


## Innovating the English language curriculum to enhance career readiness in Vietnamese higher education



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### ABSTRACT

#### Article History

Received: 28 July 2025

Revised: 18 September 2025

Accepted: 13 October 2025

Published: 17 October 2025

#### Keywords

Career readiness  
Curriculum innovation  
English language and literature major  
Vietnam's higher education  
Affordance-based curriculum  
Hidden curricula  
Competence development

As labor market demands evolve, aligning higher education curricula with students' career goals and learning needs has become increasingly vital. This study investigates career aspirations and expectations of English-majored students at five universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, including public, private, and international institutions. Drawing on survey responses from 560 students, the research explores three core dimensions: preferred career paths after graduation, expectations regarding course content, and perceptions of how effectively current programs support professional development. The study also explores students' perspectives on hidden curricula, which refer to the implicit experience's students learn through institutional culture, teacher-student interactions, and social norms and activities. The findings reveal a strong interest in careers such as English teaching, translation, and business, with growing attention to tourism, diplomacy, and media. Students expressed strong appreciation for English skills and specialized courses but reported dissatisfaction with modules perceived as outdated or lacking practical relevance, such as physical education, some literature subjects, and technology-related courses. These results highlight urgent needs for curriculum innovation that balances local responsiveness with global alignment. Universities should tailor course offerings to reflect evolving domestic career demands while benchmarking curricula against regional and international standards to ensure quality, comparability, and student mobility.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study provides the first large-scale, multi-institutional survey of English majors in Vietnam, revealing how evolving career aspirations intersect with hidden curricula and affordance-based opportunities. The findings offer original insights for innovative curriculum reforms that align local labor demands with global standards, enhancing career readiness in Vietnamese higher education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapidly changing global job market has placed increasing demands on the competencies and skills of university graduates, particularly those with degrees in language-related fields. As future educators, translators, interpreters, or communication professionals, English-majored students must benefit from a curriculum that provides foundational knowledge and aligns with their career aspirations and the practical skills needed in their

chosen fields. Understanding these learning needs is essential to designing university courses that prepare students for both local careers and global opportunities.

For English-majored students in Vietnam, these challenges are especially salient. Their career choices are diversifying beyond the conventional domains of teaching and translation to include business, tourism, media, and diplomacy, reflecting the country's integration into the global economy and students' growing awareness of new opportunities. However, many programs still rely on traditional course structures, leaving a gap between what students aspire to and what curricula provide. This tension highlights the need to examine institutional responses to labor market demands and how students perceive the relevance of their studies and articulate their professional goals.

In this context, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has introduced the National Qualifications Framework and regulations, such as Circular 17/2021, since 2021 to ensure study programs meet standardized outcomes and remain responsive to labor market demands. In effect, English language programs play a particularly strategic role. High proficiency in English provides access to traditional career pathways such as teaching and translation. At the same time, it increasingly opens opportunities in emerging fields, including business administration, media, tourism, and diplomacy for English-majored graduates. However, the effectiveness of these programs depends on how well they adapt their structures, embed experiential learning, and reflect the evolving aspirations of students at different stages of their studies.

This study underscores the importance of curriculum innovation as a strategic imperative for Bachelor's English language programs. By integrating practical learning experiences and aligning course content with local and global career demands, universities can better prepare graduates to succeed in a competitive, interconnected workforce. More specifically, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What career paths do English-majored students aspire to pursue after graduation?
2. What are their expectations regarding the content and focus of their academic courses?
3. To what extent do students believe the current courses offered by their universities meet their learning needs and prepare them for careers in both domestic and global contexts?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The term curriculum in higher education is broadly understood as the planned and organized sequence of academic content, experiences, and learning outcomes that institutions offer students. Curriculum is not merely a list of courses but encompasses a holistic approach to student learning, integrating content, teaching methods, assessments, and the overall educational philosophy of the institution (Huggett et al., 2006). Higher education curricula are commonly categorized into several types, each serving distinct educational purposes and reflecting different educational philosophies. One of the most fundamental distinctions is between formal and informal curricula. The formal curriculum refers to the official, structured curriculum planned by the institution and typically outlined in course syllabi.

In contrast, the informal curriculum refers to the learning experiences students engage with outside structured academic programs, such as extracurricular activities, peer interactions, and internships (Annala et al., 2016). Another important distinction is between explicit and implicit curricula. The explicit curriculum includes what is formally taught and assessed within the classroom, such as specific courses and content areas (e.g., literature, linguistics, and language skills in an English major). In contrast, the implicit curriculum includes the values, attitudes, and skills that students are expected to learn through the academic environment, even though they may not be explicitly stated or formally assessed (Lindén et al., 2017). This could encompass skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and cultural awareness, which are integral to the holistic development of students but are not always formally acknowledged in the curriculum. Higher education institutions also implement hidden curricula, which refer to the unspoken or implicit

lessons that students learn through institutional culture, teacher-student interactions, and social norms (O'Neill, 2015). This hidden curriculum can significantly impact student development, shaping their attitudes, behavior, and worldview without being directly acknowledged in the formal educational framework.

