

ENGLISH PRACTICE SPACES FOR GLOBAL MOBILITY: A CASE STUDY OF AN INTERNATIONALLY ORIENTED UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 04/12/2024	English language teaching and learning takes an essential role in internationalizing higher education. In Vietnam, tertiary institutions have striven to elevate students' English proficiency as a solid package for their global mobility. Through the case study of a private university with an international orientation, this study aims to explore the spaces for English practice deployed at this institution and teachers' perceived constraints on such environments. This study drew on a critical analysis of language-related policies, annual internal reports and website posts, and interview data with 10 full-time English teachers at the university. Findings reveal abundant opportunities and spaces for language practice that reiterated the significance of English in its internationalization pursuit. However, the teachers noted many limitations impeding such efforts concerning student engagement, individualized support, and alignment with internationalization. This study provides practical implications for administrators, language program developers and teachers in creating more ample spaces for language practice and ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of such platforms.
Revised: 04/3/2025	
Published: 04/3/2025	
KEYWORDS	
Language practice spaces	
Internationalization	
Out-of-class English learning	
Student engagement	
Global mobility	

KHÔNG GIAN THỰC HÀNH TIẾNG ANH ĐÁP ỨNG HỘI NHẬP TOÀN CẦU: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP CỦA MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC TƯ THỰC THEO ĐỊNH HƯỚNG QUỐC TẾ TẠI VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 04/12/2024	Việc dạy và học tiếng Anh đóng vai trò thiết yếu trong quá trình quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học. Các trường đại học Việt Nam không ngừng cải thiện trình độ tiếng Anh của sinh viên nhằm nâng cao khả năng hội nhập của sinh viên. Thông qua phân tích trường hợp một trường đại học tư thực theo định hướng quốc tế, nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu các không gian thực hành tiếng Anh tại trường và quan điểm của giáo viên về các mặt hạn chế của các hoạt động này. Nghiên cứu phân tích các chính sách ngôn ngữ, báo cáo nội bộ thường niên, bài đăng trên web của trường và dữ liệu phỏng vấn với 10 giảng viên cơ hữu. Kết quả cho thấy các không gian thực hành rất phong phú, nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của tiếng Anh trong mục tiêu quốc tế hóa của trường. Tuy nhiên, các giảng viên chỉ ra một số hạn chế liên quan đến mức độ tham gia của sinh viên, việc hỗ trợ từng cá nhân sinh viên và sự tương thích với mục tiêu quốc tế hóa. Nghiên cứu này giúp các nhà quản lý, nhà phát triển chương trình và giảng viên tiếng Anh trong việc đa dạng hóa không gian thực hành ngoại ngữ và đảm bảo tính hiệu quả của những nền tảng này.
Ngày hoàn thiện: 04/3/2025	
Ngày đăng: 04/3/2025	
TỪ KHÓA	
Không gian thực hành ngoại ngữ	
Quốc tế hóa	
Học tiếng Anh ngoài giờ học	
Sự tham gia của sinh viên	
Hội nhập toàn cầu	

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.11652>

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1. Introduction

With its escalating role as a lingua franca, English plays a central role in mediating socio-economic, scientific and education exchanges among countries worldwide. In Vietnam, the unequivocal positioning of English has been articulately stated in its educational law and language policies, and consistently ascertained at different levels of education, particularly in the context of higher education (HE) [1]. Upgrading the English language proficiency level of academics and students is a step forward for internationalization in higher education [2]. English is also part of the indispensable package for higher employability among university graduates in the context of globalization [3]. However, Hoang [4] observes that the English language proficiency of the majority of Vietnamese students completing undergraduate education fails to meet the market demands for workplace communication. This contributes to the growing concern for the development of language competence among students, driving the efforts to reform language policies and curricula in Vietnam [1].

