HELPING LEARNERS ATTAIN THE STANDARD-BASED PROFICIENCY LEVEL: PERSPECTIVES OF EFL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

TRUONG VIEN [1], DANG NGOC THI GIANG [2]
[1] English Department, Hue University of Foreign Languages
[2] Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry

Abstract: The study presents an investigation into EFL teachers and students' perceptions and practices of teaching and learning in helping students attain the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR-V. Both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) data were collected from the participants. The participants included 5 EFL teachers and 105 students from Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF). Results showed that most of the EFL teachers and students had positive perceptions towards attaining the English proficiency level as required. In addition, participants highlighted specific activities for helping learners to be able to achieve the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam. Furthermore, some challenges faced by both teachers and students were explored from teaching and learning. Finally, pedagogical implications were showed from the findings with typical issues related to helping learners be able to attain the standard- based English proficiency B1 level along with concrete suggestions.

Keywords: English language proficiency, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in Vietnam, CEFR-V.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is trying itself in innovation phases of national policies to keep pace with the globally current tendency, especially in education. Actually, English is regarded as the compulsory subject for the all degrees in domestically educational system. Along with the application of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), the Vietnamese Government issued the Decision of No.1400/QD-TTg on approving of the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) on teaching and learning foreign languages in the phase 2008-2020. Hence, this project aims to improve and foster teaching and learning a foreign language effectively for either teachers or students in all levels.

In order to gain the proposed objectives, educational administrators have applied the standard- based language proficiency of teaching and learning English. It requires both teachers and learners to attain required language levels depending on their levels, from

A1 to C2. Thus, when students in the universities/ colleges graduate from their universities, they have to achieve the standard -based English proficiency B1 level required by MOET.

As a result, the study on "Helping learners attain the standard - based proficiency level: perspectives of EFL teachers and students at Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry" is conducted to explore teachers and students ' perceptions towards attaining the standard- based English proficiency level, especially the B1 exam within the CEFR tests and ways which teachers help students practice and self- develop their English proficiency to attain the standard-based English proficiency B1 level.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)

2.1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a framework created by the Council of Europe since 2001. It describes the ability of language learners for four skills such as speaking, reading, listening and writing through six reference levels such as A-Basic User (including A1 Breakthrough, and A2 Way stage);   B-Independent User (including B1 Threshold and B2 Vantage); and C-Proficient User (including C1 Effective Operational Proficiency, and C2 Mastery) (Council of Europe, 2001).

The aims of the CEFR are to help demonstrate the levels of proficiency existing standards, tests and examinations so as to make convenient in comparisons with various systems of qualification (Council of Europe, 2001).

2.2. An overview of CEFR-V

The Vietnamese Government has been interested in improving and fostering foreign languages teaching and learning nowadays through the National Project named Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System from 2008 to 2020 (namely 2020 Project). According to the stipulation of the CEFR-V, which basically originated from the CEFR, university students are required to achieve B1, MA students of all majors are also required to attain B1 level and doctoral students have to achieve B2 level.

In general, in order to get level 3 of CEFR-V (B1), university students have to be able to understand the main points of clear standard input on accustomed issues regularly faced in work, school, leisure, etc. They can understand current affairs or personal topics or professional interest slowly and clearly transferred by some speeches on radio or TV programmes. Moreover, students can manage most daily situations while they are living, working, or traveling abroad where the target language is spoken. What is more, students can create simple matched texts on topics that are habitual or of personal interest. Finally, students can express experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and

ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for ideas and plans in English or another foreign language.

2.3. Benefits and difficulties in attaining the standard-based English language proficiency

According to Villano, (1996:45-49), several companies required knowledge of foreign languages. He said that multilingual applicants have more opportunities of getting the position. If they know well a second language, they can have a competitive advantage in the labor market by opening up supplement career opportunities. Furthermore, if learners are good at English proficiency, they can study or travel in a foreign country easily. Additionally, English proficiency can provide them with additional chances for internships, research or service learning abroad. Moreover, knowing other language can supply learners with accessing to the cultural treasures of foreign countries, simultaneously, it opens up opportunities in business. (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004). Meanwhile, Karen Moldenhauer (2017) revealed that there were a lot of benefits of achieving standard language proficiency. One of them is that some jobs need to have knowledge of a foreign language. Similarly, he said that multilingual applicants will have additional opportunities.

