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# ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH FOR TOURISM STUDENTS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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Dinh Thi Bich Nguyet, Tran Minh Duc<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *For students of Faculty of Tourism (FOT), Hanoi Open University, having good communicative competence is especially necessary. Related researches have mentioned a number of methods to develop learners' communicative competence; among which project-based learning is considered one of the most effective methods because it brings learners equal chances with native speakers to interact in actual communicative situations (Miller, 2016). This study is conducted to achieve two objectives: discovering the current situation of FOT's students' communicative competence and suggesting a solution to improve their communicative competence using project-based learning methods. A combination of data collection methods i.e., survey and in-depth interviews, was used to explore the current situation of FOT's students' communicative competence while survey, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews were carried out to discover the problems with students' communicative competence. Finally, based on the results, possible solutions were suggested to deal with such problems. The study revealed that most of the FOT's students had an average communicative competence; the major problems that they encountered were in vocabulary control, vocabulary range, phonological control, sociolinguistic competence, spoken fluency and thematic development. To overcome the problems, most of the interviewees suggested giving students more opportunities to be involved in practical activities in which they can use English to deal with the problems, especially ones that often occur in real life situations. Therefore, a project-based learning approach was considered an appropriate solution to improve students' communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** *communicative competence, project-based learning, problems with communicative competence, improving communicative competence*

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of international tourism blooming dramatically, being competent in at least one foreign language, especially English, is a crucial requirement for tourism workers in Vietnam. In the Faculty of Tourism (FOT); Hanoi Open University, English has an important role in the training programme. First of all, it is one of the Program Learning Outcomes of the Faculty (PLOs) that put learners' communicative competence one of the most fundamental objectives of education and training: "PLO 5. Being able to apply English in specialized jobs related to tourism and travel management fields, in study, research, cooperation and integration." (Program

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Learning Outcomes, Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University). In addition to this, the Faculty emphasizes the importance of English in most of the courses in the Faculty, including ESP subjects such as English for Tourism (05 courses), Specialized English for Tour guiding (02 courses) and English for Hotel Training (01 course). Besides, it is used as an EMI in most courses of academic specialization. In the second year, students of both majors (Hotel management and Tourism & Travel services management) will take their practicum placements at the hotel and travel enterprises in Hanoi. Another activity that requires their use of English is supporting international events in Hanoi. Therefore, for FOT's students, English communicative competence has a crucial role in both studying and working.

However, despite the irresistible importance of English communicative competence to FOT students, there are not adequate extracurricular activities in English in the Faculty in which students have the chance to interact with foreign tourists in English so that they will be able to improve their English skills. As a matter of fact, almost every extracurricular activity is for professional specialization courses only. This leads to the lack of a practical environment for students to use their English skills in real life, and a number of English low-proficiency students in the Faculty, especially first year students. Therefore, it is necessary to have a clear panorama of the current situation of FOT's students' English communicative competence before investigating their problems in particular. Appropriate actions need to be taken accordingly, starting with a specific proposal of a possible solution to improve students' communicative competence. To fulfill these purposes, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the current situation of FOT's students' English communicative competence?*
- 2. What solution can be suggested to help FOT students improve their communicative competence in English?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

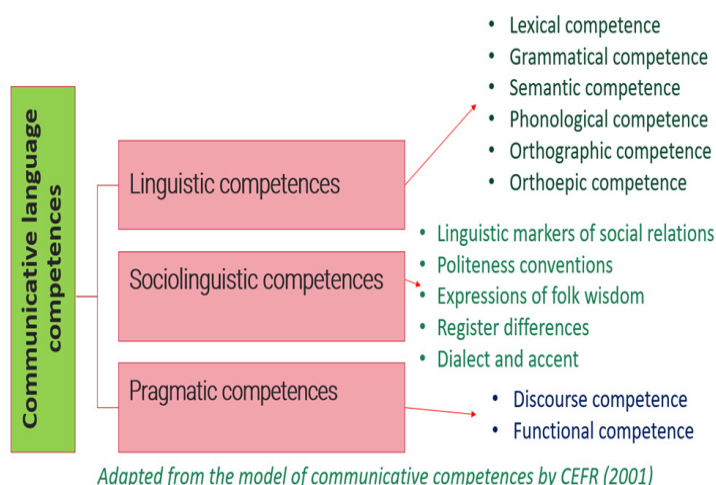
In the world context, the studies on communicative competence (CC) have been developing since the 1970s with diverse perspectives and conceptions of CC's elements. Initially, Hymes (1972) suggested that CC refers to the effective use of language in a particular social situation. Most noticeably, Canale and Swain (1981) considered CC the synthesis of knowledge involving basic grammar rules and linguistic knowledge in relation to the social environment. Those authors were renowned for their CC model of 4 elements including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. That model was widely used until 2001; along with the trend of applying communicative approach in learning and teaching foreign languages, the authors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) came up with a comprehensive CC model. According to this guideline, learners' CC is demonstrated when they use existing competencies in different contexts to carry out topical language activities in a particular field, using the most appropriate strategies to accomplish assigned tasks. To develop CC, they need to grasp many factors other than pure language knowledge in order to use the target language appropriately in specific situations. CEFR proposed three elements of CC including linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences, and pragmatic competences. This theory has been further clarified in the accompanying guidelines by the linguist Francis Goullier assigned