Furthermore, curriculum types can be categorized based on their focus and approach. The most traditional type is a subject-centered curriculum, focusing on content delivery within specific disciplines. It is often based on a fixed body of knowledge and includes a clear progression of topics within each subject area (Ramdass & Mokgohloa, 2023). An alternative is a student-centered curriculum that prioritizes students' needs, interests, and learning styles. The curriculum is designed to be more flexible, emphasizing active learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Carnell & Fung, 2017). A more contemporary type is a competence-based curriculum focusing on developing specific competencies required for professional success. This type of curriculum emphasizes measurable skills and outcomes. It is often employed in vocational and professional education, where clear benchmarks for performance are essential (Kumar & Rewari, 2022). The integrated curriculum, on the other hand, blends content from multiple disciplines to create a more holistic learning experience. It is designed to foster interdisciplinary understanding and is particularly useful in addressing complex, real-world problems that require knowledge from multiple fields (Phuong et al., 2023). Lastly, an outcome-based curriculum (OBC) is an educational framework that focuses on the desired outcomes of the learning process rather than the content or process of teaching itself. The central idea of outcome-based education is to clearly define the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students are expected to acquire by the end of a course or program, then structure the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessments around these outcomes (Kumar & Rewari, 2022). This alignment makes it easier for students to understand the relevance of their learning and how it connects to their future career aspirations (Ramdass & Mokgohloa, 2023).

In the context of English language majors, curriculum design must serve not only academic objectives but also the practical career needs of students, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the competencies required to thrive in the workforce. Aligning higher education curricula with students' career aspirations and labor market demands is increasingly recognized as essential for developing graduates with relevant, transferable skills. As English-majored students commonly aim for careers in teaching, translation, publishing, or corporate communication, this alignment plays a crucial role in preparing them to meet the expectations of their professions and broader society (Phuong et al., 2023).

However, research highlights persistent gaps between these expectations and actual training. Many students feel underprepared for professional challenges, particularly in teaching and translation, where applied language skills are critical (Phuong et al., 2023; Tran, 2023). This signals an urgent need for curriculum innovation that embeds hands-on learning opportunities such as internships, industry-linked projects, and applied coursework to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Curriculum development must therefore prioritize experiential learning as a means of equipping students with the skills demanded by contemporary employers (Kumar & Rewari, 2022). This includes designing courses incorporating internships, collaborative projects, and authentic simulations, allowing students to engage with professional contexts during their studies (Ramdass & Mokgohloa, 2023). As digital skills and technological proficiency become essential across industries, higher education programs must also adapt by integrating training in digital communication, data analysis, and emerging technologies. Furthermore, designing curricula that reflect student aspirations and industry demands requires collaborative input from faculty, employers, policymakers, and students (Annala et al., 2016).

Despite the growing interest in aligning higher education curricula with labor market needs and career aspirations, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific career aspirations of English-majored students, particularly in the context of Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Existing research primarily addresses the broader challenges faced by English language programs, such as the need for curricula to be more aligned with industry demands (Phuong et al., 2023). The study aims to provide suggestions for curriculum

improvements and the design of more career-relevant educational programs to promote employability, adaptability, and meaningful engagement with the evolving needs of society.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Site and Context

This study was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest urban center and a key economic, cultural, and educational hub. The city is home to over 60 universities and colleges, serving over 400,000 students across various disciplines. Its higher education institutions include large public universities, private universities, specialized colleges, and international campuses, reflecting the city's role as a national leader in tertiary education. As a center for international business, tourism, and cultural exchange, Ho Chi Minh City places particular importance on English language proficiency, making English language education a critical component of university programs.

The five universities selected for this study consist of two public universities, two private universities, and one private international university. While all are in Ho Chi Minh City, two are in the city's outskirts. The public universities each enroll between 12,000 and 18,000 students across various fields, while the private universities serve smaller student populations, ranging from 4,000 to 8,000 students. All five institutions have long-established English language faculties, with English major programs offered for students aged 18 to 30 years. Annual intakes of English-majored students vary by institution, typically ranging from 50 to 300.

It is important to note that English language majors are offered at nearly all universities in Vietnam, regardless of whether an institution's primary focus is on technology, economics, agriculture, or other fields. This widespread availability reflects the strategic role of English in supporting national development goals and facilitating global integration. The Bachelor of Arts in English language is particularly in high demand, as it provides pathways to teaching, translation, business, and communication careers, and fulfills English proficiency requirements for entry into Master's and PhD programs across all disciplines (Doan, 2020). The universities participating in this study exemplify the diversity of Vietnam's higher education system and its shared commitment to producing graduates with English language competencies that support local and international opportunities.

#### 3.2. Research Design

The study began with a literature review to understand existing frameworks and practices in curriculum design in Vietnam's higher education system. The review focused on official documents from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), institutional guidelines, and curriculum implementation announcements. These sources provided insights into national educational standards, curriculum development processes, and the alignment of university programs with labor market demands.

