

**ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF JOB APPLICANTS  
GRADUATING FROM FOREIGN TRADE UNIVERSITY ON HO CHI  
MINH CITY CAMPUS AT THREE MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES:  
CURRENT SITUATION AND SOME SUGGESTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Recognizing the importance of how to train the human resources to meet the increasing demand of enterprises and the competitiveness of the labour market, the author has conducted three interviews with three human resources managers working in top multinational companies to study the English language communicative competence of university graduates from Foreign Trade University on Ho Chi Minh City Campus (FTU2). This article is to report the results of the interviews, based on which, the author suggests some solutions to improve the quality of English language training in FTU2 and other training institutions in Ho Chi Minh City in particular and in Vietnam in general.*

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, communicative competence.

**TÓM TẮT**

**Năng lực tiếng Anh giao tiếp của ứng viên tốt nghiệp Đại học Ngoại thương, Cơ sở II tại TP Hồ Chí Minh ở ba công ti đa quốc gia: thực trạng và một số ý kiến đóng góp**

*Nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của vấn đề đào tạo nguồn nhân lực để đáp yêu cầu ngày càng cao từ các doanh nghiệp cũng như sự cạnh tranh gay gắt của thị trường lao động, tác giả đã tiến hành tìm hiểu năng lực tiếng Anh của các ứng viên tốt nghiệp Trường Đại học Ngoại thương - Cơ sở II tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh đối với ba nhà quản lý nhân sự của ba công ti đa quốc gia hàng đầu thế giới bao gồm HSBC, Ernst & Young và Unilever. Bài viết này báo cáo kết quả phỏng vấn cùng thực tiễn đào tạo tiếng Anh tại Cơ sở II nhằm đưa ra một số đề xuất nhằm nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo tiếng Anh tại đây cũng như các cơ sở đào tạo khác trên địa bàn thành phố nói riêng và Việt Nam nói chung.*

**Từ khóa:** phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ giao tiếp, năng lực ngôn ngữ giao tiếp.

**1. Introduction**

FTU2 is an active training organization in Ho Chi Minh City, which supplies human resources for business sectors. One of its strong points is that students are well equipped with knowledge and skills of both strategic business sectors and the English language (Foreign Trade University Council, 2013, p.6). Besides, diverse and exciting extracurricular activities in such organizations as the English Club, Business Administration Club, Businesspeople's Skills' Development Club, and Embrace Community have significantly contributed to develop students' activeness and confidence. Therefore, recruiters are generally interested in FTU2 graduates, and 95%

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of graduates can find jobs (Foreign Trade University Council, 2013, p.6). However, shortcomings are unavoidable. Despite efforts in cooperating with enterprises in order to improve training quality, all training programs in general and English language training programs, to some extent, have still been unable to meet the demand of enterprises. Considering the situation, the author has conducted interviews with three human resources managers working in three multinational companies located in Ho Chi Minh City including HSBC, Ernst & Young (E & Y) and Unilever. Every year, these companies attract a high number of applicants graduating from FTU2. Take Unilever as an example. According to the interviewed human resource manager, the annual number of FTU2 graduates working as probationers occupies up to 30%. Based on the study's results, this article aims at reporting the level of meeting enterprises' demand among FTU2 graduates in general and suggesting some solutions in order to enhance the quality of human resources provided for the labour market.

## **2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Communicative competence**

Communicative language teaching (CLT), or the communicative approach, is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes learning language successfully comes through communicating real meaning. CLT theorizes that effective knowledge of a language is not merely knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Learners need to be able to use the language in real business and social contexts. As a result of many disparate developments in both Europe and the United States, in the 1970s and early 1980s, CLT rose to prominence.

CLT is usually characterized as a flexible approach to teaching, rather than as a rigorous teaching method with a clearly defined set of classroom practices. It can be best defined by David Nunan's five features as follows:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

(Nunan.D, 1991, p.279)

These five features of CLT show that it targets at the needs and desires of their learners as well as the connection between the language taught in the classroom and used outside the classroom. Therefore, CLT practitioners often use pair and group work requiring negotiation and cooperation among learners, fluency-based activities and

role-plays in which learners practise and develop language functions as well as the accurate use of grammar and pronunciation focused activities.

