

EXPLORING THE REALITY OF LEARNING ENGLISH MAJOR IN A BUSINESS-ORIENTED UNIVERSITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: The trend of higher education institutions becoming multidisciplinary universities has become popular, and private universities are not an exception. Although initially oriented as a southern spearhead unit for training in finance and banking, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB) quickly recognized the needs and career opportunities for fields and careers not only in the banking sector, banks and financial institutions. Therefore, the university has opened new majors taught in universities in the social sciences and humanities. The Faculty of Foreign Languages was established to train human resources who are good at foreign languages for the finance and banking industries and at the same time capable of working in many other industries and fields. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at the school with business orientation, has trained thousands of successful students in a variety of employment positions. However, teaching and learning English in a university that is dominant and famous for finance banking presents many challenges. From these difficulties, many opportunities have been opened for both learners and teachers at the faculty and the school. This study aims to analyse English majored learners' perspectives towards the opportunities and challenges that they encounter in learning business-oriented majors at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, HUB. The study employed the quantitative approach through a questionnaire. The findings of the study reveal that learners have to confront certain barriers regarding the policy, curriculum and applicability along with the opportunities to develop and foster competency.

Keywords: English major, ELT, tertiary education, multidisciplinary university

1. Introduction

The current context of globalization has witnessed the emergent need to diversify the curricula at universities to fulfil the market needs and the developmental orientation of the universities. In the past, students had to choose just one or two universities for their wishes after the university entrance examination to enroll in the expected majors (Bertuci et al., 2018). This led to the limitation of options for students to choose suitable courses or related courses in the fields and reduced the opportunities for alternative courses if they were in case of rejection. This challenge has spurred a notable interest among scholars and university administrators to open more majors at higher education ranging from science to social science, which generates the era of multidisciplinary university. This model is trendy in certain Western universities to provide flexible choices of majors so learners can flexibly switch between the fields or study two simultaneously.

In the context of Vietnam, many universities have implemented policies to foster the capacity to ensure the resources to obtain the standards of multidisciplinary universities which include program outcomes. Ho Chi Minh City University of Banking is not an exception in this era of integration. This university is dominant of business-oriented subjects such as finance, banking, and economics, which signifies the ability to attract a huge number of students to seek for business-oriented majors. However, the demand for multidisciplinary university has fostered the establishment of social sciences in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. It is widely assumed

that English majors are attributed to social sciences; notwithstanding, these majors in this faculty attempt to equip learners with English abilities to work in business-oriented sectors such as banking or business fields. This transformation has entailed a number of challenges among learners in specializing in English for business purposes. Simultaneously, several opportunities have arisen in our institution.

Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the following research question:

What are the learners' perspectives toward the challenges and opportunities of learning business-oriented English majors at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking?

2. Literature review

2.1 Business English as the emergent need of the market

A curriculum is a statement of the intended outcomes of the program that learners are expected to achieve at the end of the course (Brady & Kennedy, 2013; Pinar, 2012). It is also a tentative development of the learning experience to reach a target. It allows teachers, administrators and learners to recognize their responsibilities to collaborate to attain the learning mission (Richards, 2013). The syllabus will be stated in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitude as the core graduate attributes that manipulate all the educational practices in the institution.

The Business English major has shown its significance in the current market as the language is just considered a means to an end of the communicative purposes (Gacs et al., 2020; Lu, 2017). The traditional language program only allows learners to master language proficiency. However, the limitations can be seen in their inability to apply the language appropriately in particular working contexts. Therefore, the need for specialization of English programs, which is integrated with the professional development of the field, is increasing demand for institutions to merge into their educational program.

2.2 Core elements of an educational program in outcomes-based education

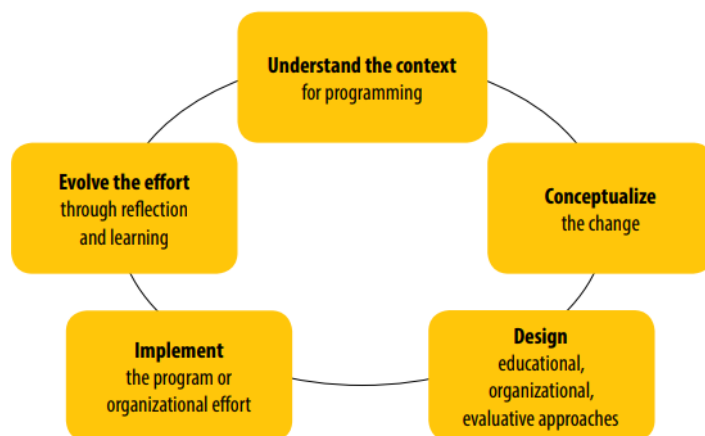


Figure 1. Framework for ongoing curriculum development by Kushner (2022)