Consequently, this study adopted a quantitative survey design to systematically examine English-majored students' career aspirations, course expectations, curricula relevance, and perceptions of hidden curricular activities. The survey was administered through Google Forms, combining structured multiple-choice and Likert-scale items with space for open-ended comments, ensuring both breadth and depth of data collection. Following the demographic background questions, the questionnaire items were organized into four main sections corresponding to the study's focal points.

1. Career aspirations: Students identified their intended professional pathways after graduation. Options covered traditional domains (English teaching, translation, interpretation) and emerging directions (business administration, tourism, media, diplomacy, corporate management, family business), including an "undecided" option, which captured the uncertainty often present in earlier cohorts. This section provided baseline insights into the evolving career orientations of English majors.
2. Course expectations: Participants evaluated the necessity and relevance of major course clusters in their program, including English skills, linguistics, translation and interpretation, culture and literature, IT-related

courses, internships and graduation projects, and physical education. Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely unnecessary to 5 = very necessary), this section quantified how students prioritize different academic components concerning their career preparation.

3. Curriculum perceptions: To capture broader judgments of the formal program, the questionnaire items focus on the learning environment and program delivery, including class sizes, academic advising, exposure to international lecturers, and teaching and assessment practices. These items explore students' perceptions of whether the curriculum structure and pedagogy adequately support their learning needs.
4. Perceptions of hidden curricular activities: The survey asked students to evaluate the effectiveness of extracurricular and co-curricular elements. Items included academic advising, student clubs, extracurricular activities, and student contests and tournaments. Ratings on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not effective to 5 = very effective) revealed how students view the hidden curriculum as part of their professional and personal growth.

An open-ended feedback section also invited students to suggest improvements, with common themes including greater emphasis on practice-based courses, stronger internship opportunities, diversification of elective subjects, and enhanced facilities.

The survey was administered to approximately 60% of English majors across five universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The target population included students from Year 1 to Year 4, ensuring representation across all stages of the undergraduate program. Questionnaires were distributed through form lecturers at each institution, facilitating broad participation. Data collection was conducted from November 2024 to February 2025. A total of 560 valid responses were obtained, providing a reliable dataset for statistical analysis.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### *4.1. Vietnamese Higher Education Curriculum Construction Process*

The construction of higher education curricula is a complex process that involves multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, academic staff, industry experts, and, in some cases, students. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) plays a key role in setting the overarching guidelines for university curriculum design and implementation.

According to MOET regulations, curriculum construction should align with national educational goals, industry demands, and academic standards. This ensures that the curriculum meets the job market's needs and fosters students' intellectual and professional development. The process typically begins with identifying learning outcomes, which are the skills, knowledge, and competencies students should acquire by the end of their program. These learning outcomes are carefully crafted to meet the expectations of both academic and professional environments (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2018, 2021).

The academic discipline also influences the construction of the curriculum in question. For example, the curriculum for an English-majored program would differ significantly from that of engineering or medicine, focusing more on language proficiency, communication skills, cultural understanding, and literature analysis. However, common to all curricula are core courses, mandatory subjects that all students must take, and elective courses, which allow students to specialize in areas of interest.

Additionally, there has been an increasing emphasis on developing interdisciplinary curricula in the context of Vietnamese higher education. This approach integrates knowledge from multiple disciplines to provide students with more holistic and adaptable skills in fields like education, business, and the social sciences (Phan, 2020).

### *4.2. Regulatory and Framework Guidelines*

MOET provides specific framework guidelines that outline the required structure for programs at different degree levels (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral). These frameworks specify the credit hours, course types, and

assessment methods universities must follow. As developed by MOET, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of Vietnam further defines the learning outcomes and competencies expected at various educational levels and guides universities in aligning their curricula accordingly.

In addition to national guidelines, universities develop internal policies and structures for curriculum construction. These policies are regularly reviewed and updated to adapt to changing educational standards and labor market requirements (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2021).

#### *4.3. Curriculum Evaluation and Quality Assurance*

Curriculum evaluation is essential to ensure that the program's educational goals are met and that the curriculum remains relevant, effective, and responsive to academic developments and labor market needs. MOET has established a formal quality assurance framework that universities must adhere to. This includes regular internal and external evaluations to assess the effectiveness of curriculum design and delivery.

One of the primary tools for curriculum evaluation is the feedback mechanism, which involves collecting input from various stakeholders, including students, alumni, employers, and academic staff. This feedback can be gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews, and is used to assess whether the curriculum is meeting students' learning needs, aligning with industry requirements, and facilitating career readiness (Hicks, 2018).

Universities are also encouraged to conduct self-assessment reports as part of the accreditation process. These reports evaluate the alignment of the curriculum with the expected learning outcomes, the adequacy of teaching resources, and the effectiveness of assessment methods. Based on these reports, universities may change course content, adjust teaching methods, or incorporate new technologies to improve learning experiences. Additionally, many institutions use benchmarking exercises to compare their curricula with international standards or similar programs at other institutions. This helps universities stay competitive and ensure their curricula align with global best practices. In Vietnam, several universities are already exploring the integration of international accreditations as part of their continuous improvement efforts.