The notion of communicative competence is one of the theories spawn from CLT. Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983, 1984) defined communicative competence in terms of three main components, i.e knowledge and skills as follows:

(1) Grammatical competence: Grammatical competence is the mastery of the linguistic code (verbal or non-verbal) involving vocabulary knowledge as well as knowledge of morphological, syntactic, semantic, phonetic and orthographic rules. This competence means that learners can use knowledge and skills to understand and express the literal meaning of utterances.

(2) Sociolinguistic competence: Sociolinguistic competence is expressed by the knowledge of rules and conventions which underlie the appropriate comprehension and language use in different sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts. In a later publication, Canale (1983, 1984) transferred some elements from sociolinguistic competence into the fourth component called discourse competence. Discourse competence is described as the mastery of rules that determine how forms and meanings are combined to achieve a meaningful unity of spoken or written texts. The unity of a text is expressed through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion is achieved by the use of cohesion devices like pronouns, conjunctions and synonyms, which help to link individual sentences and utterances to a structural whole. Coherence is achieved through the logical organization of meanings such as progression, consistency, relevance of ideas.

(3) Strategic competence: Strategic competence is the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that are used for the appropriateness in specific contexts so that the communication can achieve the highest level of effectiveness. Some expressions of this competence paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, reluctance, avoidance of words, structures or themes, guessing, changes of register and style and modifications of messages.

Through the intense influence of communicative language teaching, it is widely accepted that communicative competence should be the goal of language education, central to good classroom practice. As CLT aims at enabling learners to communicate in real business and social contexts, in FTU2, CLT is used as a common approach in teaching English, and communicative competence is headed for. Therefore, a wide range of pair and group work, role-playing and fluency-based activities can be easily recognized in English lessons in FTU2.

### **3. Conducting the study on English communicative competence of FTU2 graduates**

In order to investigate the English language communicative competence of FTU2 graduates, a qualitative research method is used, in which the author has conducted in-

depth interviews with three human resources managers from three multinational companies located in Ho Chi Minh City. As these are foreign invested businesses, English is used as a main language for communication. The interviews focused on investigating:

- (1) Strong points of FTU2 graduates expressed in job interviews.
- (2) Weak points of FTU2 graduates expressed in job interviews.
- (3) Some suggestions to improve English communicative competence of students studying at FTU2 in order to better meet the work demand.

The major results are as follows:

Questions asked	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
1	<i>“FTU2 graduates have better English communicative competence than those from others in Ho Chi Minh City. In the recruitment process, FTU2 graduates who have taken the entrance exam in “group D” (including those who take the exam with three subjects namely Maths, Literature and English) attended the application process very confidently.”</i>	<i>“Generally speaking, FTU2 graduates are outstanding among all applicants.”</i>	<i>“Our company is interested in FTU2 graduates because of their high English competence. This may due to the fact that the credits for English subjects are quite high. Besides, compared to others, FTU2 graduates are very active and confident thanks to a wide range of extracurricular activities.”</i>
2	<i>“50% FTU2 graduates who have taken the entrance exam in group A (including those who take the exam with three subjects namely Maths, Physics and Chemistry) fail in the application process because of the inferior English competence. In the individual interview, they do quite well; however, when it comes to the group interview, these candidates</i>	<i>“Generally speaking, Vietnamese students are rather inferior in soft skills like problem-solving and communication skills. Some students don’t even know how to write a persuasive proposal for more members to add into their teams. Vietnamese graduates do not</i>	<i>“FTU2 graduates are not very familiar with business writing. For example, they find it difficult to write a succinct email.”</i>

	<i>are usually dominated by others... Vietnamese students in general and FTU2 students in particular are not good at expressing themselves..."</i>	<i>have sufficient knowledge of different ways of thinking of people from different cultures, which sometimes causes difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication."</i>	
3	<i>"As a FTU2 alumnus, I think there should be a combination of theory and practice in learning programs. For example, instead of unfamiliar case studies about foreign companies in the textbooks, teachers should use those about companies in Vietnam. Unilever is willing to provide a source of practical case studies for the English teaching in FTU2."</i>	<i>"It is essential that students practice soft skills like problem-solving and expressing ideas. From my point of view, learning programs in Vietnamese higher education provide little knowledge of global cultures such as different ways of thinking of different nations. If they do not know the cultures of their foreign business partners, the communication will suffer."</i>	<i>"I understand that a training program has to be up to the standard. However, what is more important is how to make students remember and be able to apply what they have learnt. Thus, online programs can be considered to be designed and put into practice. These programs aim at revising and practicing what students have learnt."</i>

The results of the interviews have revealed the current situation of English communicative competence of FTU2 graduates with both strong points and weak points.