In spite of the fact that the benefits bring learners more convenience in aspects mentioned above, many researchers found out difficulties which teachers and learners had during the process of teaching and learning to gain the English proficiency. According to Tomlinson (2012 and 2014), mixed-ability classes would be more challenging for teachers because students were in classes according to their age and year of study, and they were multileveled. More importantly, Ngoc Khoi Mai (2014) showed that the enormous challenge was lacking an environment for practicing and using English in the Vietnamese social context. According to Le (1999), both learners and teachers lacked motivation to learn English because they had no immediate English-language needs.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Some studies related to attaining English language proficiency have been conducted. A study carried out by Kanokrat in 2015 investigated English Learning Strategy and Proficiency level of the first year students at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, in Bangkok Thailand. The aim of the research was to identify English language learning strategies commonly used by the first year students. Six direct and indirect strategies were presented in the study. There was a difference in these students' use of English learning strategies among the various levels of their English proficiency. The questionnaire was applied for the research. It was computed by the software for analyzing the data. The findings showed that English learning strategies popularly used by the first year students included six direct and indirect strategies, consisting of differences in strategy use of the students with different levels of English proficiency. Moreover, the researcher recommended for further study such as the study of language

learning strategy use with other research methods focusing on other languages, particularly language skills and/or the relationship of language learning strategy use and other factors in other programs and/or institutions.

In Vietnam, one study was done by Duong and Trinh (2014) on lecturers and students' perceptions towards EFL policy and practice at Can Tho University. Questionnaires and in-depth interviews were applied for the data collection. The purpose of the research was to determine the role of EFL policies at the researched university in helping students achieve B1 in the Vietnamese six-level scale of ELP. Results showed that most participants held a positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of the EFL policies implemented at the researched university and the Vietnamese-six level scale of ELP was not frequently integrated in English teaching. Therefore, it was suggested that the CEFR-V content should be included in instructional programs for teachers and students to teach and learn through semesters. Furthermore, their suggestion to make the implementation possible and effective was how to publicize CEFR-V and what to prepare for the implementation such as lecturer training, material selection, facilities and test formats. In addition, findings were stressed on the pedagogical practices to suit the syllabus of the CEFR-V (Duong & Trinh, 2016).

Nguyen (2017) conducted a research on the perceptions towards the use of the Vietnamese Common European Framework of Reference for Language Proficiency (CEFR-V) in order to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency by 41 EFL teachers at Mekong Delta University. Their ages ranged from 26 to 50 years old as well as their teaching experience from 4 to 25 years. The qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied for the study. The questionnaires were focused on teachers' perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency and its influences on the foreign language education and evaluation in the Vietnamese context. Moreover, the interviews concerning strengths of the use of the CEFR-V, challenges of the implementation of the CEFR-V and some recommendation for optimizing the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency were presented. Findings of the study demonstrated that participants had positive attitudes towards the global framework. Simultaneously, the study claimed that participants perceived more possible benefits than other issues in the use of CEFR-V.

Although most researchers realized that attaining the English language proficiency for learners in each context is very vital, it is difficult for each country to implement based on both the national standard of English language proficiency and international standard (CEFR). This is because in the procedure of the implementation, applying the international standard English language proficiency for learners still have limitation. Some people have positive perceptions towards the international standard-based level, others do not. Moreover, useful activities for practicing English language or learning strategies for improving learners' English learning towards attaining the CEFR or CEFR-V are under investigation. Therefore, teachers and students in Vietnam are

looking for more related studies in this field, and this research is done so as to meet that urgent and necessary need.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants of the research consisted of two groups: Group 1 included 105 students. They were invited to respond to questionnaires. Group 2 included 05 EFL teachers who were in charge of B1 CEFR-V classes and 3 students. They were invited to answer questions in interviews.

The data was gathered from the questionnaires and interviews mainly focusing on three research questions as mentioned previously. The questionnaire was designed in two versions (English & Vietnamese). In the questionnaire, there are 44 items which were designed in the five-point Likert scale, some questions for students were open-ended. Three Themes in the questionnaire mainly focus on perceptions of HU-UAF students in attaining the English proficiency within CEFR in Vietnam, specific activities which students self-develop to be able to attain the required level and some challenges faced by both teachers and students while teaching and learning to attain the standard-based level.

