

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

NONG THI HIEN HUONG

**INVESTIGATING THE VALIDITY OF THE ADVANCED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM
ENGLISH TEST AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with introduction to the study and explains aims of the present study. Then, the background to the study, statement of the problem and research questions are presented. Finally, it outlines chapters in the thesis.

1.1 Introduction

In the globalized world, all employers on a national as well as on an international scale always pay much attention to the foreign language skills of their future employees, thus it can be noted that being able to speak one or more foreign languages is a prerequisite for each individual who expects to get a good job in the future. The most dominantly popular foreign language is English which is increasing gaining an important position in several countries all over the world. English is not only a means but also an important key to gain access to the latest scientific and technological achievements for developing countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia.

Furthermore, it can be observed that the number of native English speakers is from 400 million to 500 million; more than one billion people who have been using some forms of English. Many people have used English for different purposes, English has become the official or second language of a majority of the countries around the world including India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam (Kluitmann, 2008; Roengpitya & Saelim, 2015).

In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Government has identified the urgent social – political, commercial and educational need for Vietnamese people to be able to better communicate in English. In line with this aspiration, all Vietnamese tertiary institutions have accepted English as a compulsory subject as well as medium of instruction for academic purposes (Canh, 2009; Le, 2011; Nha, 2014; Tran, Griffia & Nguyen, 2010; Van, 2007). This development has given rise to the need to teach and measure students' command of English at institutional level. However, the issue that is often raised in relation to in-house language test is the validity of the test.

According to Bachman (1990), test validation is the process of producing validity and reliability evidence to support the well-foundedness of inferences concerning trait from test scores, i.e., principally, testing should be concerned with evidence-based validity. Test writers need to provide a clear argument for test validity in assessing specific traits with reliable evidence to support the plausibility of this interpretative argument (Kane, 1992). Therefore, test validation has been regarded as the most important role in test development and use and should always be examined at different educational levels (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Similarly, Cumming, Alister and Berwick (1998) also point out that validation in language testing and assessment plays a central role in academic decisions, pedagogical practices and educational policies. In a nutshell, validation is an effort to improve the quality of education, as it reveals strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum, appropriacy of the programme, students' promotion as well as teachers' evaluation.

Validity and reliability are the two most essential components of test validation as well as two most important characteristics of a good test. Test validity measures what is intended to

measure while reliability is an assessment tool which produces consistent results (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Although a reliable test may not be necessarily valid, a valid test is always reliable (Bachman, 1990; Henning 1989) because a test cannot be considered as valid unless its measurement is reliable. Therefore, a valid test encompasses reliability elements. Several previous test validation studies have investigated the validity of their in-house language tests and make valuable contributions to understand the concepts of test validation (Advi, 2003; Ayers, 1977; Cumming, 2004; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Fulcher, 1997a; Sar, 2008; Huong, 2001 ; Lee & Green, 2007; Mojtaba, 2009; Moritoshi, 2001; Nakamura, 2006; O'Sullivan, Weir & Saville, 2002; Pishghadam & Khosropanah, 2011; Riari, 2013; Siddick, 2010; Wilson, 1999; Zubairi, 2001).

On the other hand, there often have been a lot of gathered concerns in relation to the validity of in-house language tests from the educators and administrators who always raise a question of whether the in-house test faithfully reflects the course objectives, expected linguistic knowledge, skills as well as measures the real linguistic competence of test-takers. Similar concerns also occur to the case of the AEPET, which is an important in-house language test of public universities in Vietnam. Bearing this in mind, the study aims to validate the validity of AEPET by focusing on three crucial validity components: concurrent, predictive and content validity. The study aims to examine the concurrent validity of the AEPET by looking at the relationship between the AEPET score and a standardized international language test score, which is International English Language Testing Services (IELTS). Furthermore, the study investigates the predictive validity of the AEPET by addressing the question to what extent the AEPET determines academic success of students. Last but not least, the study focuses on content validity of the AEPET by accessing English language lecturers' judgments about the

AEPET in order to see whether the AEPET content reflects the knowledge and skills mentioned in the Advanced Educational Program (AEP) syllabus, as well as to find out to what extent AEPET preparation adheres to crucial test preparation procedures before the examination is administrated.

1.2 Background to the Study

The background of this research covers three areas related to context where the data for this study were collected. The first area focuses on the status of teaching and learning of English language in Vietnam. The second section introduces the Advanced Educational Program (AEP) conducted at the research site, which is a public university in Vietnam. The last area presents information about the English course in the AEP.

1.2.1 English Language Teaching and Learning in Vietnam

Vietnamese Government considers education and training its top driver of socio-economic development. Thus, in recent years the Government has proposed and implemented many new policies to promote education and training and to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, and international integration (Van, 2007).