Contemporary research has shown ongoing interest in English language education in tertiary institutions in Vietnam in the context of HE internationalization. Hoang [4] emphasizes the need to “rethink of the roles of English in the development of higher education in Vietnam”. In response to the rapid shifts in the global and local educational settings, universities in Vietnam have made radical changes to the curricula and language of communication in classrooms. The widespread adoption of English as a medium of instruction at most HE institutions has posed many problems concerning lecturers’ and students’ linguistic readiness for participating in such learning environments [5]. As such, there exists an everlasting need for reviewing language policies and diversifying spaces for language practice to elevate students’ English language competence in tackling such contextual challenges [6], [7].

To optimize the efficiency of these processes, both formal and informal learning spaces have been found to be rewarding and conducive to students’ language development [8], [9]. Formal settings for language learning are primarily restricted to traditional classrooms and learning spaces on campus. With the burgeoning of educational technology and the aftermaths of the covid-pandemic, formal learning spaces extends to digital and virtual platforms endorsed by HE institutions [10]. On the contrary, informal learning settings “embody specific forms of sociality, co-presence and social support” that are attributable to students’ engagement in learning outside school [11]. In this way, Richards [8] presents a list of informal learning spaces such as chat rooms, self-access centers, language villages, digital games, and social media in which social interaction is the central conduit for language practice. These spaces altogether provide students with rich exposure to language resources and learning opportunities drawing on their circumstances within and beyond classrooms.

While there has been a high volume of research on the benefits of learning in both formal and informal learning spaces [12], [13], studies delving into the ways in which a specific HE institution deploys promotes the status of English in its pursuit of internationalization remain limited. This study aims to explore the language practice spaces at an internationally oriented private university and teachers’ perspectives on the constraints hindering the effectiveness of such environments. It contributes to enriching understandings of the ways in which specific HE institutions have striven to expand English-related spaces and opportunities for global mobility. The insights from this case study enable administrators and language program developers to revisit and revise their own policies and practices to empower their students with strategies for efficiently utilizing the learning resources available within and across multiple learning settings. The present study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the language practice spaces offered by the university to support its internationalization orientation?

RQ2: What are teachers’ perceived constraints of these language practice spaces?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research setting

This study draws on a case study of a private multidisciplinary university in Ho Chi Minh City that aims to provide students with an international standard of education in its strategic development. One of the core values underpinning its operations is to comprehensively integrate into the global context in its internationalization pathway. The university offers 36 domestic undergraduate programs in different fields of economics, business, finance, law, languages, IT and communication, and seven collaborative programs with American and British universities. There are approximately 450 academic staff with a large number of them graduating from prestigious HE institutions overseas. Over 10 percent of the full-time lecturers are foreigners who are native speakers of English or fluent in the language. The university has developed long-standing partnerships with universities from different parts of the world and is continuously looking for new international partners.

The university provides an intensive General English Program (GEP) for non-English majors. The GEP comprises six courses with a total of 300 contact hours spanning the first 1.5 years of their studies. 30% of the specialized courses are delivered in English as a medium of instruction. For graduation, students are required to achieve an overall band of 5.5 and above in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or equivalents in other international language proficiency tests endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP). Together with the formal language courses, the university hosts a wide range of spaces for practicing English (discussed in the findings).

2.2. Instruments and Data Analysis

There are two types of data supporting this study. Document analysis of six official documents, 10 faculty reports and 108 website posts in the academic year 2023-2024 were utilized to identify the language policies and spaces for language practice at the university. For teachers' perspectives, qualitative data was collected from interviews with 10 English teachers working full-time at the university. These teachers were recruited voluntarily based on three criteria including a minimum of three-year working experience, proactive involvement in out-of-class English-related activities for students, and experience as student counselors or mentors in international activities. The interview focused on the key issues impeding the implementation of the language practice spaces at the university in its internationalization efforts. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher presented the English-related spaces in Table 1 (see 3.1) to the interviewee to facilitate their reflections and obtain valid responses.