Kushner (2022) proposes a framework for developing a university curriculum based on five stages of understanding the context, conceptualizing, designing, implementing, and evaluating the program's effectiveness through reflection and learning. First, the university program needs to explore the market demand to understand the context of education. The content should be aligned with the needs and characteristics of potential stakeholders (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). Second, the syllabus designers will conceptualize the changes to

integrate the necessary educational components into the materials and the expected learning outcomes. It is followed by completing the entire educational institution's design. The program's design consists of various organization, education, and assessment approaches. After the completion of the course design, the program will be implemented into the teaching context. To ensure the quality of the design, the last step of evaluation for evolution for both objective and subjective methods, such as reflection or test, will be adopted. The evaluation results will contribute to the program's recycling, which generates a circular order of the program design.

In addition, outcomes-based education (OBE) has been implemented in various contexts in consistency with the international standards of quality assurance such as AUN-QA. This idea was proposed by recognizing the expected learning outcomes as the program's spotlight for the backward design (Pinar, 2012; Richards, 2013). In the traditional educational design for content-based education, the content of the course and the teachers are two critical centers of the whole program with the linear approach. It leads to confusion and distinctive variations in the learners' outcomes. Now, the transformation of educational designs into outcome-based approaches has emphasized the graduate attributes of the learners as the guide for both administrators and teachers in implementing the program (McCann, 2017).

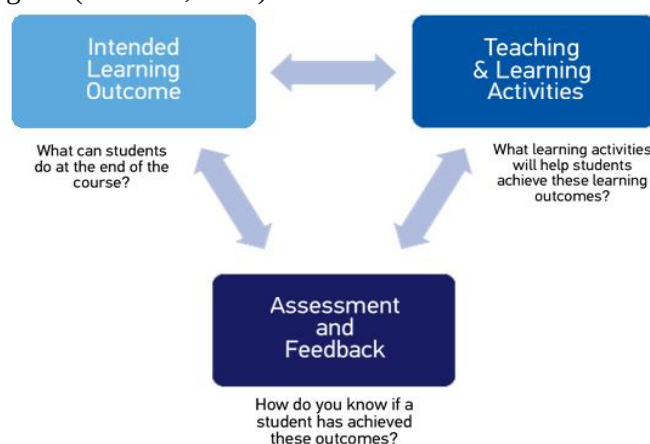


Figure 2. The constructive alignment in university program design by Biggs and Tang (2010)

The idea of constructive alignment by Biggs & Tang (2010) is developed in the mutual impacts among three factors, including expected learning outcomes (ELOs), teaching and learning, and assessment. The ELOs are the main products of the program, which guide the teaching and learning activities, while the classroom activities should support the learners to obtain the ELOs. In addition, the assessment will show the teaching activities' effectiveness, and the class activities also shape the assessment methods. Finally, the assessment needs to evaluate the achievement of ELOs as ELOs determine the content of the assessment.

2.3 Principles of program design

There are various perspectives of scholars toward the principles of program design based on particular criteria. Bound, Chia, and Karmel (2016) state that the proper educational design should follow six principles:

- Authentic: Use real-world materials to foster the empirical competence of learners.
- Alignment: Ensure that all the aspects of the program can work together to serve the exact needs of the course.

- Holistic: Apply multiple senses and combine theory and practice from the low to high thinking skills to optimize learning capabilities.
- Future-oriented: Allow learners to reflect and critique the content to deepen understanding and critical thinking considering various perspectives.
- Feedback: Give and receive feedback to develop active involvement in learning.
- Judgement: Enable learners to express perceptions of the effectiveness of their own and their peer products with ethical judgement.

Other scholars also have different stances on the principles of curriculum design, such as Tyler (1949), with defining appropriate learning objectives, establishing useful learning experiences, organizing learning experiences to have a maximum cumulative effect, and evaluating the curriculum and revising those aspects that did not prove to be effective.

