

Exploring the level of understanding of the 2018 general education english curriculum at upper secondary level: Insights from english-majored students at Saigon university

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Abstract: In the context of this study, the researchers aimed to investigate the level of understanding of English-majored students at Saigon University regarding the 2018 General Education English Curriculum at upper secondary level. Through a mixed-methods research design involving surveys of 71 students and interviews with 8 students, the researchers found that the students had a fairly good understanding of the views of curriculum design, requirements to be met, and assessment of learning in the 2018 General Education English Curriculum at upper secondary level. However, the students still lacked in-depth knowledge in areas such as curriculum objectives, educational contents, and educational methodology. The findings suggest that institutions offering TESOL programs should consider adjusting or supplementing their courses related to the new curriculum to better prepare students with the necessary knowledge for teaching practices in the future.

Keywords: Level of understanding, English-majored students, General Education English Curriculum, Upper secondary level

1. Introduction

The 2018 General Education English Curriculum (GEEC) for upper secondary level was designed with the goal of communicative competence in teaching and learning process; linguistic knowledge acts as a means to develop communicative competence through the four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2018) [1]. To adapt to global development as well as the reforms in the 2018 GEEC, English-majored students must first become aware of the curriculum, then thoroughly understand it before practicing and adjusting their teaching methods to achieve the objectives set by the Ministry of Education and Training. However, until now, there has been little research on the level of understanding of English-majored students regarding this new curriculum - a prerequisite for developing appropriate competencies and teaching methods - especially at Saigon University. For this reason, the researchers decided to conduct a survey to explore this issue with one research question: *What is the level of understanding of English-majored students at Saigon University regarding the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Characteristics of the 2018 General Education English Curriculum

English subject contributes to the formation and development of other essential skills for work, life, and lifelong learning (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2018) [1]. For this reason, the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training issued the GEEC in 2006; the National Foreign Language Project 2020; the Decision on Approval, Adjustment, and Supplement of the Project “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System for the period 2017 - 2025”; and other programs. Finally, a new version of the GEEC, updated from the old 2006 version, was issued in 2018, consisting of eight sections, focusing on qualities and competencies.

2.2. Concepts and factors related to the level of understanding of English-majored students at Saigon University

Attitude is defined as a response to an antecedent stimulus or attitude object. The stimulus can be observable or unobservable and can be considered an independent variable or exogenous variable (Breckler, 1984) [2]. Attitude has three main components: affective component (how we feel), behavioral component (how we act), the cognitive component (how we think) towards a specific stimulus or entity.

The cognitive component relates to the role of cognition in a person’s attitude towards a stimulus; it includes beliefs, knowledge structures, perceptual

responses, and thoughts (Breckler, 1984) [2]. In the context of this study, the level of understanding of English-majored students regarding the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level can be examined through the cognitive component of attitude.

2.3. Previous studies

So far, there have been many studies related to the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level. Hoàng (2022) [3] mentioned that the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level is developed around eight elements.

To investigate the current state of English teaching oriented towards competency development as per the 2018 GEEC, Phạm and Vưong (2022) [4] conducted a survey using data from 360 English teachers at lower secondary schools. The results showed no strong correlation between understanding and the application of teaching methods due to various factors such as infrastructure conditions, class sizes, and teacher competencies.

Based on a recent study by Nguyễn et al. (2023) [5], the implementation of the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level in practical situations was investigated through the use of questionnaires and interviews with primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary English teachers in some northern provinces of Vietnam. The results showed many obstacles related to high workload, continuous changes in textbooks, as well as shortcomings in teacher teams, infrastructure, and training.

Additionally, to investigate the level of understanding of the 2018 GEEC at lower secondary level among third- and fourth-year English-majored students at Saigon University, a survey was conducted showing that most English-majored students at Saigon University had been introduced about changes in the GEEC through methodology and teaching theory courses (Ngô et al., 2021) [6].

Although many studies have been conducted related to the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level, most of these studies revolve around issues concerning teachers and educational institutions. There has been a study assessing students' understanding of the new curriculum; however, that study focused on the 2018 GEEC for lower secondary. In summary, up to now, there has been almost no study that strongly focuses on evaluating the level of understanding of English-majored students about the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level, especially at Saigon University.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

To assess the level of understanding of English-

majored students at Saigon University regarding the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level, the researchers used a mixed methods design, combining questionnaire and interview, and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2. Sampling method

The researchers used a convenience sampling method because "convenience sampling" is a non-probability or non-random sampling method where individuals from the target population are selected based on ease of access, geographical proximity, or willingness to participate in the research (Dörnyei, 2007) [7].

From the group of 71 students surveyed, 8 individuals were selected for interviews based on their academic performance (excellent and good grades). Additionally, the researchers focused on the key characteristics of the sample, such as class, gender, year of study, and completed courses to maintain the diversity of this study.

