

SELF-EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG VIETNAMESE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN A COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

Nguyen Tien Quang, Nguyen Anh Thi*, Do Thi Bich Thuyen

Can Tho University

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 23/5/2025</p> <p>Revised: 27/10/2025</p> <p>Published: 27/10/2025</p>	<p>With recent reforms in English language education emphasizing a competency-based approach, fostering communicative competence has become a key goal. Despite this shift, there is scarce research on how students themselves evaluate their communicative abilities within the framework of the Competency-Based English Teaching Curriculum. This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese English as a foreign language students at high schools assess their communicative competence and the challenges they face under the Competency-Based English Teaching Curriculum. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through questionnaires (n = 205) and semi-structured interviews (n = 9) with twelfth-grade students from 25 public high schools across 9 provinces in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. The findings reveal that students rate their overall communicative competence as moderate, with particular strengths in sociocultural and strategic components. Additionally, four key categories of challenges emerged, including teacher-related, student-related, family-related, and school-related factors. These insights offer practical implications for enhancing the implementation of Competency-Based English Teaching Curriculum and contribute to broader discussions on improving English language education in Vietnam and other similar contexts.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Competency-Based English Teaching Curriculum Challenges Communicative competence High school students Self-evaluation</p>	

TỰ ĐÁNH GIÁ NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP CỦA HỌC SINH PHỔ THÔNG VIỆT NAM THÔNG QUA CHƯƠNG TRÌNH DẠY HỌC TIẾNG ANH DỰA TRÊN NĂNG LỰC

Nguyễn Tiên Quang, Nguyễn Anh Thi*, Đỗ Thị Bích Thuyền

Trường Đại học Cần Thơ

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<p>Ngày nhận bài: 23/5/2025</p> <p>Ngày hoàn thiện: 27/10/2025</p> <p>Ngày đăng: 27/10/2025</p>	<p>Trong bối cảnh cải tiến hoạt động giảng dạy tiếng Anh theo định hướng phát triển năng lực, việc phát triển năng lực giao tiếp cho người học trở thành mục tiêu trọng tâm. Tuy nhiên, hiện có ít nghiên cứu tìm hiểu về việc học sinh tự đánh giá năng lực này. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu việc học sinh trung học phổ thông tại Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ tự đánh giá năng lực giao tiếp và các thách thức gặp phải khi học thông qua chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh dựa trên năng lực. Với phương pháp hỗn hợp, dữ liệu được thu thập từ bảng hỏi (205 học sinh) và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc (9 học sinh) lớp 12 tại 25 trường phổ thông công lập thuộc 9 tỉnh ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Việt Nam. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, nhìn chung học sinh đánh giá năng lực giao tiếp của họ ở mức trung bình, có xu hướng mạnh về năng lực văn hóa - xã hội và chiến lược so với các nhóm năng lực khác. Bốn nhóm thách thức chính cũng được tìm thấy gồm: yếu tố giáo viên, học sinh, gia đình và nhà trường. Từ đó, nghiên cứu đề xuất một số hàm ý sư phạm nhằm cải thiện việc thực hiện chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh dựa trên năng lực cũng như nâng cao chất lượng việc dạy và học tiếng Anh trong các bối cảnh tương tự.</p>
<p>TỪ KHÓA</p> <p>Chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh dựa trên năng lực Thử thách Năng lực giao tiếp Học sinh phổ thông Tự đánh giá</p>	

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* Corresponding author. Email: nathi@ctu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

Since 2008, Vietnam has implemented major English language teaching (ELT) reforms to improve students' communicative competence. The National Foreign Language Project (NFLP), launched through Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg on September 30, 2008 [1], marked a shift from content-based learning to a competency-based approach that emphasizes real-world English use. Aligned with these reforms, the Competency-based English Teaching Curriculum (CETC) was introduced to center instruction on communicative competence. CETC prioritizes practical skills, learner-centered teaching, individualized pacing, outcome-based assessment, and market alignment [2], [3]. It encourages critical thinking and real-life application, supported by valid assessments and high-quality learning resources.

Despite these goals, implementation faces ongoing issues [4], [5]. Studies report persistent struggles to develop communicative competence. Classroom activities often favor form over meaning, limiting real-life communication [6]. Instructional quality is frequently inadequate [7], and limited exposure to authentic language environments hinders practice [8]. Consequently, many students graduate with only basic proficiency, restricting effective English use in academic and professional settings [7].

Although earlier research explored the NFLP from teacher, policy, and curriculum angles [9], [10], students' perspectives on CETC remain underexamined. Specifically, little is known about how Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) high school students self-evaluate their development in communicative competence or what improvements they suggest. It should be mentioned that the term 'self-evaluation' used in this study refers to a learner's ability to critically assess their own skills and performance in using English for effective communication. From these perspectives, this study addresses that gap by investigating how students assess their skills against Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) standards, identifying the challenges they face, and accordingly promoting recommendations for enhancing the CETC. The research is guided by two central questions:

- i. To what extent do Vietnamese EFL high school students assess their communicative competence developed through the CETC?
- ii. What challenges do they encounter in mastering communicative competence through the CETC?