2.4 Previous study

Prior research on the opportunities and problems encountered by students majoring in business English provides valuable insights into the field's prospective growth areas as well as its challenges. The intricacy of business jargon, cultural quirks, and the high degree of expertise needed in both written and oral communication are the primary obstacles that have been found in numerous research. For example, studies have shown that students frequently struggle with the formal tone and specialist terminology required in business environments (Smith & Robertson, 2018). Furthermore, students must navigate and comprehend corporate norms and etiquette that differ greatly between cultures, which makes it difficult to integrate intercultural communication skills (Chen, 2019). Regarding opportunities, research indicates that becoming proficient in Business English leads to a wide range of professional options. Global markets place a high value on business English proficiency, which makes students more marketable as job applicants (Jackson, 2020). In addition, the digital revolution has made it easier for students to access a wide range of materials and platforms where they can practice and polish their abilities in actual business settings, improving their linguistic and professional abilities (O'Neil, 2021). Furthermore, the development of instructional technology has been seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Although technology requires students to be technically proficient, it also provides customized learning opportunities through adaptive learning systems that may meet each student's unique needs and learning preferences (Brown & Lee, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting and participants

This study was conducted at a banking university in Vietnam. This university is famous for providing training for business-oriented majors ranging from finance and banking to business administration. The Faculty of Foreign Languages attempts to provide professional training for English majors specializing in Business English. Business English in the context of Vietnam has a considerable concentration depending on the vision of the tertiary institution. English majors at HUB focus on English majors, allowing graduates to work in business, especially the banking sector. Therefore, the program is also designed to equip learners with the necessary knowledge and skill in business education. There is the integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the professional knowledge of the majors.

The study invited 100 third-year university students at the Faculty of Foreign Language in the major of Business English to a study that explored their perspectives towards learning English majors at HUB. The choice of those majors stems from the completion of fundamental

subjects and they were in the phase of joining to the first specialized subjects in business. Those learners had already obtained the fundamental linguistics subjects, including morphology, syntax, phonetics, phonology and semantics. Their level of English proficiency is expected at B2 according to the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR). This standard is aligned with the expected learning outcome (ELOs) in the curriculum design of the institution. The whole program attempts to support learners to aim at C1 as a graduation attribute to be eligible to enter the job market. They were in the second phase of the program. The first phase is to obtain fundamental and general language skills and linguistics, general subjects while the second phase focuses on the specialized subjects of the field. Hence, this period is when they get exposed to business-oriented majors.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

No.	Information	N= 100		
		Option	Frequency	Proportion
1	Gender	Male	28	28%
		Female	72	72%
2	Age	22	4	4%
		21	96	96%
3	Time for learning English	9 years	4	4%
		8 years	96	96%
4	School of study	Public school	63	63%
		Private school	37	37%
5	Background of origin	Rural	52	52%
		Urban	48	48%

Table 1 describes the general information of the participants in the research study for the mediators that may influence the study results. The descriptive data show that the percentage of females tripled that of males. Ninety-six per cent of the participants were 21 years old while 4 were one year older because they retook 67% of the members came from public schools, while 37% of the students were from private schools. There was only a minor difference in the percentage of students from rural and urban areas, at 52% and 48%, respectively.

3.2 Research methods

The study applied a quantitative approach to explore the effectiveness of exploration of the learners' perspectives towards learning business-oriented English majors at the banking university in Vietnam (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative method allows the researcher to survey the samples of the whole population in the presence of standard deviation to generalize the patterns or trends of perception, which can represent the whole context. In contrast, the qualitative method can provide insights into the participants' emotions, experiences, and stances (Tracy, 2020). Both methods assisted the researcher to fully experiencing the factors that manipulated the learners' experiences in learning.

3.3 Instruments

There were two main research instruments to facilitate the research to investigate the learners' perspectives towards the challenges and opportunities of learning English majors at a banking university in Vietnam

Questionnaire

The English-written questionnaire (See Appendix) consists of 20 open-ended questions to investigate the learners' perspective towards the challenges and opportunities of business-

oriented courses at a university in Vietnam. The questionnaire will include three sections. The statements in this questionnaire were adapted from the principles of curriculum development and the study of Kushner (2022). The questions were designed with a five-point Likert scale as the conventional five-point scale with the middle neutrality can cause indecisive judgement for the participants (Bell & Waters, 2014). The scale is categorized as (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. The quantitative data are quantified into 1-2-3-4-5 with the assumption of equal intervals among the score in the scale.