Interview is another tool for collecting the data. The contents of the interview mainly concentrate on three research questions. However, some additional questions for both teachers and students were suggested if necessary. Through interview, participants' ideas contributed to qualitative answers for the researcher despite the fact that the questionnaires might have not supplied exactly. In addition, participants who took part in the informal interviews could answer naturally and be more comfortable. Moreover, interviews would be confirmed after the questionnaires were conducted for the result collection and analysis. The total of interviewees was 8 participants joining the research including 2 groups (both teachers and students) of male and female. Time for each interview was about 10 to 15 minutes. All the interviewees' responses were recorded under the allowance of the participants. The data would be analyzed by the questionnaires in which descriptive statistics was used by the SPSS. After collecting the information from participants, the researcher carried on computing by the SPSS (20.0 version). The data from the interviews were analyzed including categorizing the data, arranging and interpreting the data with the purpose of obtaining deep understanding of perceptions, activities for practice, difficulties and challenges, and suggestions made by both teachers and students.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Students' perceptions towards attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within CEFR in Vietnam

Data from students' questionnaires

The data collected from the questionnaire was computed by SPSS software in 20.0 version to define the reliability of the research. The result was demonstrated by the

reliability coefficient of all items in the questionnaires which was completely reliable (alpha.958). Thus, the whole questionnaire was regarded as reliable for the research. Secondly, in the investigation into the issue related to the perceptions of necessity of attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level, there are 9 items in the questionnaire, and they were computed by the SPSS 20.0 version. This demonstrates by the reliability of 9 items in Theme 1 is really high (alpha=.860).

Moreover, the Descriptive Statistics Test was run on the mean score of students' perceptions to check in attaining the English proficiency B1 level within CEFR in Vietnam. The results of the test are presented in the following table:

Table 1. *Students' perceptions towards the necessity of attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within CEFR in Vietnam*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean of Theme 1 (perceptions)	105	2.11	5.00	3.9354	.58951

The table above shows that the total mean score of students' perceptions of the necessity to attain the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam (M=3.9) was slightly lower than the level (M=4.0). Meanwhile, it was considered as higher than the Neutral score (M=3.0) which based on the five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree). Additionally, it seems to be close to the Agree scale, hence, students' perceptions were appreciated as being accepted in attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam as required.

Data from students and teachers' interviews

Theme 1 focused on asking the questions related to the perceptions of students towards the necessity of attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level. A teacher interviewee stated *"Attaining the standard-based English proficiency level is necessary for every student to get better jobs in the future".* However, one student had a different view, *"I think it is not necessary because when we face to interview or talk to foreigners, they don't need to know that we have already had the English certificate".* Another student responded that attaining the required level is really important for students. On the other hand, some students recognized the importance of requirements which is not high to gain the purposes. One respondent claimed: *"I think it is necessary. Benefits of adequate usage of English are abundant. However, how to get it is still a big question among learners. I consider it as a vital specific goal, which most of students are not capable of recognizing and self-motivating to achieve".*

Results from the questionnaires and interviews revealed that both EFL teachers and students significantly appreciated in the necessity of attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level. With clear perceptions, they get motivated in teaching and learning to gain the expected and required purposes.

5.2. Activities self-developed by students to improve English skills and to attain the standard-based English proficiency B1 level

By collecting the data from the questionnaires in Theme 2 (How do students do to be able to attain the B1 within CEFR in Vietnam?), there are 23 items extracted from the SPSS whose reliability is highly ensured (alpha .966).

Table 2. *Activities which students practice*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
M2	105	2.38	5.00	3.9063	.68355

In addition, extracted from the software SPSS after computing, the total mean score of Theme 2 is M=3.90 focusing on activities which students self-develop for 4 skills of English proficiency so that they could be able to attain the standard-based B1 level (M=3.90). It nearly reached the high level (M=4.0) which has the meaningful value of agreement from the participants. This means that students expressed their choices that were closely similar to what the researcher supplied.

Furthermore, the one sample T-Test was run on the mean score of students' activities which they self-study for their purposes aiming at the standard-based B1 level and the test value was 3.0 (the Neutral level). The result revealed that there was some difference between the mean score of students' practices (M=3.9) and the test value (t=13.587; df= 104;p=.000). It follows that students have self-developed 4 English skills (Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading) by their own ways.

Data from students and teachers' interviews

In the interview part, question 3 of the interview focused on the item which had the lowest choice with the mean score in the questionnaire (M=3.59) (I sometimes practice speaking with native speakers in the internet). One student stated as follows:

"*I join English extra classes and do further practice on the Internet. However, I have never talked to native speakers.*"

Another respondent:

"*I have a lot of ways to self-develop my English. For listening skill, I practice listening skill spoken by American and English accents on YouTube; for speaking skill: I imitate foreigners' accents to pronounce; for reading skill, I do the reading samples from the books and online materials, and for writing skill, I practice writing topics based on samples given by the teacher and from the book.*"

According to teacher interviewees, they shared their own ways in the following:

"*I usually focus on writing and speaking activities because in my point of view, these two skills help learners a lot in conquering the language proficiency. Some activities, which relate to these skills, are essay, presentation, role play, project, translation, making sentence with new words…*"

"*Depending on each skill, I often organize suitable activities for 4 skills such as: role play, interview, debate, providing English materials, different resources, introducing websites for learning, related software to learn English*".