2. Research Method

2.1. Research design

This study uses a descriptive research design within a mixed-methods framework, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches for a fuller understanding of the research problem [11]. An explanatory sequential design was followed. First, quantitative data were collected via questionnaires to capture students' self-assessments of communicative competence, followed by semi-structured interviews to explore emerging patterns [12]. This structure allows qualitative insights to clarify and expand on survey results, enhancing the depth and reliability of the study [12].

2.2. Research participants

This study involved 205 twelfth-grade students from Vietnam's Mekong Delta region, all of them had recently completed the CETC mandated by the MoET. The sample included 73 males (35.6%), 118 females (57.6%), and 14 students (6.8%) who did not report their gender. Using a voluntary response sampling method, 9 students with distinct questionnaire patterns were later selected for semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into their communicative competence development.

2.3. Research instruments

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire included 46 items covering six communicative competence domains: Linguistic, Sociocultural, Discourse, Formulaic, Interactional, and Strategic. It had two sections.

The first gathered demographic data (gender, age, grade, school, hometown, and contact info for follow-up), while the second measured students' self-assessed competence using a five-point Likert scale, from "completely disagree" to "completely agree". The questionnaire drew on three key sources, including Celce-Murcia's communicative competence framework [13], Yufrizal's study on EFL learners' perceptions [14], and Lockley's research on self-perceived competence [15]. These sources were chosen for their relevance to the goals of the study and their proven effectiveness in assessing communicative competence in EFL contexts.

2.3.2. *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were employed to gain deeper insights into students' communicative competence development. The interview protocol was informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory [16] and Celce-Murcia's communicative competence framework [13]. This approach considered the influence of immediate learning environments, home-school relationships, institutional policies, cultural and socioeconomic contexts, and changes over time. These factors helped contextualize challenges such as unclear instruction, low engagement, limited support systems. In addition, external pressures affecting students' ability to develop communicative competence.

2.4. *Data collection procedure*

Before data collection, participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, the use of data, and their right to withdraw at any time. Their consent to participate in the research was also formally obtained. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. A pilot study tested the questionnaire, prompting revisions for clarity, and two pilot interviews refined question wording and translation. Using an explanatory sequential design, the online questionnaire ran for two weeks. Incomplete responses were removed, and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure comfort and clarity [17]. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and reviewed for accuracy before being coded for thematic analysis.

2.5. *Data analysis*

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were computed, and t-tests were conducted to examine group differences. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data [18]. This process involved reviewing and refining codes to ensure accuracy, coherence, and reliability. Data were examined repeatedly to reach thematic saturation. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions, offering deeper insights into students' perceptions and challenges related to communicative competence under the CETC.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Vietnamese EFL high school students' self-evaluation of communicative competence through CETC*

A questionnaire was administered to assess students' self-evaluation of their communication competence after training with the CETC. Descriptive statistics indicate that students' overall self-evaluation of communicative competence was relatively low ($M = 2.84$).

A One-sample t-test was conducted to compare students' self-evaluation across six competence domains (Linguistic, Socio-Cultural, Discourse, Formulaic, Interactional, and Strategic) against the neutral benchmark ($M = 3.0$). Results showed significantly lower self-evaluations in Linguistic ($M = 2.80$, $t = -3.38$, $p = 0.001$), Discourse ($M = 2.74$, $t = -4.33$, $p < 0.001$), Formulaic ($M = 2.71$, $t = -4.60$, $p < 0.001$), and Interactional competence ($M = 2.80$, $t = -3.22$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting students perceived themselves as slightly below average in these

areas. Conversely, no significant differences were found in Socio-Cultural ($M = 3.01$, $t = 0.106$, $p = 0.915$) and Strategic competence ($M = 2.99$, $t = -0.119$, $p = 0.906$), indicating self-perceptions aligned with the neutral benchmark.

Overall, students rated their development in Linguistic, Discourse, Formulaic, and Interactional competence below average, while Socio-cultural and Strategic competence were rated at an average level. These results suggest that the CETC has had a limited overall impact on students' communicative competence.

A key reason for students' low self-assessment is the limited opportunity for authentic communication practice in Vietnamese high schools. Although the CETC promotes real-world language use, classroom conditions often fall short. Effective language learning depends on meaningful interaction and reflection, conditions rarely met in practice [19]. As Tweedy notes, without real-life English exposure, students struggle with fluency, listening, and cultural understanding [20]. Another issue is the ineffectiveness of teaching practices. Many students reported that instruction focuses heavily on grammar, reading, and writing, while speaking and listening are neglected. This reflects broader pedagogical trends in Vietnam, as noted by Tieocharoen and Rimkeeratikul [21]. Time constraints further limit teachers' ability to plan and deliver interactive lessons [7], often reducing time for feedback and deeper engagement [9].