by the Council of Europe in 2007. The framework is inclusive and accessible, so has been being applied extensively in teaching and learning European languages in general and English in particular (Ivana, 2022).

Identifying CC's elements helps shape the research directions for assessing students' CC and potential solutions to improve their CC. Regarding CC assessment, it is necessary to refer to the context and purpose of communication as well as the participants' roles and attitudes in those specific contexts (Savignon, 2002). According to Ivana (2022), the assessment of students' CC can be done indirectly through their self-assessment or stakeholders' assessment, or through practice activities, and teachers should play an important role in conducting assessments. However, it is inevitable that the assessment results are affected by subjective factors, so it is necessary to compare the results from many parties. When conducting an in-depth research on specialized English, the author found that there was no formula that can be applied collectively to measure CC; however, it was suggested that the design of the scale should focus on linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences, and pragmatic competences as instructed by CEFR. In 2019, Sebastianus and colleagues studying the factors affecting the English communication competence of 30 third-year hospitality students in Indonesia concluded that phonetics, syntax, fluency, discourse, and vocabulary were core issues in enhancing CC in English. The authors also pointed out the factors that influenced their students' CC enhancement included the fact that the students did not spend enough time practicing with foreigners outside classrooms as well as did not have classmates who were interested in practicing together during and after class.

Along with the increasing demand for human resources who can use English for CC and noticeably have paid much attention to project-based learning (PBL). The results of many studies (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006) show that this method contributes greatly to improving learners' CC, especially when applied to specialized English programs. Jantima (2011) in a study on the use of projects in a tourism English course at a university in Thailand confirmed that PBL contributed greatly to improving the learners' CC when they had opportunities to use English more to communicate in meaningful interactions. Elen (2020) also insisted that PBL helped improve her students' speaking competence in English by helping to improve their grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation. The author also found that participating in projects allowed her students to increase flexibility when applying language competencies to specific contexts to perform tasks; whereas, being properly guided and prepared helped them become confident when participating in the project and increase excitement in the process of completing the project. The project also gives students the opportunity to be more creative and more involved in communicative interactions. Lala (2020) emphasized that PBL gives learners chances to interact and communicate with each other in authentic contexts; thereby besides helping develop CC, participating in the project helps them develop other essential skills like collaboration skills, teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking. Thus, using projects to improve learners' CC has been highly appreciated thanks to certain benefits, especially for travel students. A well-known instruction for PBL comes from Markham, Buck Institute for Education, USA (2009). The core of this PBL is learning by doing; students learn knowledge and skills and apply them to solving real-world problems, creating products or presentations. Markham gave out the instructions involving 5 stages of building and implementing a project: 1 - identifying driving questions, 2 - making an

overall plan for the project, 3 - making a timetable for each step, 4 - managing the implementation process and project product, and 5 - evaluating the project results. Stephanie (2010) noted that each phase in the project implementation process has a role and has a mutual relationship so it needs to be completed on time to ensure the success of the project. However, Kornwipa (2018) stated that when setting a timetable, teachers need to give enough time to ensure that students are well prepared to proceed with each step of the project; the lack of time not only affects the outcomes of the project but also creates a bad psychological factor for students. In addition, the evaluation of project results should be not only done through teacher evaluation using clear evaluation criteria but also students' self-assessment. Students learn from the project process and can reflect on changes in their CC based on their experiences; their self-assessment is also an important factor in promoting their self-study after the end of the project (Stephanie, 2010).