The former Vice Chairman of the National Assembly's Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, and Children said that "in order to fundamentally and drastically reform the educational system, it is important to teach English as a second language at schools. We have to encourage innovative ideas in the content and teaching English method. If we are afraid of doing something wrong, we cannot reform" (as cited in Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 22). He stated that English plays an important role as an international language because it is the key to

open a brilliant future for each country in general and for Vietnam in particular. Crystal (2000) also stated that English language is used in a number of countries, serves sometimes as the first language, sometimes as the second language or official language and sometimes as a foreign language. Sharing the same view, Hung (2013) and Van (2007) indicate that English ranks first with a much greater influence than other foreign languages such as French, Chinese and Russian in Vietnamese educational system. English has become an international language and is the key for success in business, commerce and technological science.

Bearing this in mind, Vietnamese Government introduced English nationally as a compulsory subject both at upper-high schools and secondary schools and as an elective subject at primary schools in Vietnamese general educational system. Vietnamese educational system consists of three levels with 12 grades: primary level (from grade 1 to 5 for children aged 6-11); upper-secondary level (from grade 6 to 9 for children aged 11-15); and upper- high school (from grade 10 to 12 for children aged 16-18).

At all Government schools and universities, English classes are divided into two semesters within 35 weeks per year. At the primary level, English is taught for 2 periods a week from Grade 3 to Grade 5 (age 8-10), making a total of 70 periods per year for each grade. Each period consists of 40 minutes. At the upper-secondary level, English is taught 3 periods per week from Grade 6 to Grade 8 (age 11-13), totaling to 105 periods per year for each grade. In contrast, it is taught 2 periods per week in Grade 9 (age 14), making the total 70 periods per year. At the upper-secondary level (age 15-17), English is taught 3 periods a week, making the total of 105 period per year for each grade. For both secondary upper-secondary levels, time for each period is 45 minutes.

At higher education level (age 18-22), students who study a normal class in which Vietnamese is the medium of instructions, English is taught with 5 periods a week, making the total of 175 periods. In contrast, students who study in advanced educational class in which English is the medium of instructions, English is taught for 15 periods a week making the total of 525 periods. Each period consists of 50 minutes. Table 1.1 presents the number of English periods which is taught at each level of education in Vietnam (Van, 2007).

Table 1.1: Number of English Periods in Vietnamese Educational System

Level of education (Grades)	Period duration	Periods per week	Weeks per year	Periods per academic year
Primary (G3- G4-G5)	40	2	35	70
Secondary (G6-G9) G6- G7 -G8		3	35	105
G9	45	2	35	70
Upper-secondary (G10- G11-12)		3	35	105
University Normal class	50	5	35	175
Advanced class		15	35	525

For schools, the English materials, textbooks designed by Vietnamese Minister of Education Training (MOET) are applied and taught in class in order to facilitate students to use English as a means of communication at certain level of proficiency in four skills: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. This series of textbooks was designed and produced by a group of Vietnamese textbook writers in MOET from 1989 to 1992 and was introduced into Vietnamese secondary schools stage by stage during those four years (Nguyen & Crabbe, 2007). They are being used across the country until now. MOET emphasizes that, by the end of upper-high schools, students are expected to obtain a standard level of understanding English and other multi- cultures in the world in order to become aware of cross-cultural differences, to be better overall communicators, to introduce about Vietnam people, histories, cultures and customs to the world (Cahn et al., 2009; Huong & Pham, 2010; Van, 2007; Neha & Burns, 2014). For universities, the selection, evaluation and use of suitable English

materials, textbooks are decided and approved by *the* university administrators in order to better adapt the students' specific needs to an increasingly globalized environment.

In brief, Vietnamese educational reform in this time is totally suitable for catching up with the development taking place in the world. Command of English is crucial to meet the urgent socio-political, commercial, educational needs of Vietnamese people and enable them to have a better communication and interactions at global level.

1.2.2 The Advanced Educational Program (AEP)

The study is conducted at a public university in Vietnam. The university which is the leading core university in the north of Vietnam follows the Government decision to offer the Advanced Educational Program in collaboration with different educational institutions in the United States since the year 2000. The Advanced Educational Program is an educational program which is the cooperation between public universities in Vietnam and several educational institutions in the United States since the year 2000. The programme has been endorsed by Vietnamese Government under Decision No. 14/2000/ QD-MOET entitled "Developing the Advanced Educational Program in the National Education System in Vietnam" with a common target of building, developing different educational areas and renouncing the universities in Vietnam to the world ranking (Government Decisions, 2001.)

The first specific goal of the AEP is to build up international undergraduate programmes that can attract students to study in the programme and compete with current abroad study movement both in Vietnam and overseas. Secondly, this programme provides for students with knowledge, self-study and research capacity and technical skills to meet with the

requirements of their future career or higher education related to different aspects serving for different purposes in all the country. Last but not least, this program also helps students to improve their awareness and moral attitude to ensure the loyalty with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, being healthy and responsible for the industrialization and modernization of Vietnam.