After the pilot testing of 32 participants, the Cronbach Alpha test was applied to check its reliability. The alpha value reached 0.764, and the questionnaire is appropriate for the investigation (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There were 3 items removed from the initial questionnaires which reduced the reliability from 0.648.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The process of collecting and analyzing data went through some stages. A set of 100 questionnaires were randomly distributed to 100 participants with the descriptive data in Table 1. Participants were given about 30 minutes to finish all the provided questions, including both personal information and personal perception of the opportunities and challenges they encountered in learning English majors with business orientation in their university. The data were collected through a Google form. After that, the questionnaires were gathered, and the raw data were imported into Excel. The SPSS 25 was applied to analyse the descriptive and quantitative data (Larson-Hall, 2015).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 The challenges of learning business-oriented majors at FFL, HUB

The results of the study showed certain perceived challenges in learning business majors at FFL, and HUB from different domains that put learners under pressure.

Table 2. The challenges of learning business-oriented majors at FFL, HUB

Items	Questions	Mean	Std
1	I am not familiar with the technical terms of business.	4.42	0.16
2	I do not have enough time to spend on preparing for the lessons.	4.30	0.08
3	Business English is challenging in the language of grammar and vocabulary.	4.47	0.12
4	The business content is too demanding to learn.	4.12	0.48
5	Company culture is hard to learn.	4.50	0.61
6	The materials are hard and too much.	3.10	0.78
7	The teachers are not friendly and supportive.	2.42	0.87
8	The teaching methods are not suitable for learners.	3.60	0.26
9	The content is theoretical.	4.36	0.31
10	There is not real practice in classroom.	3.62	0.27

Table 2 demonstrates the students' perspectives towards the challenges in learning business-oriented English major at FFL, HUB. From the general observation, learners showed different perspectives towards the potential challenges in learning English major at FFL, HUB. Most of items received agreement from the participants. It can be clearly seen from the table that the highest value was attributed to Item 5. *Company culture is hard to learn*, with a mean value of 4.50 and quite a dramatic standard deviation of 0.61 The second-highest item with the closest gap to the top one was Item 3. *Business English is challenging in the language of grammar and vocabulary* at 4.47 for the mean score; however, it obtained the second lowest standard deviation at 0.12.

Moreover, Item 1 and Item 9 had similar mean values at 4.42 and 4.36, respectively, while the standard deviation of Item 9. *The content is theoretically* doubled that of Item 1. *I am not familiar with the technical terms of business* at 0.31. The last Item in the "strongly disagree" rank was Item 2. *I do not have enough time to prepare for the lessons* at 4.30, and the lowest standard deviation at 0.08.

Regarding the next rank, the value of Item 4. *The business content is too demanding to learn* was 4.12. It is notable that there was a similarity in the value of Item 8. *The teaching methods are not suitable for learners* and Item 10. *There is no real practice in a classroom* at 3.60 and 3.62, respectively.

The value of students who showed a neutral perception was 3.10 for Item 6. *The materials are complex and too much*, while the lowest value of "disagree" belonged to Item 7. *The teachers are not friendly and supportive*, with a value of 2.42.

4.2 The opportunities of learning business-oriented majors at FFL, HUB

Table 3. The opportunities of learning business-oriented majors at FFL, HUB

Items	Questions	Mean	Std
11	The programs can foster my English competency.	3.23	0.24
12	The teachers are supportive to learners	4.42	0.42
13	The content is relevant to the market demand	4.25	0.30
14	The business content is useful for learners	4.67	0.81
15	I can improve my knowledge from the program	4.52	0.34
16	I can improve my skills from the program	4.62	0.61
17	I can improve my attitudes from the program	4.40	0.16
18	The program is practical	3.12	0.62
19	The materials are sufficient and suitable for me	4.48	0.41
20	I can be more confident to work in the future	4.42	0.18

Table 3 describes the learners' perspectives toward the opportunities of learning business-oriented majors at FFL, HUB. In general, nearly all of the question Items received complete agreement from the research participants with similar mean values. The highest mean value was given to Item 14. *The business content is helpful for learners* at 4.67, and the highest standard deviation at 0.81. The second position was Item 16. *I can improve my skills from the program* at 4.62, while the value for Item 15. *I can improve my knowledge from the program* was 4.52.