In Vietnam, before 2010, there was a lack of research on English communication competence as well as studies assessing the current situation of English communication competence of Vietnamese students or proposing solutions to improve their CC. However, in the later periods, this field of research is of great interest to many authors in the context of globalization and English is considered a global language. Nguyen Hoang Tien (2018) pointed out the fact that many university students in Vietnam graduated but still did not confidently communicate in English with international customers and partners. This author proposed that students need to increase their time reinforcing their communicative response ability during their study time. The authors Le Quang Dung and Tran Luu Hung (2018) recognized that many Vietnamese students still lacked motivation to communicate in English, continuing to use Vietnamese in group activities in English lessons. According to Le Huong Hoa (2018), students' CC was limited because in the communication process, they lacked the ability to react naturally and often applied word-by-word translation that reduced their response speed. The fact that they paid too much attention to the accuracy of pronunciation, grammar, word usage or style was also a factor that affected the naturalness of their communication as well as created psychological barriers or fear of making mistakes in communication. The frequency of practicing communication skills both inside and outside the classroom was also limited. Le Van Canh and Nguyen Thi Ngoc (2017) affirmed that one of the decisive issues to help improve CC amongst Vietnamese students is to embrace more English learning activities out of the school. Supporting the reference to the CEFR, Nguyen Hoang Tien



and Dinh Ngoc Lam (2018) when researching the development of learners' CC concluded in order to improve learners' CC, teachers must understand the components of communicative competence in learners, accurately and specifically identify key competencies and additional competencies corresponding to each specific situation.

In addition to the extensive application of communication methods in Vietnam since the 2010s, Project-based Learning (PBL) has received a lot of consideration as an effective solution to improve the CC of English learners. Hoang Anh Duc (2019) affirmed that PBL is a learner-centered learning model, helping learners improve their CC and develop other necessary skills towards acquiring basic 21st century skills.

Realizing the obvious advantages of PBL, many teachers and educators have conducted studies applying different projects to specific fields and subjects and assessing the effectiveness and impact of project work on learners and their capacity. In particular, the application of the scheme is of interest to many tourism training schools. Pham Dieu Ly (2018) in a sample study on the role of PBL in English language teaching at Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University explained the steps to build the project introduced by Buck Institute for Education, USA (2009). Twenty students who participated in the project '*Feelings of international tourists on their visit in Vietnam*' were much more confident in communicating with international visitors and more proactive in giving their views in group activities. Ho Si Thang Kiet (2019) researching the application of PBL in travel English translation classes confirmed that the students felt excited, confident and learnt much more effectively than the traditional presentation method. Those project participants also had the opportunity to develop academic autonomy, and communicate much more confidently while developing other skills such as collaboration, problem-solving and critical thinking. There are also many other studies on the application of PBL to different contexts and conditions but mainly discussed its general benefits more than focusing on CC (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Le & Nguyen, 2021).

To conclude, the above literature review shows that it is significant to evaluate students' current CC, thereby to be able to suggest appropriate solutions to improve their CC as well as applying PBL has potential to help improve students' CC. As stated by Ivana (2022), there is no formula that can be applied collectively, so it is essential for each training establishment to conduct its own study on their own students within their context in order to propose the best solution to improve their students' English communicative competence.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design of the study**

The study used mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analysis "oriented in gathering information focuses on describing a phenomenon across a larger number of participants thereby providing the possibility of summarizing characteristics across groups or relationships" (Rhodes, 2014) and therefore helped the researchers to investigate the phenomena of FOT's students' communicative competence as a whole. Meanwhile, to further understand problems that students encountered with their language learning, explore their expectation from the Faculty to help improve their English communicative competence and get the ideas of possible solutions

for this, the researchers also employed quantitative research, as it is referred to as “an approach to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into problems or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Wyse, 2011).

### **Data collection and analysis**

To verify the English communicative competence of FOT’s students from various angles, a triangulation method was used to collect the data from three sources: FOT’s students’ self-evaluation, FOT’s English lecturers and enterprise representatives, using a survey questionnaire.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted further from analyzing the results of the survey in order to get a deeper understanding of the students’ communicative competence from triangular subjects: FOT’s students, FOT’s English lecturers and enterprise representatives; with FOT’s lecturers and enterprise representatives’ participation in in-depth interviews and FOT’s students’ attendance in focus-group interviews. As the interviews were semi-structured, six sample questions were prepared to ask participants mainly about the problems that FOT’s students often encountered when communicating in English, then some practical recommendations to help the students improve their communicative competence. In fact, during the interview, with different targeted interviewees, additional questions were added. For example, with the tourism enterprise representatives, the researchers asked more questions about their expectation with the English communicative language ability towards their staff, while the English lecturers were requested to propose possible reasons for the problems with their students’ CC and the students were asked to express their expectation of the activities from the Faculty to help them better their English CC. All the interviews were recorded via mobile phone with participants’ consent and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were guaranteed their anonymity and confidentiality of the data and that their responses were used for the research purpose only. The interviews were implemented via Google Meet online platform.