#### **4. Current situation of English communicative competence of FTU2 graduates**

Based on the results of the study, some conclusions about strengths and weaknesses of English communicative competence of FTU2 graduates can be drawn as follows:

##### **4.1. Strengths**

First, all of the three managers agree that FTU2 graduates have better English communicative competence than those from other universities in Ho Chi Minh City.

According to the manager in E & Y, FTU2 graduates have good command of English because it is one of the university's main focuses (English subjects occupy 25% of the curriculum). Unilever's manager, a FTU2 alumnus, adds that graduates of group D in general have higher English levels than those of group A. In the group discussion included in Unilever's recruitment process, graduates of group D are more outstanding than others when it comes to defending ideas and expressing themselves.

Second, all of the three participants agree that FTU2 graduates communicate confidently in English. Some of them possess good presenting and teamwork skills. According to managers of E & Y and Unilever, this confidence stems from the fact that there are a wide variety of extracurricular activities for FTU2 students to participate provided by clubs, competitions, the Student Union, charity and environment protection teams.

#### **4.2. Weaknesses**

First, all of the three managers claim that FTU2 graduates usually find it difficult to express ideas in English in a clear and succinct way. According to Unilever's manager, this is not necessarily because their low levels of English. This may be because few real-life situations are included in English lessons and because some students do not take practice seriously. This manager also states that students who have taken the entrance exam in group A are inferior in English to others. In Unilever, the recruitment process includes two rounds. The first round is one-on-one interview, which means that each candidate is individually interviewed by a recruiter; the second round is group discussions where candidates act as department managers, work in groups to find solutions to an issue. Most of FTU2 graduates do well in the first round. However, when it comes to the second round, some students are unable to compete with others because of their slow reaction and ineffective expression. On average, 50% of graduates of group A fail in this round because of inferior English proficiency.

Second, two out of three participants say that in the probationary period, FTU2 graduates have difficulty in writing business texts, among which emails are most used. According to the HSBC manager, they often make mistakes in organizing and expressing ideas. They do not know how to express ideas in a succinct way to save time for the recipients. Many do not know how to write a proposal while proposals are very common in business. Besides, there is a lack of flexibility in formality. Texts that need formality are written too informally while others that need informality are written too formally. The HSBC manager adds that it is important to understand the way of thinking of foreign business partners, which is not fully recognized by FTU2 students in particular and Vietnamese students in general. For example, Vietnamese people tend to think in a deductive way while American people tend to think in an inductive way. Thus, when reading emails, American people usually read the first part slowly and carefully and the rest quickly. However, English training programs in FTU2 do not

include subjects that specialize in cultures, so students have little awareness of learning them

### **5. Some suggestions for better English communicative competence of FTU2 students**

According to “Development Strategies of Foreign Trade University until 2030 and the vision for 2030” (Foreign Trade University Council, 2013, p.7), goals to achieve are as follows:

- The prestige and fame of Foreign Trade University is preserved and improved
- The training quality is improved; some of training programs are internationally accredited before 2030

Plainly in evidence is that the goals of FTU2 are the same as those of Foreign Trade University. In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary that the quality of training programs in FTU2 be improved to meet the demand of the labour market and enhance the prestige of the university’s brand from enterprises’ perspective. In FTU2, English subjects occupy 25% of the total credits, so these should be focused.

However, at present, Vietnamese education is facing major difficulties. Thus, training human resources that can meet the corporate demand still has a long way to go. Based on the results of the study, the author has some specific suggestions to contribute to the improvement of English programs in FTU2 to better meet corporate demand.