3.3. Instruments

Questionnaire: After clearly identifying the research problem and questions posed to participants that require clear answers, the questionnaire is the appropriate research instrument because it is pre-established and adjusted to limit the flexibility and creativity of the respondents (Brannen, 2017) [8].

The questionnaire was divided into two parts, serving the specific objective of the study. Part one explored some personal information of the participants, including gender, class, and completed courses. Part two consisted of questions arranged on a Likert scale to collect data on the level of understanding about the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level.

Interview: The researchers chose semi-structured interview. According to Dawson (2009) [9], semi-structured interviews are essential tools when researchers want to obtain specific information for analysis and comparison between interviews. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for eliciting further information from the responses to open-ended questions (Wengraf, 2001) [10].

For these reasons, semi-structured interviews were used in this study with a total of 8 participants selected to delve deeper into the level of understanding of English-majored students at Saigon University regarding the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level. The researchers used 5 interview questions to collect data.

3.4. Data collection procedure

The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms, then sent to 71 participants within the research scope via Facebook Messenger. After collecting the survey data, the researchers continued to contact and invite participants for interviews. The invitees were those who had completed the survey and had accumulated academic grades of good or above, specifically 4 students with good grades and 4 students with excellent grades. Interviews were conducted individually via Google Meet and were recorded.

3.5. Data analysis

After the survey data was collected via Google Form, the researchers transferred it to Microsoft Office Excel, encoded it into numbers, and then imported it into the data analysis and statistical software SPSS 20 to analyze frequency, percentage, mean value, and standard deviation. For the interview recordings, the researchers transcribed the audio into text corresponding to each interview participant (denoted as S1, S2 to S8). After completing the transcriptions, the researchers carefully read and marked important segments to include quotes in the analysis report.

4. Results

Level of Understanding of Students Regarding the 2018 GEEC at Upper Secondary Level

Statements	N = 71		
	M	SD	Interpretations
1. The 2018 GEEC adopts the view that communicative competence is the goal of the teaching process; linguistic knowledge is the means to form and develop communication skills.	3.99	0.870	Agree
2. By the end of the 2018 GEEC, students will be able to communicate at level 4 of the Vietnamese six-level language proficiency framework.	3.30	1.247	Neutral
3. The 2018 GEEC ensures a learner-centered approach, making student learning activities central to the teaching process.	3.94	1.170	Agree
4. Through the 2018 GEEC, students will gain a deep understanding of the countries, people, and cultures of English-speaking countries and other countries around the world.	3.89	1.036	Agree
5. The thematic system in the 2018 GEEC includes four themes: Our Family, Our Society, Our Environment, and Our Future.	3.86	0.990	Agree
6. The 2018 GEEC's objective is to help students use English to enhance the learning quality in other subjects within the curriculum.	3.86	1.060	Agree
7. After completing the 2018 GEEC with with approximately 600 - 800 words at level 3, the total vocabulary students need to master is about 3000 words.	3.77	0.988	Agree

8. Teachers fulfill multiple roles, including: (i) educator and instructor, (ii) advisor, (iii) participant in the learning process, (iv) learner and researcher.	3.94	1.120	Agree
9. The primary educational method in the program is the communicative language teaching approach and a learner-centered approach	3.51	1.275	Agree
10. The types of assessments in the English subject include speaking tests, integrated writing tests, and a combination of multiple-choice questions, constructed-response questions, and other forms.	4.10	0.913	Agree

The researchers presented 10 statements derived from the 2018 GEEC (mainly at the upper secondary level) and asked students to choose agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert scale. Out of the 10 statements, 4 were incorrect. Therefore, if these statements have high average scores, it means that students do not have correct understanding of the corresponding contents of the curriculum.

Most participants answered correctly on statements 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 10 with mean values and standard deviations of 3.99 - 0.879, 3.94 - 1.170, 3.89 - 1.036, 3.86 - 1.060, 3.94 - 1.120, and 4.10 - 0.913 respectively. In other words, English-majored students were not yet fully aware of the objectives of the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level, along with the educational contents and teaching methods of this subject. Moreover, the educational contents related to the system of themes and the required levels of language proficiency should be focused more by students, especially at the upper secondary level. On the other hand, regarding the requirements to be met and the assessment of learning, most students had a fairly good understanding. Additionally, English-majored students at Saigon University had a good awareness of the views of curriculum design for the 2018 GEEC at upper secondary level.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Conclusions and discussion

Generally, students had a low level of understanding in areas including curriculum objectives, educational contents, and teaching methods. This can lead to incomplete knowledge transfer and poor learners' comprehension due to teaching methods not aligning with the curriculum's orientation. However, for the contents related to views of curriculum design, requirements to be met, and assessment of learning, most students had a fairly good understanding.

(Xem tiếp trang 92)