So as to scrutinize the data collected from the surveys, the research group utilised statistical analysis using Excel tools. Thematic analysis was then applied to interpret underlying problems encountered with students’ communicative competence and synthesize possible solutions offered by the interviewees.

### **The questionnaire**

The questionnaire was developed from the assessment scale descriptors of the European competence framework (CEFR), focusing on elements of oral communicative competence, namely vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control (Linguistic competence); social relations and politeness awareness (Sociolinguistic competence); Discourse competence - flexibility, turn-taking, thematic development, coherence & cohesion and Functional competence - spoken fluency and propositional precision.

Even though the CEFR’s scale descriptors help to measure learners’ communicative competence from level A1-C2, the researchers only applied the scale for level A2-B2 because it is suitable with the course learning outcomes about students’ English competence in line with the Faculty’s

training program. A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess the communicative competence of FOT's students, in which 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree. The questionnaires were sent and collected via Google forms.

### **SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

The study was conducted in parallel with the research "Solutions to improve English communicative competence for students of the Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University", code MHN 2023 - 02.24, funded by Hanoi Open University. As for FOT's students, being able to communicate in English orally is crucial, the study only focused on oral English communicative competence.

445 of 685 FOT's students in their second and third year (65%) in both majors - Hotel management and Tourism & travel services management responded to the questionnaire evaluating FOT's students' English communicative competence. By the time the study was implemented, the second year students had taken 03 courses in English for tourism and 01 course in English for hotel training (students of Hotel management major); their level is expected to be more or less B1-B2; while the third year students had completed 04 courses in English for tourism together with 01 course in English for hotel training (students of Hotel management major) or 02 courses of English for tour guide training (students of Tourism & travel services management major); they are expected to get level B2 after finishing all the English courses.

The survey also involved all English lecturers (09) who are currently teaching in FOT. They have from 03 to 10 year experience of working in FOT and can teach various courses within the training program.

In addition to this, 19 representatives from the enterprise partners of FOT, including both hotel and travel sectors took part in the survey. These are the organizations who received FOT's students for practicum (second year students) or internship (third year students). The representatives from such organizations were the students' supervisors during their practicum or internship.

Of all the survey respondents, there were 06 lecturers, 05 enterprise representatives and 25 students attending the interviews.

02 lecturers who most recently taught each cohort were selected. To guarantee the interview's reliability, the selected teachers are the most experienced and competent in English.

05 enterprise representatives coming from two hotel departments which require students to use English the most, i.e. Food & Beverage and Front office department as well as one travel organization, i.e. the Management Board of Hanoi Old Quarters.

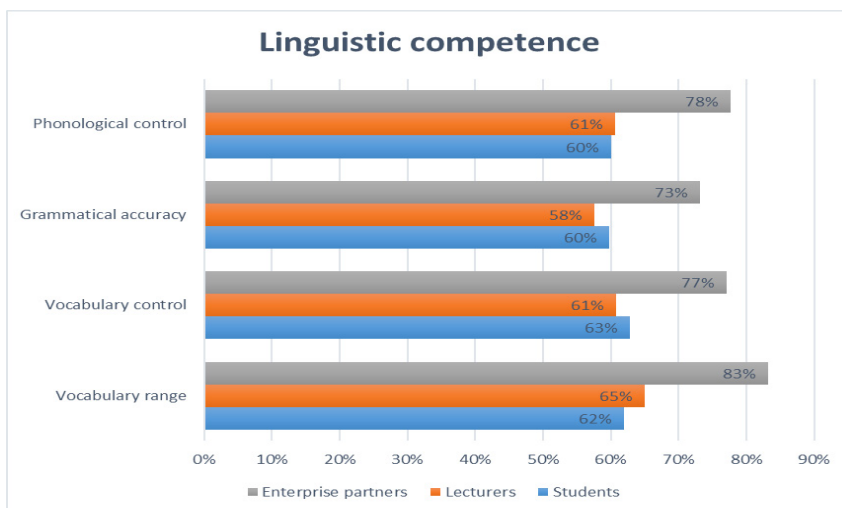
Finally, 25 students (10 from first year, 08 from second year and 07 from third year) took part in three focus group interviews. They voluntarily registered as interviewees so their answers to the interview questions were under no pressure.

All the participants were clearly informed about the terms of the interviews and attended the interviews with full consent.