#### *4.4. Stakeholder Involvement in Curriculum Evaluation*

An essential component of curriculum construction and evaluation is the active involvement of industry stakeholders. Given the gap between academic training and industry needs, many universities in Vietnam have been strengthening their collaborations with businesses, government agencies, and professional associations. This partnership ensures that the curriculum reflects real-world job requirements and helps students gain the necessary practical skills for the workplace.

Furthermore, students themselves play an important role in the evaluation process. Student satisfaction surveys and focus group discussions provide direct feedback on course content, teaching quality, and the effectiveness of learning resources. By actively engaging students in curriculum evaluation, universities can adapt and refine their programs to better meet students' expectations and improve retention rates (Phuong et al., 2023).

#### *4.5. Continuous Improvement and Adaptation*

Curriculum construction and evaluation are not static processes but require continuous adaptation. As the labor market and educational technologies evolve, so too must higher education curricula. This is particularly true in fields like English language education, where new methodologies, digital tools, and global communication trends constantly shape the needs of students and professionals.

Thus, universities must stay attuned to both global trends and local demands. MOET regulations are regularly updated to incorporate new developments in higher education policy, such as integrating digital literacy into all curricula and promoting lifelong learning frameworks.



As part of this dynamic approach, universities should also prioritize cross-disciplinary education to help students develop various skills beyond their field of study.

#### *4.6. Trends in Constructing English Language Curriculum*

A review of curriculum structures across the participating institutions reveals notable trends in how English language major programs are constructed in Vietnam's higher education context. Despite institutional diversity, including public, private, and international universities, the overall architecture of these programs remains largely homogeneous. Most universities adopt a conventional course framework combining English skills development, foundational linguistic knowledge, literature and culture studies, and various electives. These core components reflect a shared understanding of what constitutes a well-rounded English language education, particularly concerning the acquisition of communicative competence and theoretical grounding.

Nevertheless, differentiation appears in the structure and depth of specialization pathways. Most surveyed institutions offer two to three specialized tracks within the English major, typically including English Teaching, Translation and Interpretation, and English for Business or Communication. These specializations allow students to align their studies more closely with their career aspirations and are often introduced in the program's later years. However, the quality and intensity of specialization vary, with some institutions offering a rich selection of elective modules and others maintaining a more generalist orientation.

Another significant area of variation lies in providing practicum experiences and graduation requirements. While experiential learning is widely recognized as essential for employability, not all universities require students to complete an internship or practicum component. Some programs offer internships as optional or co-curricular experiences rather than integrated academic requirements. This inconsistency may impact students' preparedness for professional environments, particularly in fields such as teaching or translation, where real-world practice is indispensable.

Likewise, the final-year graduation project, typically a research-based thesis or capstone project, remains optional or non-standardized in certain institutions. Although such projects provide valuable opportunities for students to engage in independent inquiry and develop academic research skills, their absence in some curricula reflects a continued emphasis on course-based assessment models. This omission may limit students' exposure to scholarly investigation and reduce their readiness for postgraduate studies or research-oriented careers.

Importantly, the ongoing trend toward internationalization in higher education has increasingly prompted institutions in Vietnam to benchmark their curricula against global standards. According to current Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) guidelines, program developers must consult and compare at least four English language-related programs from Vietnamese and international universities during curriculum design. This comparative approach ensures compatibility in program objectives, learning outcomes, and credit structures, enhancing students' academic mobility and the global recognition of their qualifications. The practice of curriculum referencing fosters academic rigor and relevance and alignment with international best practices, thereby contributing to Vietnam's broader educational reform goals and the competitiveness of its higher education institutions on a global scale.

In sum, while English language programs in Vietnam's universities share a common curricular foundation, institutional differences in specialization offerings, internship requirements, and research components suggest varying levels of responsiveness to student needs and labor market demands. At the same time, efforts to align curricula with international models mark a positive shift toward quality assurance and global integration. These trends underscore the importance of strategic curriculum planning that balances standardization with flexibility, ensuring that English majors graduate with broad competencies and specialized, practical skills that align with contemporary career trajectories.

#### 4.7. English Language Students' Career Aspirations

The survey data reveal the career aspirations of English-majored students, highlighting both traditional and emerging fields of interest.