Moreover, these are followed by Item 19. *The materials are sufficient and suitable for me*, with a value of 4.48. It can be seen that Item 12. *The teachers are supportive to learners*, and Item 20. *I can be more confident to work in the future* had the same mean score of 4.42. The value of Item 17. *I can improve my attitudes from the program* was just modestly lower at 4.40. The lowest one in this rank was Item 13. *The content is relevant to the market demand* at 4.25. It is essential to mention that there were only two Items in the scale of "neutral" at 3.12 for Item 18. *The program is practical* and 3.23 for Item 11. *The programs can foster my English competency*.

5. Discussion

Regarding to the challenges of learning business English majors, the actual working environment is fundamental for learners to experience and reflect on the comparison between theory and practice in the market. The university needs to equip the faculty with the imitated company office or provide opportunities for learners to merge into the actual working context to learn the company culture. The theoretical content of the company culture needs to be more

abstract to absorb. It is recognized that learners showed their agreement on the challenges of language use they endured as the participants are still third-year students with a level of English proficiency at B2 level a. Therefore, they are unable to understand and master all the language features (McKay, 2012). Especially for business English is a new domain that learners must confront, so the language is required to be very formal, and indeed, several expression patterns need to be more distinctive and unfamiliar to understand.

Moreover, it is undeniable that there is an apparent reality in most universities in Vietnam that the programs are much theory-based, which includes a tremendous volume of a theory that learners always need help to learn with little impact for real working competency (Biggs & Tang, 2010). Simultaneously, the field of business is far different from academic English in most training programs. Learners must spend time exploring the professional content of the field to understand the technical terms which usually distract or manipulate learners' common assumption of meanings. The massive content and pressure of various subjects in one semester is a big challenge for learners to spare time reviewing and revising the lesson. This reality is contradictory to Oliva's (2008) suggestion for the program in the model of outcomes-based education that the amount of time learners spend on self-study should be three times higher than that of in-class training.

Additionally, there is always a dilemma in the program of business English that learners must deal with not only the language but also the professional content. It is supposed that learners should be trained with professional knowledge of the business field; however, they have little exposure to the business content as half of the program is for language training, so the business content is insufficient for learners to comprehend the business mechanism.

This result can be interpreted as the confusion of learners when they still recognize these factors with both advantages and disadvantages at the same time (Trigwell & Prosser, 2014). Some teaching activities could be more suitable for the personalization of learners, which reduced the mean score for item 8. Learners also acknowledge the modified practice in the classroom, which is not practically related to the real-world market. Both ideas of teaching method and practice have a mutual impact as they assist each other in generating engaging lessons for learners.

The materials are the instruments teachers adopt to achieve the expected learning outcomes. The neutrality in this idea stems from the inconsistency of the difficulties in the materials that learners use in class. Materials play an essential role in conveying the intended content of the program in alignment with the program's expectations and the trainers' teaching capabilities. Notwithstanding, the learners recognize the positive learning atmosphere of the teacher's friendliness and support. These are the external motivation for learners to overcome the challenges in knowledge acquisition.

For the opportunities perceived by learners, the helpfulness of the program was seen. This idea is recognized with the standard design of the program in consideration of market analysis. The program's content allows learners to foster their readiness to join the job market in the presence of fundamental business subjects such as finance, logistics, or human resource management. The program also integrates various soft skills into the program such as communication, presentation, and teamwork, with core business knowledge to develop learners' abilities upon the completion of the course (Qu, 2014). This transformation has contributed to solving the previous problem of the university program where learners are filled with only theory

in the complete absence of soft skills to elevate productivity. Although the materials are considered quite challenging, it is possible to acknowledge their function and usefulness in the program in accordance with the national university program standards (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The teachers are perceived positively for their constructive feedback to learners, and this positive learning environment can develop learners' confidence in learning and completing assignments.

Due to the design of outcome-based education, three domains of knowledge, skills, and attitudes are focused equally. The valuable ethical lessons are integrated sensitively into the program to raise learners' awareness of the standard attitudes in the business world. Some aspects also modify learners' daily routines to be more professional. The positive recognition of program alignment is constructed through the alignment of the program design with the market analysis. The process of program design has invited scholars and experts to provide recommendations, and it is also benchmarked with the famous program in other prestigious universities to ensure the validity of the program. The outcome of the positive sides on the impact of programs is quite contrary to the previous idea when learners identify the program as both practical and theoretical (Richards, 2001). It is expected that the program can ensure both practice and theory with certain levels of equality, so the experience is quite bizarre to be inclined to one stance. The last outcome is made due to the integration of both business content and language content. There needs to be more than the language content to develop learners' language skills, as half of the program is occupied by business content.