**RESULTS/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Results from the surveys - The current situation of FOT’s students’ communicative competence**

**Linguistic competence**



**Figure 2. An evaluation on FOT’s students’ linguistic competence**

*(Source: Data from the questionnaire)*

Figure 2 illustrates the data from the questionnaire about learners’ linguistic competence in which the bars describe the average proportion of FOT’s students who met the course learning outcomes.

It is clearly seen that enterprise partners give more generous evaluations on FOT’s students’ communicative competence, compared to FOT’s lecturers and students. According to their evaluation, most of the students (more than 70%) have good linguistic competence, especially vocabulary range (83%). On the contrary, FOT’s lecturers and students share a rather similar evaluation when from both sources, FOT’s students’ communicative competence ranges around 60% only. This can be explained by the fact that the students working/ practicing at the enterprises were selected from the internal interviews with the requirement of English skills, so in general they will be more competent than other students.

Other communicative competences of the students are displayed in the table below:

**Table 1. An evaluation of the FOT’s students’ communicative competences**

Communicative competences		Enterprise partners	FOT’s lecturers	FOT’s students
Sociolinguistic competence		75%	65%	60%
Discourse competence	Coherence & cohesion	80%	60%	60%
	Thematic development	69%	65%	58%
	Turntaking	74%	66%	62%
	Flexibility	77%	62%	59%
Functional competence	Spoken fluency	75%	62%	59%
	Propositional precision	80%	64%	63%

*(Source: Data from the questionnaire)*

In conclusion, it can be inferred from the table that the overall evaluation of FOT's students' communicative competence by enterprise partners is higher than FOT's lecturers and students. This is understandable as the students working in the enterprises had been selected and interviewed. In addition, the results of FOT's lecturers and students are pretty much in common, showing that the data are reliable. Accordingly, around 60% of the FOT's students meet the standard for B2 level, with the lowest percentage on grammatical accuracy (58-60%), thematic development (65-58%) and spoken fluency (62 - 59%). Although this number is acceptable, to the FOT's English lecturers, this is still not a satisfactory proportion because the Faculty always aims at training high quality human resources and thrive for the better results.

### **General evaluation of FOT's students' communicative competence**

The table below shows the enterprises, FOT's lecturers and students' evaluation of FOT's students' communicative competence as a whole.

**Table 2. General evaluation of FOT's students' communicative competence**

Scale	Very weak	Weak	Average	Good	Very good
Enterprises	0%	5.5%	53%	36%	5.5%
FOT's lecturers	0%	18%	60%	29%	12%
FOT's students	3.7%	23%	75%	8.1%	1.2%

*(Source: Data from the questionnaire)*

Overall, most of the survey respondents including enterprises, FOT's lecturers and students identified the FOT's students' communicative competence as "average" with 53%, 60% and 75% respectively.

Of all the subjects of the survey, a comparatively high proportion of about 40% of the enterprises (41,5%) and FOT's lecturers (41%) thought FOT's students' communicative competence was "good" and "very good". On the contrary, only 9.3% of FOT's students thought they were good enough at communication. It is also important to note that a remarkable percentage of the respondents (5.5% of the enterprises, 18% of the FOT's lectures and 23% of the FOT's students) were not satisfied with FOT's students' communicative competence then rating it "weak". 3.7% of the students think that their communicative competence was "very weak".

Therefore, as FOT's English lecturers, it is important for us to further comprehend the problems that hindered our students from better performance in English, then to find solutions to help them overcome their problems. In order to do this, we carried out the interviews with 05 enterprise representatives, 06 FOT's lecturers and 25 FOT's students in first, second and third year.

### **Results from the interviews**

#### *Problems with communicative competence that FOT's students encountered*

#### *Interviews with enterprises*

When conducting the semi-structured interviews, we chose 05 representatives for the Faculty's enterprises partners, among whom are 02 managers of the Food & Beverage section and

02 managers of the Front Office department in the 4\* and 5\* hotels in Hanoi; the last interviewee worked at the External Relations and Communication Division of Hoan Kiem management board. All of them were direct supervisors of the students who had their practicum or internship at the enterprises so they had a good understanding of the students' English competence.

In general, most of the enterprise representatives agreed that FOT's students were able to communicate with foreign tourists but only at the basic level. One of the biggest problems with their communicative competence is that they lacked English terminology and this affected their confidence in communication, preventing them from developing the conversation with guests.

*"There are some students who are quite reserved and not willing to share... They only talked when being asked. I often told them that this (practicum) is the precious opportunity for them to interact with guests; ...taught them the necessary skills... but they are still not open..."* (Interviewee K.)