Assessment practices also undermine communicative development. Current evaluations emphasize grammar and vocabulary over communication skills, misaligning with CETC goals [5], [9]. This results in an imbalanced curriculum and deprives students of the feedback necessary to build real-world competence.

Still, students rated their socio-cultural and strategic competencies relatively higher. CETC's inclusion of films, stories, and visual aids has helped foster intercultural learning [7], supported by NFLP initiatives like culturally rich pilot textbooks and teacher workshops [22]. However, average ratings suggest persistent difficulties in embedding cultural content. Teachers often struggle to align cultural knowledge with curricular targets [23], even though such knowledge is crucial for understanding idioms and context-specific expressions [9], [24].

Strategic competence showed stronger development. Teachers promoted self-directed learning through digital tools, games, and consistent feedback [9]. Students embraced self-study and intercultural exchanges to supplement classroom learning. Research by Vu [25] or Tran and Phan [26] highlights students' regular use of metacognitive strategies and commitment to personal learning routines, suggesting CETC has effectively supported learning autonomy in this area.

3.2. Vietnamese EFL high school students' challenges in mastering their communicative competence through the CETC

3.2.1. Teacher-related challenges

Vietnamese EFL high school students identified several teacher-related barriers to developing communicative competence through the CETC. These challenges include the dominance of teacher-centred pedagogy, time constraints, exam-focused instruction, ineffective classroom activities, and a lack of clear instructional support.

A significant concern raised by most students ($n=7$ out of 9) was their teachers' continued reliance on traditional, teacher-centred, and content-oriented methods. As student D noted, "My teacher tries to make time for lecturing in class" while student A observed, "Teachers spend more time teaching vocabulary and grammar and correcting homework. In class, the activities are usually only 1-2 minutes or maybe 5 minutes at most... We don't learn much from them." These observations reflect the persistence of content-heavy, lecture-driven instruction that offers minimal time for communicative practice.

This finding aligns with Nguyen et al [9], who reported that many Vietnamese teachers remain committed to traditional, content-focused pedagogies, impeding the shift to competency-based approaches. These practices are partly rooted in historical and cultural values shaped by Confucian

educational traditions, which emphasize teacher authority and rote learning [27]. Limited training in learner-centred methodologies further constrains teachers' ability to adopt communicative approaches [9]. As Dao and Newton [28] highlighted, this disconnect between theory and practice undermines students' ability to apply grammatical knowledge in real-world contexts.

Students also reported that time pressure (n=2 out of 9) and the prioritization of exam preparation (n=2) further hinder communicative instruction. Student A explained, "The classroom activities are rushed because teachers are trying to cover all the material before exams. [...] We're experiencing a lack of speaking and listening practice because our teachers are intensely focused on exam preparation." These interrelated constraints contribute to a compressed, test-oriented curriculum that often neglects the development of oral skills essential for real-life communication [29]. As Hien and Loan [7] noted, both teachers and students experience pressure. Teachers must balance curricular demands with exam readiness while managing large workloads and multiple classes, leaving little time to nurture communicative competence.

Another common challenge involved the ineffectiveness of classroom activities. While some students (n=4 out of 9) acknowledged the use of varied tasks such as presentations and video recordings, they also questioned their quality and impact. Student C remarked that "video recording felt more like reading from a script than actual speaking". Others (n=2 out of 9) criticized repetitive and uninspired exercises. Student I recalled, "The teacher provided a workbook with 100 exercises... We must keep working through them... extremely tedious." Student A added, "Sometimes, including myself, we even look for answers online instead of figuring them out ourselves." These monotonous tasks undermine student motivation and fail to develop authentic communication skills.

Furthermore, students perceived their teachers' guidance and support for communicative development as vague or insufficient. Student I commented, "My high school teachers rarely provide support for practicing English communication. They mostly help with solving and correcting exercises." Although the MoET has introduced professional development initiatives under the NFLP [22], many teachers regard these efforts as superficial or poorly tailored to classroom realities [9]. The prevailing one-size-fits-all approach to teacher training often lacks the depth and flexibility needed to address diverse teaching contexts [30].

3.2.2. Student-related challenges

Students also identified internal challenges that hinder their ability to develop communicative competence through the CETC. These include difficulties applying classroom knowledge in real-life contexts, reluctance to seek support, challenges in expressing ideas, and communication anxiety.