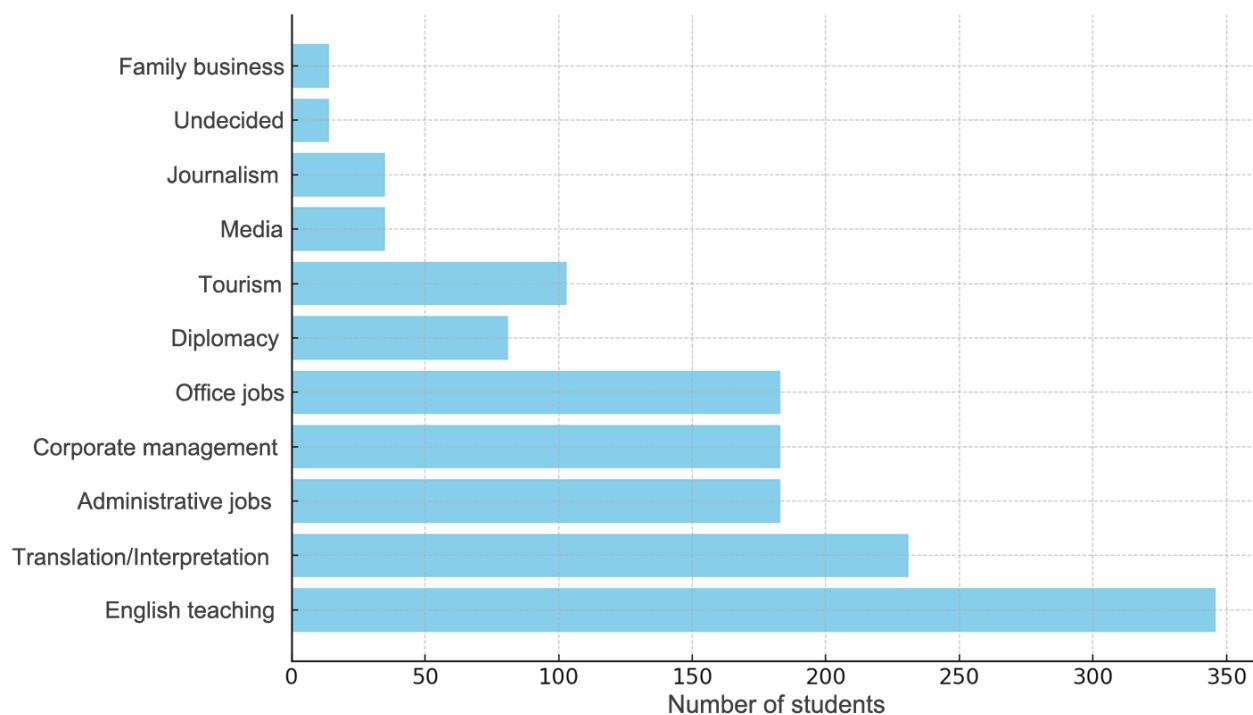


Figure 1. Career aspirations of English language majors.

Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of students' intended career paths, indicating that English teaching receives the highest number of selections, followed by translation and interpretation, while smaller but notable proportions favor administration, corporate management, diplomacy, tourism, and media. As shown in Figure 1, the most preferred career path is English teaching, with 19.55% of respondents selecting it as their top choice. This reflects the continued prominence of teaching as a career for English majors. Translation and interpretation are the second most popular careers, with 13.05% of students aspiring to work in these language-related professions. Both administrative and corporate management roles attract a significant portion of students, with 10.34% each, indicating an inclination toward business-related careers. Similarly, office jobs also capture 10.34% of students' interest.

Other fields of interest include diplomacy (8.98%), tourism (7.68%), and media/journalism (6.27% each), reflecting growing interest in communication, international relations, and media. A small proportion of students remains undecided about their career paths (2.54%), while family business management and other fields are selected by 2.49% and 2.15% of students, respectively.

This distribution shows a clear preference for traditional language-related careers such as teaching and translation but also highlights a growing interest in business and communication sectors, such as administration, media, and tourism. The bar chart below visualizes this data, showing the career goals of students and the number of students pursuing each career. English teaching is the dominant aspiration, followed by translation/interpretation and administrative roles.

#### 4.8. Career Aspiration Changes Across Student Year Cohorts

The analysis of career aspirations across year groups reveals distinct patterns as students progress through their studies (see Figure 2). Among first-year students (freshmen), career ambitions are strongly concentrated in traditional English-related fields. Teaching English emerges as the most common aspiration, followed closely by translation and interpretation. Many freshmen remain undecided about their future, explicitly indicating no specific field, while a few



express interest in business or corporate roles. This suggests that early in the program, students either gravitate toward familiar English-majored paths or are still exploring options.