Besides, the interviewees considered that another issue is their weak sociolinguistic competence, results from their lack of experience and interaction with factual situations. Other problems mentioned by the enterprise representatives are summarized below:

**Table 3. Enterprise partners' comments on FOT's students' problems with communicative competence**

Enterprise partners' comments on FOT's students' problems with communicative competence
"... <b>pronunciation</b> is not clear/correct"
"...use many " <b>casual</b> " <b>language</b> when talking with guests, which is not suitable in a luxurious working environment (5* hotel)"
"...can't ( <b>promptly</b> ) <b>response</b> to guests when being asked"
"...only able to communicate <b>basic conversational topics</b> with guests, rarely widen topics"
"...can't <b>extend the conversations</b> with guests"
"...only <b>talk</b> with guests when <b>being asked</b> "
"...having difficulties understanding speeches from guests if they use <b>professional terms</b> or <b>colloquial language</b> "

*(Source: Data from the interviews)*

When analyzing the themes that appear in the interviews (theme words are in bold), we can recognise that the problems with the students' communicative competence that were pointed out by the enterprises are related to their ***phonological control, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, social relations and politeness awareness, thematic development and spoken fluency.***

Overall, the enterprises are satisfied with FOT's students' English competence but only at the standard level. If they want to have an outstanding performance at work, they will need to improve a lot.

#### *Interviews with FOT's English lecturers*

While the interviews with the enterprises revealed the existing concerns with FOT's students' communicative competence that were explored through their performance at work, further interviews with the FOT's lecturers aimed to scrutinize their problems through their performance in class, hence tried to explain for those problems under the angle of the expertise.

The interview data are displayed in the following table:

**Table 4. FOT's English lecturers' comments on FOT's students' problems with communicative competence**

FOT's English lecturers' comments on FOT's students' problems with communicative competence
"... not aware of <b>sociolinguistic knowledge</b> "
"...be able to deal with familiar and learned situations but <b>inflexible</b> if the situation is unfamiliar"
"...not good <b>control of vocabulary</b> because of the lack of practical use"
"...some good students have very good <b>phonological control</b> , but many average or below-average students don't "
"...a number of students from provincial areas may be affected by their <b>dialects</b> , leading to the <b>mispronunciation</b> of words; many of them pronounce words without ending sounds "s, t, k..."
"...many students <b>miss ending sounds</b> when pronouncing words, they <b>mispronounce even</b> professional terms"
"...not good <b>control of vocabulary</b> "
"...can't <b>develop topics</b> even given hints from teachers; not aware of <b>sociolinguistic knowledge</b> ; students with good English are more sensible of it, but tend to use <b>slang</b> in any contexts, that are sometimes not suitable"

(Source: Data from the interviews)

The thematic analysis of the data in the table shows that **sociolinguistic competence, flexibility, vocabulary control, phonological control, thematic development are the major problems that FOT's students encountered, among which phonological control is the most problematic**, as in one comment:

*"There are big differences between students' English level in different classes. In some classes of lower level, students have bad pronunciation skills, which affects greatly their understanding of the messages given by the interlocutor. They will be able to fix the pronunciation mistakes when being instructed by the teacher but will repeat the mistakes in other contexts."* (Teacher H.G., interview)

From the expertise viewpoint, the teachers thought the above problems mostly resulted from a lack of practical interaction with foreigners. Another possible reason could be *"the limited speaking activities in class, which mainly focus on role-play. Because of this, students tend to learn from the model and will be quite passive and confused when encountering actual situations."* (Teacher H.A., interview). Some students tend to use slang in every situation whether it is appropriate or not, which is *"strongly affected by contemporary trends on social media"* (Teacher H.G., interview). Finally, the weak pronunciation skills can be explained by the study habits of students: *"they do not have the habits of learning from the phonetic transcription as in the dictionary but mostly just try to learn the word meanings"*. (Teacher H.G., interview)

#### *Focus group interviews with FOT's students*

Besides the problems with FOT's students' communicative competence identified by the enterprises and lecturers, we want to acknowledge the problems that FOT's students were struggling with themselves and their expectations to the Faculty to help improve their English competence. This will be the important basis to decide what elements of communicative competence should be more problematic and be our priority to fix compared to the other elements, then to decide what should be possible solutions to such problematic elements.