A majority of students (n=6 out of 9) reported that they struggle to transfer classroom learning into real-world communication. Student E explained, "I have a habit of studying without actually applying the knowledge in practical situations. I lack an environment for speaking English... while I may know the vocabulary, I cannot use it in practical situations." Student I echoed this: "We can apply grammar in exercises, but in real-life situations, we don't know how to use it." This gap is largely due to the limited communicative opportunities in Vietnamese classrooms, which often lack interactive learning due to large class sizes and time constraints [31]. Thien Bao and Lo [8] similarly note that students in Vietnam have few chances to engage with native speakers or practice English in authentic contexts.

Another contributing factor is students' reluctance to seek help from teachers (n=3 out of 9). Student A stated, "When I encounter difficulties, I usually don't tell my teacher because there's nothing they can do at that point," while Student D added, "Students rarely seek assistance... the teacher remains unaware of the problems." This lack of communication limits teachers' ability to intervene and support struggling learners. Research suggests that students are more likely to seek help in relaxed, student-centred environments [32]. In contrast, Vietnam's exam-focused, teacher-dominated classrooms may inadvertently discourage help-seeking behavior [5].

In addition, personal barriers such as anxiety, difficulty formulating ideas, and fear of judgment (n=2 out of 9) also interfere with communication. Student H shared, "I feel nervous and fear I will not be understood... I consistently stumble, need to revise, and forget what I intended to say." Such anxiety is often linked to fear of making mistakes, inadequate vocabulary, and limited grammar skills [9]. Moreover, Vietnam's educational emphasis on written over oral skills [22] and its grammar-heavy assessment system discourage students from taking risks in spoken English, further exacerbating their hesitation and lack of confidence.

To address these challenges, students should be encouraged to adopt more proactive and self-directed learning strategies. This includes recording themselves to identify pronunciation or fluency issues, mimicking speech from English videos, and seeking informal opportunities for real-life language use. Engaging in English clubs, volunteering in English-speaking settings, or attending language events can provide meaningful practice and boost both fluency and confidence. Additionally, students should be encouraged to reach out to teachers and peers when they face difficulties, transforming the classroom into a more collaborative and supportive space.

3.2.3. School-related challenges

At the institutional level, students encountered several challenges that hindered the development of communicative competence, particularly related to learning materials and extracurricular support systems.

Three students reported that school-provided learning resources were overly grammar-focused, lacked communicative content, and occasionally contained inaccuracies. Student A remarked, "The materials provided are usually just a list of vocabulary or grammar points, along with vocabulary and grammar exercises. The textbook focuses a lot on writing practice and doesn't include much on communication." Furthermore, the same student noted inconsistencies and errors in the textbooks: "Some teachers adhere strictly to the textbook, while others recognize potential errors... but can't clearly explain them."

The issue stems from inadequate preparation for implementing multiple textbook series from various publishers. Nguyen found that many teachers received minimal training and relied on personal experience, revealing a lack of readiness [33]. Time constraints, unclear evaluation criteria, and limited guidance worsened the situation. Mai et al. warned that inconsistent textbook adoption may lead to unequal student outcomes [34]. These findings highlight the need for structured support, including comprehensive training, correction of content errors, consistent evaluation metrics, and encouragement for teachers to adapt and enhance materials to better support communicative competence development.

In addition, some students (n=2 out of 9) expressed concerns regarding the school's English-speaking clubs. While such extracurricular programs are intended to promote authentic language use, participants reported an unsupportive, competitive environment. Student C explained, "There are students who are very good at English and might criticise others harshly... hearing such criticism makes me feel self-conscious, and the more self-conscious I feel, the harder it is for me to speak." Although English clubs can foster language skills, cultural awareness, and confidence [9], [35], this study reveals that peer judgment and lack of facilitation can undermine their intended benefits. This aligns with Oktari, who identified peer criticism, low self-confidence, and anxiety as key barriers to effective speaking practice in English clubs [36].

4. Conclusion

This study examined how EFL high school students in Vietnam's Mekong Delta perceive their communicative competence under the CETC. Students rated their skills as average, showing strengths in socio-cultural and strategic areas, indicating partial success in fostering cultural awareness and communication strategies. However, challenges persist. Teacher-centered methods, limited support, and exam-focused curricula hinder progress. Students also face internal

barriers like anxiety, difficulty expressing ideas, and trouble applying lessons to real life. While family support was common, academic pressure often increased stress. The findings suggest a need for more authentic practice, stronger teacher training, and better institutional alignment with CETC goals. In practical terms, the study provides insights for policymakers and educators to design more learner-centered interventions that balance exam preparation with communicative competence development. It also offers valuable implications for curriculum designers in tailoring CETC implementation to local classroom realities. Regarding the limitation of this study, it relied solely on students' perspectives and did not include teachers' views, which could have enriched the interpretation of the findings. Future research could therefore expand by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives such as teachers, administrators, and parents to develop a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing communicative competence development under the CETC.

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