This programme is built according to the United States standards and directly taught in English by Vietnam and overseas lecturers and professors to ensure students gain high quality learning outcomes. The AEP offers a four-year programme in which students are required to attend one-year English course before they are qualified for a 3 year of degree programme. All subjects are taught in English. For the first academic year, students are required to complete a one – year English course which prepares students English language skills and knowledge before they start their major coursework. This English course is run over two semesters. After the one - year English course, qualified students, who obtain IELTS overall band 6.5 and above and a minimum CGPA of 7.0, will be selected to continue their degree programme in the United States. Their bachelor degrees will be offered by the university in the United States. Other students will continue their degree at the home university and after the three years of degree programme, will achieve bachelor degree offered by Vietnamese universities. The structure of the AEP is summarized in Figure 1.1

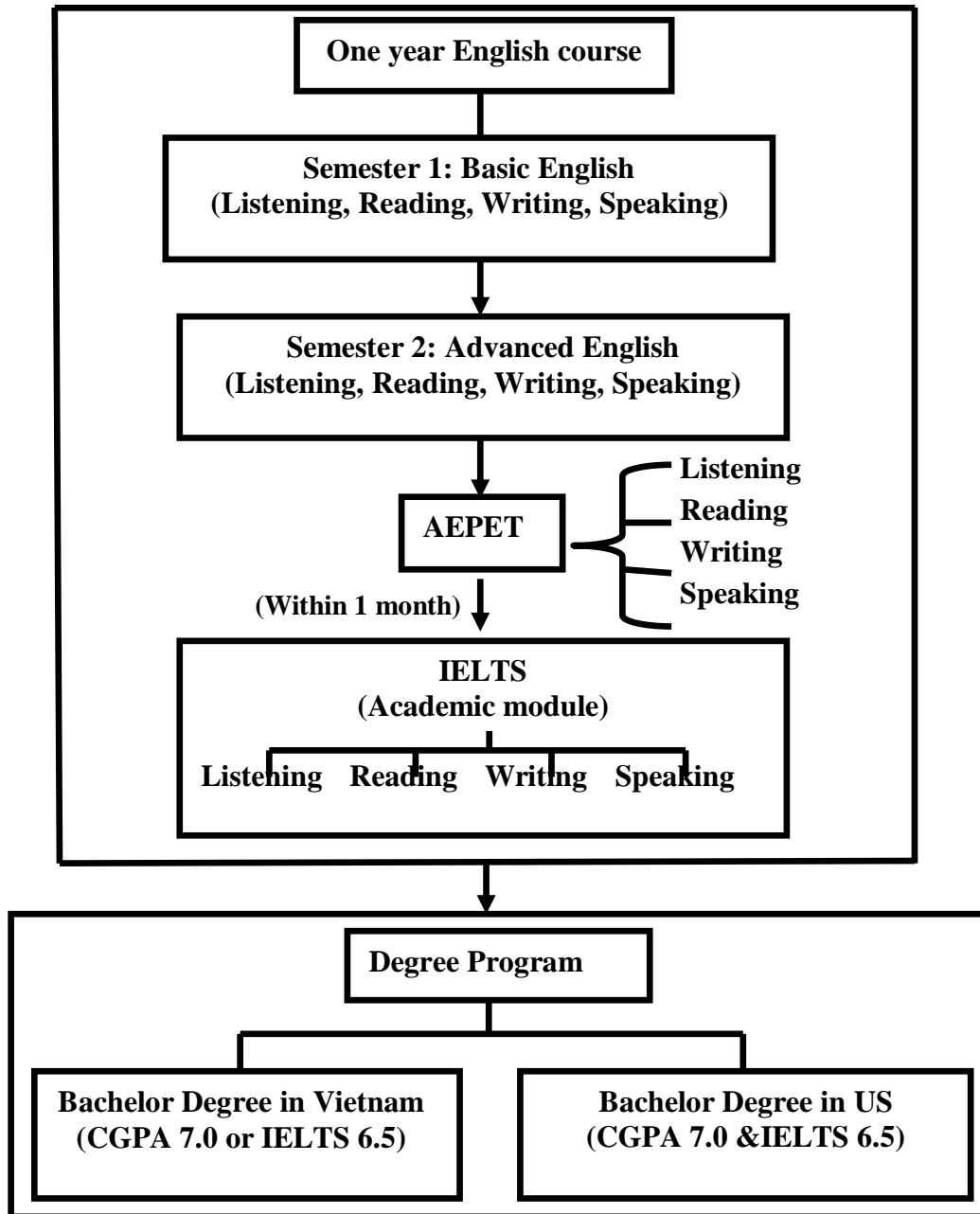


Figure 1.1: Structure of Advanced Educational Program (AEP)

In short, the AEP is the educational cooperative programme between universities in Vietnam and the United States. This programme is aimed to provide students sufficient level of English language proficiency, advanced knowledge in the educational aspects. The success of the programme helps students get more technical and advanced skills to meet the requirements of their career in the future.