To gain an overview of the students’ responses, we operated 03 interview sessions with 25 students (10 from first year, 08 from second year and 07 from third year) took part in three focus group interviews. One of the researchers controlled each interview, made sure the interview went smoothly and did not digress from the main subjects. We also tried to maintain equal participation between the interviewees as much as possible. As a whole, most of the student interviewees thought they were most struggling with **vocabulary and pronunciation skills**. Other problems were with **thematic development, spoken fluency** and **sociolinguistic competence**. Examples of their responses are as below:

**Table 5. FOT’s students’ comments on the problems they encountered when communicating with foreigners**

FOT’s students’ comments on the problems they encountered when communicating with foreigners
<p>“...bad <b>vocabulary control</b>”</p> <p>“...lack of <b>vocabulary</b>”</p> <p>“...can’t <b>develop the topics</b> when communicating”</p> <p>“...<b>accent</b> not “standard”, not natural”</p> <p>“...knowing the words but cannot retrieve them during conversation, affecting <b>fluency</b> badly”</p> <p>“...can’t remember the words that were learnt so can’t <b>response promptly</b>”</p> <p>“...can’t apply <b>vocabulary</b> into <b>actual use</b>”</p> <p>“...<b>afraid</b> of communicating with foreigners”</p> <p>“...lack of <b>specialized words</b> for tourism”</p> <p>“...sometimes need to ask for <b>vocabulary suggestions</b> from tourists”</p>

(Source: Data from the interviews)

A specific example of comments on their problems is as below:

*“I am able to communicate with foreign tourists but only with prepared and simple topics; if not, I can’t speak with fluency. Besides, I am more familiar with English native accents, I often meet difficulties in understanding other accents if they are non-native. I also want to improve my English terminology of tourism.... I don’t normally pay attention to the cultural factors when communicating with foreigners, but if I know which country my interlocutor is from in advance, I will pay attention to those factors by preparing some information about Vietnam and finding out about their culture”.* (student Y., interview.)

***Recommendations to improve FOT’s students’ communicative competence***

Through the interviews, we have summarized the recommendations that the enterprises suggested, based on the actual requirements of the working environment; the solutions given by the FOT’s lecturers were mainly from their expertise angle while the recommendations suggested by the students were also their expectation towards the Faculty.



**Table 6. Recommendations to improve FOT's students' communicative competence**

Enterprise partners	Teachers	Students
"...should have more <b>opportunities to communicate in English</b> , in different situations"	"...there should be <b>foundation classes</b> for low-proficiency students"	"...FOT should organize more <b>activities with foreigners</b> "
"...more <b>practice</b> at school"	"...they should access <b>online resources</b> to learn English"	"...more <b>outdoor activities with foreigners</b> , like an English project"
"...invite <b>specialists</b> to train for students"	"...there should be activities with the <b>participation of foreigners</b> to help students practice their English"	"...teachers should use English as the <b>only language</b> in class"
"... <b>cooperate with enterprises</b> to bring students for training at hotels"	"...create more <b>communicative environment</b> for students to practice their English skills: organizing English clubs, guiding tours, hiring foreign teachers"	"...FOT should have an <b>English club</b> "
"...should have more <b>practical activities</b> for students like English projects"	"...English clubs, <b>activities with foreigners</b> , ..."	"...more <b>practical activities</b> for students to use their English"
"...more <b>contests of English</b> at university"	"students' <b>self-studies</b> "	"...learning activities should be more <b>creative</b> to attract students"
"...students should <b>travel abroad</b> to use actual English"	"...students <b>guide tours</b> for foreign tourists"	"... <b>activities with foreigners</b> should be integrated into the curriculum instead of being extracurricular"
"...more <b>activities with foreigners</b> "	...	"... <b>outdoor activities</b> should be within the curriculum"
"...should have <b>foreign teachers</b> "		"...students need to be <b>proactive</b> to learn English. No one can help if they don't learn by themselves."
...		...

(Source: Data from the interviews)

In summary, to improve FOT's students' communicative competence, most of the interviewees agreed that there should be more activities with actual settings so that students can interact with foreigners in English more often and will be able to apply their English skills in real life.

The enterprises recommended more connection with hotels and travel organizations to increase actual factors in the learning activities; this will be useful to help students raise awareness about sociolinguistic skills when doing the job in the future.

*"...Maybe you can organize more practical learning activities, or role-play activities for students...if you can cooperate with the hotels, because the hotels have their own career standards, for example in check-in procedures... they can apply such standards into their role-play, and during the role-play activities they will imagine how the situations will happen in real life, they will know how to use their English skills and behave appropriately and professionally..."* (Ms. T., interview)

The language settings can also come from a communicative environment in which students are indulged in language activities and get themselves to speak.

