourth semesters can study Market Leader at the intermediate level because this helps to improve their learning strategies as well as their higher levels. The textbook Market Leader facilitates innovation in teaching methodology, because students can be divided into pairs or groups to do exercises and discuss the content in class. The topics are relevant to the students' needs and focus on their communicative competence and the performance at a future workplace. Many topics chosen for study and classroom practice are practical and closely relate to students' social communication. Pair-work activities often focus on using conversations to convey information, negotiate meaning and create social relations. The activities and tasks are selected and designed based on the concept of learner-centered methodology. Accordingly, tasks are characterized by decision-making with elements of freedom and choice.

In short, the goal of Market Leader at the intermediate level seems to contribute actively to achieve the university's aim by incorporating realistic situations and encouraging learners to participate in activities in order to help develop language skills and strategies. Students now hunger for updated knowledge in their fields, so Market Leader at an intermediate level more closely corresponds to what students need to learn in terms of general and business language items, skills and communicative strategies in the upgraded English course. Ample practice is ensured through either pair work or group work following the textbook's case studies, these activities and tasks aim to raise learners' awareness of their own learning strategies, so that later they can face any situation in their jobs. The more learners can participate in conversation, the more they enhance their speaking activities. Teaching approaches serve teaching goals and are subject to teaching contents, they are to be adjusted if the teaching contents change, so using the textbook in an intermediate rather than pre-intermediate level is more suitable to all students in this phase. In the process of designing the university's English syllabus, the goal-oriented, content-based syllabus is applied and a skills-centered approach is the main method to alter, study performance.

Below are some recommendations developed from research and the teaching process through class-

rooms experience at UEH.

## Recommendations

In Vietnam, we don't normally speak English with foreigners in our daily routine so students don't have many opportunities to practice their English skills except in class. Within a short amount of time (270 periods), students must conduct business conversations, increase ESP knowledge and practice the four skills to achieve fluency. At UEH, the syllabus targets are to develop students' confidence and an ability to apply their knowledge and skills in their prospective jobs. The growth of scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale has brought English courses tailored to special content; influential new ideas began to emerge in the study of language. These requirements seem to overload the learners; therefore, alterations must be implemented to suit the new environment. Nowadays many students need English and, most importantly, their English knowledge has already increased in different higher levels. In university, if the syllabus is begun from elementary and ended at pre-intermediate level, it is a waste of time for the teaching program and it's unreasonable for students because they must pass intermediate TOEIC level at the end of the university course. Additionally, after finishing university if students want to continue study for a master's degree, it is difficult to pass the English test which is required for an intermediate or advanced English level. This situation leads to some recommendations for the university's business English program:

1. The textbooks, materials and syllabus should be relevant to the student's English levels. The targets should consist of developing students' positive self-esteem, confidence and ability to employ their own knowledge and skills in their prospective job. Teachers need to find supplemental or alternative materials that relate to the updated information on specialized reading themes to help develop students' language skills. Information from the Internet and journals is more useful to clarify the principles and standards of specialized knowledge, so teachers need more time to supply more relevant materials to their students. Administrators should allow teachers to present materials which they have compiled for their classrooms. Firstly, we need to change the textbook Market

Leader from elementary to pre-intermediate to supply more suitable content with the higher level of students. Secondly, it is very important to link Market Leader and Practice Book in the course content. It means Practice Book should supplement Market Leader in grammar, vocabulary, structures and reading. Thirdly, in the education process, the teaching method should be balanced between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction. The teacher needs to connect content-based syllabus and communicative approaches to link lesson plans, instruction, and testing to completely accomplish the innovation syllabus target. Finally, the class can incorporate games that are motivating and interesting. Different techniques that employ interaction like games and role-playing as well as open discussion make the class more active and effective.

2. In university, a classroom is a learning place for many other subjects, so a large room with a teacher in front and permanent desks facing the front of the room is commonly seen. A classroom suited to language teaching is rarely found in a university setting. Also, a large class size of 45 to 50 students is a barrier to teaching English. This arrangement makes it a waste of time to organize the communicative language learning activities. These deficiencies lead to immobility for any planned communicative activities, and at the same time, the teacher is under pressure to cover the allocated syllabus in the time allowed. In this situation, my recommendation is to have a better facility for foreign language instruction classrooms, for instance, separate desks, cassette players, and projectors to develop communicative language teaching approaches. In addition, an ideal English class size should be 25 to 30 students maximum.

The goal of ESP education at UEH is to develop strategic motivated readers. Some effective strategies such as prediction techniques, skim-reading, scan-reading, dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary and discussing the main ideas were therefore employed in the classrooms. To train reading skills, a teacher has to understand the nature of the texts and the natural psychological process of reading comprehension and instruct accordingly. Reading texts and speaking activities with appropriate topics will maximize the engagement of the students with the activity, enable the communication of stimulating contexts, and create opportunities for

feedback and reflection.

3. Students are affected by Vietnamese culture, they feel rude if they interrupt, question, or argue with their teacher. They are not accustomed to a communicative classroom and feel insecure about English communication. Traditional passiveness is characteristic of Vietnamese students. Classroom discussion and exercises are important factors that distinguish practice from traditional instruction. Group work or pair work is critical to increase students' confidence. The effects on student learning of changing from traditional to communicative contexts indicate that communicative approach could deliver learning improvements. Almost all English classes at UEH experience these problems. From this situation, more work is desirable in course development to seek detailed feedback about the students' effectiveness in the training program. One way to improve instruction and diminish the problem of the "tethered teacher" is to adopt a more communicative and student-centered approach to education. Group or pair learning strategies must be organized during every lesson because they help to motivate the learners. The change in learning context affects the student - teacher relationship, which becomes a multifaceted interaction among students, teachers and the community. The teaching goal is to create competent students who can confidently work with suitable abilities in society. Therefore, the strong link between universities, companies and society is very important in university operations. The evaluation of company directors and their recommendation of standard employment requirements can supply the conclusion of the learning process, so teachers can understand what adjustments they must make throughout the course.

4. Evaluation of the current syllabus effectiveness should be done in conjunction with other techniques to help the teaching process attain its goals. Through assessment, teachers can determine what knowledge has been successfully learned and if further work is necessary. A syllabus evaluation system should give teachers useful feedback on classroom needs, on application of new teaching techniques, and on how to change the teaching program. Another concern has been expressed that some teachers will adjust the syllabus -by the assessment limits for a given course.

Teachers at the university level have to establish a meaningful link between content standards and day-to-day student performance. The administrators, supervisors, and teachers need to monitor instruction to insure that the current syllabus being taught meets the requirements established by the university system.

### Conclusion

Linking evaluation and development is a difficult task for teachers, evaluators and supervisors. Evaluations can be used by teachers and students to establish specific, achievable goals; uncover weak areas and amplify strengths in the syllabus. In this study, specific standards to evaluate the current teaching program should: (a) relate to the necessary learning skills; (b) involve the main contents and teaching method; (c) consider the large size class and students' skill levels. The goal of estimating syllabus is to create competent students, and also requires the teacher to be more creative and to invest more time and effort in lesson preparation.

The scope of this study reflects the constraints in terms of resources, time and ability level of ESP students. These constraints are applied in the syllabus design for the students at this institution, not to all students such as English as a Mother Tongue (EMT) and General English (GE).

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