First, it is necessary to include case studies associated with Vietnamese business environment in the English teaching. In fact, some textbooks currently being used in FTU2 like the series of Market Leader (Pearson Longman) have a case study in each unit. However, these case studies are in contexts of foreign countries, and they seem not enough. What is more, sometimes they fail to be practised due to a lack of time. Unilever is a friendly enterprise, which is interested in cooperating with training institutions to provide high quality human resources. Thus, this company is willing to provide a source of case studies that can be used for teaching English subjects in particular and other subjects in general in FTU2.

Second, it is essential that a subject about business cultures in different countries be taught in FTU2 in order to provide knowledge and skills of verbal and non-verbal communication, which is required in the global economy and is necessary for many FTU2 graduates working for multinational companies. According to HSBC manager, understanding cultures is an important factor affecting the effectiveness of communication and thus affecting the productivity of work.

Third, it is necessary that there be more modern and diverse methods to teach some of subjects currently being taught in FTU2. For example, Commercial Correspondence is still focusing on instructing how to write formal letters of order, complaint and payment. However, according to three managers, emails of different styles are more commonly used in the real business environment. They add that what is

more important is how to express ideas in a concise, succinct and culturally appropriate way. Thus, there should be more practice in writing emails to present an idea or suggest a solution. HSBC manager says that some graduates send emails without subjects or with inappropriate subjects and with wordy and difficult to understand expression, which leads to unsatisfying work results. As an FTU2 alumnus, Unilever manager states that English training programs focus rather heavily on translation and business contracts, which can be self-studied. Moreover, these subjects have specific characteristics, which means that they are only useful to those who work in translation or import or export while being not necessary to those who work in other business sectors. Therefore, time allocated for these subjects should be reduced to give more to others like business cultures and business writing.

Fourth, all of the three managers agree that besides knowledge, soft skills expressed in English are also important. Soft skills include communication, problem-solving, presenting, negotiating and group working skills. Recognizing their importance, examining candidates' soft skills is always included in the recruitment process of these companies. For example, as mentioned before, Unilever's recruitment process includes two rounds namely one-on-one interview and group discussion, which all require candidates' soft skills. Especially in the second round, candidates are required to express many soft skills at the same time like problem-solving, group working and idea defending skills. Both rounds must be performed in English. Some candidates pass the first round easily, yet fail the second round because of inferior expression of soft skills in English. It is for these reasons that English teachers should include soft skills' practice in their lessons, and raise students' awareness of the importance of soft skills at work so that they keep practising these skills during their time at college. In addition, subjects teaching soft skills should receive greater focus, and extracurricular activities should be enhanced. These extracurricular activities also need teachers working as consultants for higher practicality and effectiveness.

Fifth, practice makes perfect. Despite a young training campus, FTU2 has been devoting effort in developing a wide range of extracurricular activities for students and serving as a bridge between students and companies. Nevertheless, with more than 4,000 full-time undergraduates every year, this still cannot meet the increasing demand of enterprises and of a great number of very active and ambitious students. It is for these reasons that students should be given more chances for practice so that they can better apply what they have learnt when it comes to the real-life situations. In fact, the class time is not enough for practice, thus there should be cooperation between the University and friendly enterprises like Unilever and E & Y in order to bring students chances of real-life practice such as workshops (in which students can discuss solutions to given situations) and short probation periods in companies. Simultaneously, for better results, orientation is very important; thus, it is suggested that experienced and



enthusiastic teachers offer guidance and assistance to students while they join in these activities.

Sixth, due to inadequate class time, online tutorials should be built to provide further practice of what students have learnt. In this manner, students' knowledge can be continually revised, and they can better apply it into the working environment afterwards.

Above-mentioned are some specific suggestions to improve the quality of teaching and learning English to better meet the increasing demand of the labour market. These suggestions are based on the results of the interviews with three human resources managers from the three top global enterprises and on the current situation of the English language training in FTU2. Through some similarities in terms of the general social, economic and educational environment to other universities, it is hoped that the article can simultaneously make positive contributions to better education of the English language in Ho Chi Minh City in particular and in Vietnam in general.

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(Received: 16/5/2014; Revised: 29/5/2014; Accepted: 15/4/2015)