From typical activities above, it seems that they nearly had similar ideas on items of Theme 2 mentioned in the questionnaires given to the students.

From the findings mentioned previously, teachers provided their own teaching methods to help learners' foster English proficiency. Furthermore, students also presented their own learning strategies and learning styles to be able to obtain the required standard level. Among four skills of English proficiency, speaking is considered as the most vital skill. Both teachers and students expected that learners have to communicate well inside the class and in daily life as well. If students feel more confident, they are believed to be more proficient in communication. In reality, students focused on writing and reading skill than listening and speaking. A majority of students desired that they needed to be improved speaking and listening much than writing and reading skill.

5.3. Challenges faced by the students in attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam

Eleven items in Theme 3 was delivered to participant students' which were practical to them such as: large class, laziness of students, time limitation for both teachers teach an student learn, lack of facilitates, lack of students' qualification, abundant activities in the class designed by the teacher, using the mother tongue at the time, lack of self-confidence and students' passiveness.

The data on the challenges faced by the students in attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam collected from the questionnaires consisted of 10 items. The reliability of these items is high (alpha.890).

The total mean score of challenges that students expressed their attitudes towards their learning reached M=3.8, which is close to the high level "Agree scale" of the study. It proved that students often faced difficulties when they studied English, including 4 skills (Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing). The item in the questionnaire "*Teachers work overloaded*" got the lowest mean score (M=3.69).

Table 3. *Challenges faced by students in attaining the standard-based level*
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
M3	105	2.27	5.00	3.8978	.63845

Data from students and teachers' interviews

Both teachers and students responded as follows:

"*Some challenges such as lack of environment to practice English and class size, a large number of students in class lead to different interaction between the teacher and students and so on*". In some cases, the teachers revealed that:

"*Students are still shy in improving the English skills, especially they rarely speak English although the teacher always creates environment in learning English*".

In particular, the important factor in attaining the required standard level today is insufficient facilities that exert an influence on teaching and learning. If the class is not equipped adequately with tools, the lesson is not effective. For instance, in the listening period, headphones used for listening are not good enough, therefore they cannot complete the listening part in the lesson.

The findings from quantitative and qualitative data indicated that some challenges faced by both EFL teachers in helping learners attain the standard-based level are real and this should be handled by the institution.

Some typical difficulties during the process of teaching and learning which teachers and learners found are due to limitation time, both of them could not enhance prosperous lessons and activities as well. This is because teachers always supply a variety of practice exercises supported to develop four skills. What is more, the number of students in each class is crowded. This leads to each student who does not have good chance enough to ameliorate their practice such as presentations, individual tasks and so on. This attitude is similar to other researchers. Most of them claimed that the general obstacle is the large size with the number of students in class preventing them from both teaching and learning English language. As a consequence, they become lack interests in learning the language.

In addition, another typical element of challenge was discovered in the findings from the qualitative and quantitative data that the passiveness of students in activities given by the teacher that lead to gaps in their learning English to gain the proficiency. Despite the fact that the teachers expect that they always try their best in giving useful activities for students practice to enhance four skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking), students do not want to be the centered learners. They will remain passive, they do not engage in class activities provided by the teacher. From this signal, it can be understood that students lack the confidence that leads them not to communicate in class.

Last but not least, lack of tools prevented both EFL teachers and students from teaching and learning in the class. This was found in the Theme 3 of the questionnaire. Despite the fact that the teachers are willing to teach by themselves through the carefully and clearly lesson plans with abundant activities, tools have not good enough to supply for teaching and practicing.

5.4. A comparison between the mean scores of all Themes in the questionnaire:

The following table shows the mean scores of 3 Themes including perceptions of students towards the necessity of attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1

level, activities were practiced by the students who have done in their self-studying and challenges they got in their learning inside and outside the class. Results presented from the table and described in the chart below, there is close equivalence between theme 1 and theme 2 by the mean scores (M1=3.9; SD1=.589; M2=3.9; SD2=.683). This means that both mean scores are actually high that seem to approximately reach the "Agree scale" (M=4.0).