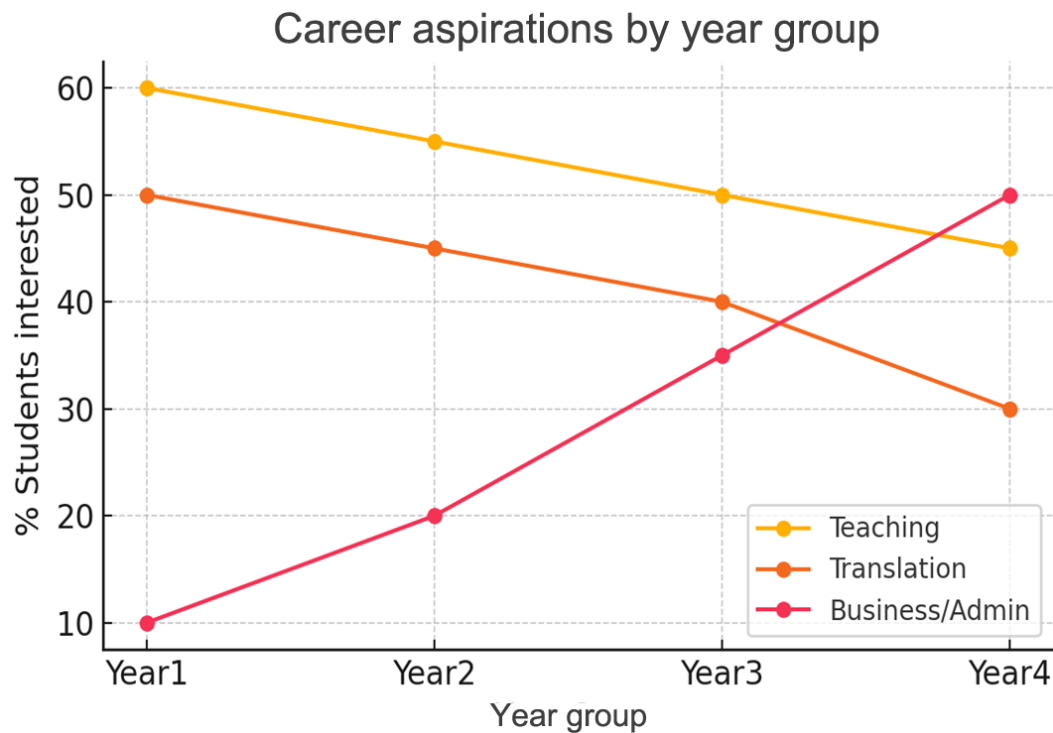


Figure 2. Career paths by year groups.

Figure 2 illustrates how career preferences evolve across cohorts, with undecided choices declining sharply from the first to the fourth year and interest in business-related positions steadily increasing, whereas teaching and translation maintain stable yet gradually decreasing shares. In effect, it shows that by the second year (sophomores), teaching and translation continue to dominate, but students begin to articulate broader goals. Fewer are undecided, and a modest increase appears in interest in business, media, and communication careers. Sophomores envision roles combining English with other sectors, such as administration or journalism.

Among third-year students (juniors), aspirations diversify significantly. While teaching and translation remain important, many students now include business-related careers, administration, or tourism in their plans. A typical junior may list multiple ambitions, such as teaching, translation, and working in corporate or hospitality settings. The undecided group has largely disappeared by this stage.

By the fourth year (seniors), career goals are the most varied and vocationally oriented. Business and management roles often equal or surpass teaching in popularity, with many students expressing interest in corporate positions, family businesses, or entrepreneurship. Interest in translation remains steady but slightly reduced. Diplomatic and government careers, though niche, appear more frequently than in earlier years. Nearly all seniors report clear career plans, often spanning multiple fields.

Across the cohorts, several trends stand out. The proportion of undecided students declines sharply as students progress. Teaching retains its popularity but sees a relative decrease by senior year as students identify broader opportunities. Most strikingly, interest in business, management, and corporate careers rises steadily, reflecting students' growing awareness of the versatility of their English degree and the demands of the job market. Translation and interpretation maintain consistent appeal, though often as part of a portfolio of career aspirations. Meanwhile, media, tourism, and diplomacy attract moderate but steady interest, particularly in the later years.

#### 4.9. Student Perceptions of Course Relevance

To explore the extent to which English-majored students value different categories of courses in their academic programs, participants were asked to rate the perceived significance of eight major course groups using a 5-point Likert scale. The options ranged from 1 (completely unnecessary) to 5 (very necessary). These course groups include English skills courses, specialized courses, internships, graduation projects, linguistics courses, translation and interpretation courses, culture and literature courses, IT-related courses, and physical education courses. The average scores were computed after converting the Vietnamese responses into corresponding numeric values, and the results provide insights into students' priorities for academic content and skill development (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Student evaluation of the course contents.

Course group	Average Likert score	Interpretation
English skills courses	4.32	Very necessary
Specialized courses	4.27	Very necessary
Internships & graduation projects	4.15	Necessary
Linguistics courses	4.13	Necessary
Translation & interpretation courses	3.99	Necessary
Culture & literature courses	3.72	Quite necessary
IT-related courses	3.53	Quite necessary
Physical education courses	2.80	Slightly necessary

Table 1 reports students' mean ratings of eight course clusters, revealing that English skills and specialized courses are considered very necessary; internships and linguistics courses are judged necessary, and physical education receives the lowest perceived relevance. Accordingly, English skills courses (Mean = 4.32) were rated as the most significant, followed closely by specialized courses (Mean = 4.27). Both categories received average scores above 4.0, indicating that students find them essential to their academic and professional development. Internships, graduation projects, and linguistics courses were also valued highly, reflecting students' recognition of the importance of practical experience and foundational linguistic knowledge in their training.

Conversely, culture and literature courses and IT-related courses received moderately positive evaluations, suggesting that while students recognize their relevance, they may not see them as central to immediate career preparation. Physical Education courses, with the lowest average score (2.80), were viewed as least necessary within the current curriculum structure.