The documents above were examined carefully by the researcher using a chain of keywords such as *English-related*, *student activities*, *out-of-class*, *language practice*, *internationalization*. The results are reported in 3.1 with specific inclusion criteria. The interview data was analyzed thematically based on the six steps of analysis guided by [14]. Firstly, the researcher developed familiarity with the data by reading and re-reading it, highlighting pieces of data concerning the constraints of deploying language practice spaces at the university, and noting down preliminary ideas. Secondly, the resulting ideas were synthesized and coded tentatively such as *student engagement*, *learning spaces*, *student needs*, *constraints*, and *internationalization*. Thirdly, potential themes were formulated from these codes such as *issues related to student engagement in language practice*, *internationally-oriented activities*, *teachers' challenges in responding to students' language needs*, and *individual students' practice styles*. Fourthly, the resulting themes were reviewed against the coded extracts to ensure their compatibility. Fifthly, the themes were defined and labelled. Three major themes were identified from the interview data concerning the issue of student engagement, individualized support for students, and alignment with the internationalization process. The final stage involved producing a report of the chosen themes

with reference to the research questions and relevant literature.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Spaces for English Language Practice at the University

Table 1. *Description of English-related spaces at the university*

No.	Spaces and Modes	Description
1	English seminars (offline, online, on campus, off campus)	These seminars help students develop language skills and test-taking strategies for language proficiency tests such as IELTS and VSTEP.
2	ESP workshops (offline, online, on campus, off campus)	These workshops provide rich opportunities for students to develop ESP vocabulary and English terminology in their specializations. This contributes to enhancing their employability in international markets.
3	Speaking portfolios (online, off campus)	Students in the GEP are rewarded with bonus marks for recorded videos of their role play in English outside class hours.
4	Reading portfolios (online, off campus)	Students in the GEP are rewarded with bonus marks for reading and summarizing novels in English outside class hours.
5	Speaking forum (offline, on campus)	The speaking forum takes place twice a week during the semester. Students are provided with handouts on certain global issues for discussion.
6	English contests (offline, online, on campus)	The contests vary in forms and topics aiming to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their language use. They include written competitions, debates, eloquence, English speeches and creative works.
7	Student publication (offline, online, on campus, off campus)	Students are encouraged to write their research reports in English and share their publications (e.g., research projects, journal articles, conference proceedings, and posters) at the annual student research symposium.
8	Cultural events (offline, online, on campus, off campus)	The university or individual faculties collaborate with international universities, embassies or international associations in hosting events that showcase cultural features of countries around the world.
9	Industry talks (offline, online, on campus, off campus)	Industry speakers are frequently invited to give talks in English to students on a wide range of topics concerning their fields of expertise and employability.
10	Lectures with international scholars	The university hosts quite a large number of international scholars visiting and giving lectures to students.
11	Overseas field trips (offline, online, classroom-based)	Faculties and the International Institute collaborate in organizing field trips overseas during which students visit universities and businesses in other countries.
12	Overseas internship (offline, off campus)	The university has a strong network with international businesses and has sent a large number of students overseas for internship.
13	Student exchange programs (offline, on campus, off campus)	The university and faculties collaborate with partnered universities in hosting student exchange programs to enrich students academic and cultural experiences.
14	Bilingual events (offline, online, on campus)	The university encourages a combination of Vietnamese and English as the language of communication during all social and student events.
15	Bilingual programs (offline, online, classroom-based)	At least 30% of the courses are delivered in English. These courses are mostly taught by foreign lecturers and qualified Vietnamese ones.
16	Collaborative programs (offline, classroom-based)	Currently there are seven collaborative programs with American and British universities. All courses in these programs are delivered in English.
17	Mock interviews (offline, on campus)	Students are encouraged to participate in mock interviews with international businesses in English. These events are held twice a year for all senior students.
18	Mock tests (offline, online, on campus)	The university and faculties collaborate with language centers and test organizers in administering mock language tests for students.

Table 1 presents the spaces for language practice at the university in its pathway to internationalization. Three inclusion criteria for identifying these spaces are (1) they involve the use of English as the language of communication or instruction, (2) they respond to the university's emphasis on internationalization, and (3) they are additional spaces outside the GEP.