What is more, the mean score of Theme 3 is lower than Theme1 and Theme 2 as analyzed previously. It also gains the rather high level (M=3.8). This is concluded that 3 themes are obtained the high scale that are reliable enough for the study chosen by the participant students. From the table, the students had fairly positive attitudes towards attaining the standard proficiency level of B1, and they did their best to practice through activities, and at the same time, they met with difficulties in their efforts to attain the level of proficiency.

Table 4. *A comparison of all Themes in the questionnaire*
Descriptive Statistics

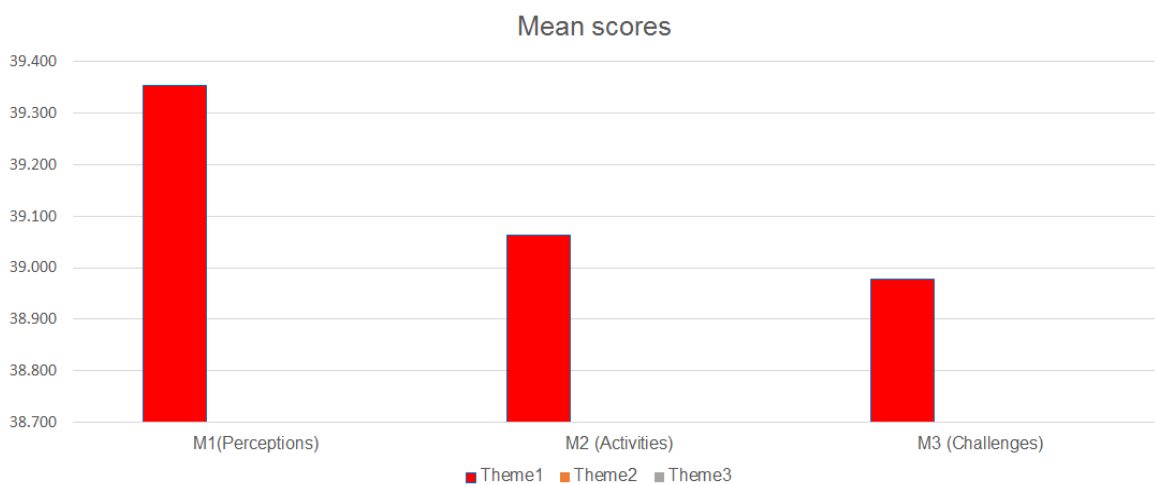|	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean of M1 (Perceptions)	105	2.11	5.00	3.9354	.58951
M2 (Activities)	105	2.38	5.00	3.9063	.68355
M3 (Challenges)	105	2.27	5.00	3.8978	.63845

Figure 1. *A comparison of the mean score of all Themes*

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is vital that both teachers and students have positive attitudes towards attaining the standard-based English proficiency B1 level within the CEFR in Vietnam. Both of them should make suitable either plans or activities for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, from the existing difficulties, it is suggested that administrative educators support both teachers and students in teaching and learning. However, the most crucial factor is that learners should try their best to be able to gain the expected achievement because the goal is realistic and it affects their future substantially.

In addition, some issues for pedagogical implication were found from the findings. The first issue found from findings is that there are some students who have negative attitudes towards the necessity of attaining the standard-based English language proficiency B1 level. They stated that they only need to be good at English speaking, they can apply in foreign companies without the B1 certificate as the current requirement. Another issue is that among four skills of English proficiency, students expressed their favorite skills and elements such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar. The activities which they did not focus on such as speaking with native speakers, attending seminars and conferences spoken in English, writing emails and diaries in English. Hence, teachers recommend that students should balance to practice four skills frequently by different ways. The last issue revealed by the students is that due to their lack of self-confidence as well as their passiveness, they would not gain the good achievement as expected.

Based on the findings, some recommendations are presented to add the questions from the participants. First of all, teachers should continuously update and innovate teaching methods, approaches, and strategies as well. Furthermore, teachers should apply modern technologies in teaching and learning. This is because they are convenient for both teachers and students to administrate the multi-media in teaching and learning process. What is more, the university administrators of Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry as well as Hue University of Foreign Languages should have concrete plans to develop and monitor their students' English language proficiency such as renewed materials, course books which are served in the B1 exams. Further, they should provide professional development assistance for teachers to equip those related approaches, methods, strategies, and techniques in English language teaching. As cited by Francis et al, 2006a; Parrish et al. 2006; Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007, teacher staff should be well-trained in order to address the unique needs from students. Moreover, they are supported by sustained, career embedded professional development. Importantly, educators should have meaningful curriculum aligned with national standards and assessments as the current application of the CEFR-V. In Genesee et al.2006's view, they described that effective curriculum has to combine coherently in higher order thinking and create in both theory and best practices.

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