Overall, the evaluation suggests that students prioritize courses that offer practical language skills and professional specialization, reinforcing the demand for curriculum alignment with career readiness. The data support the need to maintain and further develop core language and professional training components, while re-examining the role and delivery of other course categories in light of student expectations.

#### 4.10. Alignment of Courses Offered with Students' Career Goals

The alignment between the curriculum content and students' intended career paths is a critical indicator of educational effectiveness. In this study, students expressed a clear orientation toward language-related and communication-intensive careers, with teaching English emerging as the most popular aspiration (346 responses), followed by translation and interpretation (231 responses), and business-related roles in administration and management (183 responses). Other notable aspirations included diplomacy, tourism, journalism, and media. These preferences suggest that students are not only pursuing traditional roles for English majors but are also increasingly drawn to interdisciplinary and globally connected professions.

A partial alignment becomes evident when comparing these aspirations with students' evaluations of course groups. English Skills Courses and Specialized Courses, which were rated highest in significance (averaging 4.32 and 4.27, respectively, on the Likert scale), correspond well with core language and professional competencies required

for teaching, translating, and working in international business environments. Similarly, the high valuation of Internships and Graduation Projects (4.15) indicates strong student recognition of the importance of experiential learning in bridging academic knowledge and professional readiness. These findings affirm that when practically applied, foundational and specialized language training remains central to preparing students for their expected career paths.

However, discrepancies also surface in course areas that receive lower perceived relevance despite their potential importance for career diversification. Translation & Interpretation Courses, for instance, received a lower-than-expected rating (3.99), even though a significant number of students aspire to work in this field. This may reflect either inadequacies in course delivery or a curriculum that is too theoretical and lacks sufficient exposure to real-world translation challenges. Some examples include interpreting in live settings, localizing digital content, or using translation technologies. As translation work becomes increasingly digital and multimodal, a more skill-based and tool-enhanced approach may be necessary.

Culture and literature courses (3.72) also rank moderately despite being traditionally foundational in English studies. Their limited recognition by students may indicate a growing disconnection between literary-historical content and students' career-driven motivations. However, these courses can play a key role in equipping students for media, intercultural communication, or diplomacy jobs requiring cultural literacy and a nuanced understanding of global contexts. These courses could be restructured around themes such as global Englishes, comparative media cultures, or intercultural storytelling to better align with career goals.

Most notably, IT-related courses received a relatively low average score (3.53), despite the emergence of digital and administrative roles in students' aspirations. This misalignment may stem from the generic nature of IT offerings, which fail to show direct applicability to English-centric professions. Given the rising relevance of digital tools in language education, translation, media, and marketing, a revised IT curriculum tailored to English majors could significantly enhance alignment. For instance, courses in digital publishing, language-learning apps, or AI-powered writing tools would improve employability and expand students' career imagination (Zhang et al., 2025).

Lastly, Physical Education courses received the lowest score (2.80), signaling little alignment with students' academic or career interests. While such courses may contribute to overall well-being, they are unlikely to influence employability outcomes and might be better offered as optional or embedded in wellness initiatives outside the formal curriculum.

In sum, while core courses in language skills, specialization, and applied learning are well-aligned with students' primary career goals, there is room for significant improvement in other course areas. Curriculum alignment would benefit from regular feedback loops with students and alums, stronger integration of digital competencies, and a recalibration of theoretical courses toward practical, interdisciplinary, and future-oriented applications. Such reform would ensure that students gain the competencies they expect and discover new, evolving career possibilities grounded in their English language expertise.

Most respondents see a gap between the current curriculum and their career needs. For instance, English skills and translation courses were overwhelmingly rated as "very necessary," but many students remarked that actual teaching methods or course offerings could better reflect career realities.

#### *4.11. Student Perceptions of Hidden Curriculum Activities*

The study also explored students' evaluations of various hidden curriculum activities and support mechanisms, recognizing their role in contributing to the overall learning environment and professional readiness of English-major students. Participants rated the perceived effectiveness of four key elements: academic advising, student clubs, off-curriculum activities (such as sports), and student contests or tournaments. Ratings were provided on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "not effective" and 5 indicated "very effective." The results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Students' perceptions of extracurricular activities (N = 560).

Hidden curriculum activity	Average score (1–5)
Academic advising	3.67
Student clubs	3.43
Off-curriculum activities (e.g., sports)	3.16
Contests and tournaments	3.06

Table 2 presents students' assessments of hidden curriculum activities, showing that academic advising is perceived as the most effective support mechanism, whereas contests and tournaments obtain the lowest effectiveness rating. In other words, Table 2 indicates that academic advising is rated highest, whereas contests and tournaments receive the lowest perceived effectiveness. Among these activities, academic advising received the highest average score (3.67), indicating that students value the role of advisors in supporting their academic journey. This suggests that structured guidance from faculty is important in students' educational experience and perceived career preparation. Student clubs followed with a mean score of 3.43, reflecting a moderate appreciation for opportunities to engage in extracurricular communities.