Table 1 reveals the diverse spaces for language practice at the university aiming to enrich students' opportunities for using English within and beyond campus. These activities accompany the students throughout their academic journey and embrace the four essential language skills as well as strategies for learning, test-taking, and global integration. These spaces cover different stages at the university, from the time students are in the GEP to their final stages of internship and preparation for entering the labor market. Unlike the frequently discussed out-of-class learning activities in contemporary research in which students actively sought learning resources and opportunities for themselves on a personal or group basis [15]-[18], the language practice spaces presented in this study are organized systematically, drawing on a wide range of local and global resources and platforms. Further, the combination of classroom-based, on- and off-campus settings, and offline and online platforms caters to the need of more students who might not have been able to attend such events if they had been organized offline and on campus only. This traversal of learning spaces, as Lai [12] points out, contributes to forming "an ecology comprising various dynamic and interdependent elements, and these formal, non-formal and informal learning elements interact with each other to form an individual's learning experience".

3.2. Teachers' Perceived Constraints of English-Related Spaces

3.2.1. Students' low levels of engagement

Engagement refers to students' cognitive, emotional and behavioral involvement in the learning process [19]. This study focuses primarily on the behavioral tenet of engagement that embraces proactive participation in various learning spaces. Student engagement in English-related activities at the university exhibits three major problems: low levels of interest, lack of attention, and reward-oriented participation. Many teachers reported that their students were loosely engaged in the seminars, workshops and competitions organized for language practice. For example, Teacher 1 stated, "*Only a few students in my class join language practice activities. Generally speaking, not many of them have shown their interest*". Similarly, Teacher 3 commented, "*If we compare the number of attendees with the total students at our university, this figure is rather humble, only accounting for a minor percentage. Faculties are trying their best to encourage them but the students are not keen at all*". Such a reality confirms the interplay between behavioral engagement and emotional factors such as interest and enjoyment [20], [21].

Those students who actually attended the events could be classified into three groups. While some saw the learning opportunities from the language spaces at the university, others were present with limited involvement or driven by external rewards such as bonus marks. Teacher 2 complained, "*I noticed that students were distracted by smartphones or laptop computers or had personal conversations. They came mostly for the bonus marks or student performance evaluation*". As part of the university culture, the students had to attend social events contributing to their performance evaluation at the end of each semester. This became one of the main sources of stimulation for them. In other words, their involvement in these spaces was not for the sake of language practice but rather for other unrelated reasons. Having the same observation, Teacher 4 noted, "*While some high achieving students joined the English forum for more practice opportunities, those low achievers stayed for about half an hour just for bonus marks*". Such superficial participation is consistent with findings in other studies that learner engagement is affected by intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, impeding the quality of their engagement [21].

In summary, the findings reveal students' different levels of engagement in the language practice spaces available at the university. The rate of participation remained limited given the

total number of students. Not all participants were actively involved in the activities; instead, they might have been driven by external factors such as bonus marks or performance evaluation.

3.2.2. Limited individualized support

Another problem arising from the implementation of language spaces at the university is the capability of catering to individual students' needs. As Teacher 3 pointed out, *"For the English forum, each session can only accommodate a certain number of students. If it is too crowded, students have a minimal amount of time for speaking practice."* In addition, the event facilitators might not be able to provide full support for the participants because *"We can't handle all students... we can only give general tips or advice"* (Teacher 7). Thus, Teacher 6 suggested a more emphasis on the quality of engagement than quantity, stating, *"we should focus more on how we can help individual students rather than giving insufficient support."* This inadequacy has been identified as a major deterrent in deploying of such language practice spaces [18], [22].