6. Conclusion

The study's findings have shown specific merits in different domains of higher education. The outcomes of the study demonstrate students' insights towards the opportunities and challenges of learning business-oriented English major at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, with new insights. For the dean, the recognition of the limitation in the facility to foster competency and the chances to experience practical exposure of the real world in business requires the university decision-makers to introduce innovation in the facility to ensure proper access to the empirical business context. Moreover, the association between schools and companies should be established to invite business lecturers to attend the school programs to share their expertise and experience in the business market. Simultaneously, learners are able to participate in the internship or the company tour during the course at different enterprises to reflect on the similarities and differences among various working contexts. In addition, teachers can benefit from the study outcomes by observing the effectiveness of their teaching activities to modify the lessons in response to learners' characteristics and expectations.

However, the study also confronts certain limitations during the implementation. First, the scale is manageable to ensure the generalization of the findings for the whole university and the faculty. The randomization of the participants was not ensured completely as the researchers needed to explore the participants' personal backgrounds to choose the purposive samples. Second, the study was unable to explore the participants' insights to understand the potential factors that influence their choices and the recommendation for the limitations they experienced at the institution. Third, the researcher should have attended the actual class to observe the way participants experienced and responded to the challenges they encountered or the potential they recognized.

In conclusion, the study of the challenges and opportunities of learning business-oriented English major at a banking university has shown certain informative outcomes. The questionnaires received the majority of agreement from the participants, with a minor proportion of other stances. The English language and the business content are two significant obstacles for learners. Learners recognize the merits of the programs and the teaching methods through their positive responses although they had to confront the challenges relating to the curriculum, and applicability of the English majors. Moreover, learners still acknowledged the importance of Business English for their future career path and its impactful practice in fostering knowledge, skill, and attitude to elevate their readiness for future career prospects. The study also sheds light on future research to explore the learners' insights and their experience in business-oriented English majors. Some studies can be conducted to explore learners' wellbeing when they enter the new program in business English or the extent to which learners are actually ready to merge to the new program.

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KHẢO SÁT THỰC TẾ GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT CHUYÊN NGÀNH TRONG MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỊNH HƯỚNG KINH TẾ: THÁCH THỨC VÀ CƠ HỘI

Tóm tắt: Xu hướng các cơ sở giáo dục đại học trở thành các trường đại học đa ngành đã trở nên phổ biến, và các trường đại học tư thục cũng không ngoại lệ. Mặc dù ban đầu được định hướng là một đơn vị tiên phong phía Nam trong việc đào tạo tài chính và ngân hàng, Trường Đại học Ngân hàng TP.HCM (HUB) nhanh chóng nhận ra nhu cầu và cơ hội nghề nghiệp cho các lĩnh vực và nghề nghiệp không chỉ trong ngành ngân hàng, các ngân hàng và tổ chức tài chính. Do đó, trường đã mở các ngành học mới trong các lĩnh vực khoa học xã hội và nhân văn. Khoa Ngoại ngữ được thành lập nhằm đào tạo nguồn nhân lực giỏi ngoại ngữ cho các ngành tài chính và ngân hàng và đồng thời có khả năng làm việc trong nhiều ngành nghề và lĩnh vực khác. Khoa Ngoại ngữ của trường, với định hướng kinh doanh, đã đào tạo hàng ngàn sinh viên thành công trong nhiều vị trí công việc khác nhau. Tuy nhiên, việc dạy và học tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học nổi tiếng và chủ yếu về tài chính ngân hàng đặt ra nhiều thách thức. Từ những khó khăn này, nhiều cơ hội đã được mở ra cho cả người học và giảng viên tại khoa và trường. Nghiên cứu này nhằm phân tích quan điểm của 100 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh về các cơ hội và thách thức mà họ gặp phải khi học các chuyên ngành định hướng kinh doanh tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ, HUB. Nghiên cứu đã sử dụng phương pháp định lượng thông qua bảng câu hỏi. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy người học phải đối mặt với một số rào cản liên quan đến chính sách, chương trình giảng dạy và tính ứng dụng cùng với những cơ hội để phát triển và nâng cao năng lực.

Từ khóa: Chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, giảng dạy tiếng Anh, giáo dục đại học, đại học đa ngành