In contrast, off-curriculum activities, such as sports, and student contests or tournaments, were rated lower, with average scores of 3.16 and 3.06, respectively. These findings suggest that while such activities contribute to the learning environment, students may perceive them as less directly relevant to their academic success or career goals. The results highlight the need for institutions to consider how these activities can be better integrated with students' professional development, perhaps through stronger connections to employability skills or language practice opportunities. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of structured academic support while pointing to opportunities for enhancing the perceived value of extracurricular and co-curricular activities as part of a holistic educational experience for English-majored students.

#### 4.12. Implications for Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Practice

The evolving career aspirations of English-majored students highlight the urgent need for a dynamic and flexible curriculum that aligns with their developmental stages and professional goals. From the outset, structured career orientation should be embedded into the Year 1 and Year 2 curriculum to help students move beyond familiar paths such as teaching and translation. Foundation courses and seminars exposing students to diverse English-applied fields, including media, tourism, diplomacy, business, and corporate communication, can support informed decision-making early in their studies. New pragmatic types of curriculum will be expected to meet the changing needs of both students and institutions. For instance, an affordance-based curriculum is likely appropriate. The affordance-based approach emphasizes the emergent and relational nature of learning opportunities, urging educators to recognize and respond to the situational potentials within any curriculum framework (Cui et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2022). The affordance perspective invites curriculum designers to move from prescriptive rigidity toward principled flexibility, enabling learners to actualize agency and creativity within a structured environment. In this way, curriculum establishes a foundation, while affordances catalyze individual growth and contextual relevance.

As students progress, their interests diversify, particularly in Year 3, with growing attention to business, administration, tourism, and media. The curriculum should provide greater elective flexibility, allowing students to tailor their learning to these emerging aspirations. Specialized modules such as English for Business, Intercultural Communication, and Media and Journalism would complement core linguistic training while addressing broader career ambitions. By Year 4, most students have well-defined goals, often extending beyond traditional roles. Capstone experiences, including internships, practicum placements, project-based learning, and career preparation workshops, should be emphasized, bridging academic knowledge with professional practice. Simulated real-world tasks, such as developing business pitches or organizing mock international events, can enhance employability skills. Findings from this study reinforce students' strong preference for practical, career-oriented learning. English skills

courses, specialized courses, internships, and graduation projects were rated most highly, underscoring their perceived relevance to employability. Universities should ensure these components remain central pillars of the curriculum, expanding them through greater instructional hours, authentic assessments, and stronger partnerships with schools, businesses, NGOs, and media organizations to enrich experiential learning.

Conversely, courses such as Translation and Interpretation, and Culture and Literature, though still valued, may benefit from pedagogical redesign emphasizing applied practice. Real-world tasks such as subtitling, document localization, intercultural media analysis, and creative adaptation could better align these subjects with emerging careers in content development, cross-cultural consultancy, or digital publishing. The low rating for IT-related courses signals an urgent need to refocus digital components on field-specific applications, such as computer-assisted language learning, digital storytelling, content management, and AI-driven writing tools. Similarly, Physical Education courses, rated least relevant, might be better offered as optional or integrated into co-curricular wellness programs. Curriculum reform must address individual course design and adopt a learner-centered structure that offers differentiated pathways. Elective specializations in academic English, digital communication, or intercultural practice would help accommodate diverse career paths. Regular consultation with industry stakeholders and alumni will be essential for maintaining curricular relevance and ensuring that English language education remains academically rigorous and professionally impactful in a changing global landscape.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively analyzes the learning needs, career aspirations, and curriculum perceptions of English-majored students at five universities in Ho Chi Minh City. Based on responses from 560 students, the findings highlight conventional and emerging trends that have important implications for curriculum reform. While teaching and translation remain common aspirations, students increasingly look toward diverse fields such as media, diplomacy, tourism, and corporate communication, reflecting broader shifts in the labor market where English proficiency is a valuable transferable skill.

Students expressed evident appreciation for courses that develop practical language competencies and provide experiential learning, reinforcing the value of English skills training, specialization, and structured internships. However, the results point to areas where the curriculum requires rethinking. Translation and interpretation courses, despite their direct relevance to students' career goals, appear to lack sufficient applied focus and integration of professional tools. Similarly, IT-related courses and humanities-based subjects like culture and literature seem disconnected from students' career preparation needs, underscoring the importance of redesigning these offerings to emphasize digital literacy, intercultural competence, and real-world application.

The study underscores the need for English language programs to embrace flexibility, relevance, and responsiveness. Strengthening industry partnerships, embedding applied learning across all years, and adopting outcome-based frameworks will help ensure that curricula keep pace with the demands of a dynamic job market. Ultimately, aligning educational programs with student aspirations and professional realities is key to preparing graduates equipped to succeed in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

**Funding:** This study received no specific financial support.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of The School of Foreign Languages, The Saigon International University (SIU), Vietnam, under Protocol Number (IRB Protocol Number: SIU-ERB-02/2024), dated (Approval Date: 12 November 2024). Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors' Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Disclosure of AI Use:** The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT to edit and refine the wording of the manuscript. All outputs were reviewed and verified by the authors.

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