Other challenges confronting the effectiveness and efficiency of these language practice spaces concern scheduling and the language focus. The former was constrained by the fact that students had rather conflicting timetables, making it hard for them to join their preferred events. Teacher 9 remarked, *"Some students told me they wanted to go to the seminars or talk shows, but they had classes"*. The latter arose from the faculties' limited ability to respond to their students' language needs in their specific disciplines. Teacher 5 argued, *"Most of the events are for students to develop general English. There should be more activities that boost students' English for specific purposes. Some faculties do not pay much attention to this."* This shortcoming stemmed from the inconsistency in the deployment process among faculties and resources afforded by each faculty. In this regard, Teacher 8 pointed out, *"Some faculties are stronger in organizing events for their students to practice English while others have very humble activities. They should consult one another in hosting more events"*.

It is evident that students' specific needs have not been thoroughly accounted for despite the variety of spaces for language practice. The major challenges entailed the varying needs of individual students, scheduling difficulties, and the failure to provide sufficient opportunities for ESP practice.

3.2.3. Alignment with internationalization

The main motivation behind the university's effort to offer diverse spaces for language practice is to escalate its internationalization. Research has consistently reiterated that students' English language proficiency is central to this process [4], [23], [24]. However, these spaces for language practice exhibited a number of constraints.

The first issue is their limitation in empowering students with intercultural insights and skills. As Teacher 9 observed, *"There is a need for a more systematic integration of intercultural communication skills in the language practice activities. As the university aims for internationalization, fostering students' ability to communicate across cultures is essential."* These elements are highly essential not only for the university's internationalization goals but also for students' global mobility and employability [4], [25], [26]. The second hindrance is the university's approaches to global connection. Teacher 5 highlighted the need to *"invite more international scholars or students to participate in the events at our university to promote the international atmosphere."* Finally, Teacher 6 referred to another shortcoming of these learning space as *"they lacked practice in relation to real-world tasks and issues."* Events that mirror real-world problems are crucial for enriching students' insights into global issues and strategies for tackling them.

To summarize, while internationalization is the university's top priority, more candid effort is required in aligning the English-related spaces with its goal. The drawbacks concerning students'

intercultural understanding, the university's global connection and real-world topics need to be taken into more serious consideration.

4. Conclusion

Findings from the present study show the diverse spaces for language practice at the university under investigation. Such variety in learning spaces is relatively uncommon in the context of HE in Vietnam [27], [28]. As the university is striving to attain an international standard of education, its commitment to provide students with rich exposure to English and opportunities for language use in real-life context is justifiable. The English-related activities occur in different settings within and beyond classrooms, incorporating traditional offline interaction and online platforms. This flexibility allows the university and students to communicate with international students, guest lecturers and industry speakers. However, the major deterrents entail student engagement in these language learning spaces, the ability to account for individual students' needs and the overall internationalization goals the university is pursuing. These challenges require the university stakeholders to revisit their strategic planning to identify possible solutions drawing on local and international resources. For university administrators, it is important to ensure that English-related activities, particularly those aiming at ESP, are consistently deployed at the university. The English interface of the university website should also be regularly updated and more English publicity is needed to enhance its international outreach. To foster student engagement, more investment in the quality rather than quantity of such events is desired as students may be discouraged from the superficial lessons gained from participating in these spaces. For instance, English seminars and workshops can be carried out in a series enabling students to accumulate in-depth knowledge of the issues they are interested in. The events should also vary in size with some focusing on big groups and others working with smaller groups to cater to students' individual needs.

The learning spaces presented in this case study provide ample examples of the ways in which universities can diversify activities for language practice and maximize students' exposure to language used in their fields of study as well as real-life instances. It also addresses the issues arising from such practices in the context of HE internationalization. However, the study exhibits some limitations as it is situated in the specific context of a private university where English is identified as a key driver for internationalization and the quality of language education is prioritized in its strategic development. The university is financially independent and provides full support for promoting such language practice spaces. Other universities may draw on its model but need to take into consideration their financial and human resources in deploying these activities. Also, the interview data was primarily from the lecturers in the Faculty of English. Insights from students and lecturers from other faculties would contribute to a more rounded picture of the affordances and constraints in designing English-related spaces.

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