*"The learning environment for students could be an English club, with an investment in organization. If it has the participation of foreigners, it will be ideal and will help to motivate students to be more confident and better their fluency in speaking. However, these activities should be under supervision of the teachers."* (Teacher H.A., interview)

A number of students also suggested that these activities should be put in the curriculum as a part of their English courses:

*“I think that our Faculty should involve more outdoor activities, but this should be compulsory because if it’s a voluntary activity, many students who are shy will not be willing to register for it”* (Student T.T., interview).

Other recommendations are organizing English contests, English tour guide clubs, English foundation classes for students of low-level, field trips abroad or more varied activities of practicing English in class.

### **Suggestion for improving FOT’s students’ communicative competence**

After reviewing the problems that students of FOT encountered with their communicative competence as well as scrutinizing the suggested solutions by the interviewees, we concluded that project-based learning (PBL) would be one of the the best approaches to improve our students’ communicative competence because of its outstanding match with the need for students’ interaction in real life settings - Project-based learning “offer the potential to integrate the target language into the learner’s communicative competence”, “enable them to communicate and understand the target language’s culture” (*Hutchinson, 1996*). Project-based learning also “bridge the gap between using English in class and using English in real life situations outside the class (*Moss & Duzer, 1998*).

### ***Principles and methods of using PBL activities to enhance students’ communicative competence***

PBL is a teaching and learning method in which students participate in a project that helps them have experiences in a real-life environment. By requiring students to solve a problem or develop a product, PBL enhances student learning outcomes by promoting their abilities and skills in applying knowledge, solving problems, practicing higher levels of thinking and orienting their own learning (*Jonassen & Hung, 2012*). PBL is a learner-centered approach based on three constructivist principles: learning is context-specific, learners actively participate in the learning process, and they achieve their goals through social interactions, sharing knowledge and understanding (*Cocco, 2006*).

According to *Katz and Chard (2000)*, project-based learning is a very effective approach that allows students to form opinions on topics including areas of interest, ask questions, estimate, develop theories, use different tools, use acquired skills in a real-life and meaningful context and enable learners to solve problems and answer questions creatively within and outside the classroom. It can be clearly seen that students have the opportunity to practice improving their language and discourse competences. When learners use English to carry out projects, and even consider improving communication skills in English as the goal of the project, it will certainly help them improve their communicative competence.

**Table 7. A summary of PBL process**

<i>Papandreou (1994)</i>	Korkmaz & Kaptan (2000)	Stoller (2005)	Markham (2009)
1. Preparation 2. Planning 3. Research 4. Conclusions 5. Presentation 6. Evaluation	1. Stating the subject and sub-subjects, organizing the groups 2. Groups create projects 3. Application of the project 4. Planning of the presentation 5. Making the presentation 6. Evaluation	1. Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project. 2. Students and instructor determine the final outcome. 3. Students and instructor structure the project. 4. Instructor prepares students for the language demands of information gathering. 5. Students gather information. 6. Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling and analyzing data. 7. Students compile and analyze information. 8. Instructor prepares students for the language demands of the culminating activity. 9. Students present the final product. 10. Students evaluate the project.	1. Craft the driving questions 2. Plan the assessment 3. Map the project 4. Manage the process 5. Assess the project's outcomes

(Source: Data from the researchers)

In essence, although the authors proposed different processes for PBL activities, three main phases can still be identified: 1/ preparation and planning, 2/ conducting the project, and 3/ evaluating results. When researching and implementing this process, Nurwiansyah (2016) gave some notes in implementing each specific step as follows:

*1. Start with the essential questions*

Questions need to be based on practical, relevant, and meaningful situations or topics for students at the present time, ensuring students feel they have created certain results or solved the problem.

*2. Design a plan for the project*

Students need to be deeply involved in this step so that they feel ownership of the project as they take an active role in deciding on activities. Activities should serve to answer the guiding question. Right from this step, students need to clearly know the resources they can access to complete the project, or in other words, even though the project is difficult, it can still be completed.

*3. Create a schedule*

Although there may be some variation or flexibility with the schedule, instructors need to have clear instructions on how students can complete each step on time, even giving advanced warnings about potential factors that can affect the progress of the project.

*4. Monitor students and project progress*

Although students need to be as proactive as possible at this stage, teachers need to observe and discuss to promptly grasp the problems of the student groups in order to provide appropriate

support, ensuring that students can complete their tasks. Providing students with criteria to self-evaluate the project's success right from this stage will help students make appropriate adjustments to achieve their goals.

#### *5. Assess the outcome*

The first purpose of evaluating the project's outcome is that teachers need to clearly indicate the progress students have made while participating in the project in addition to identifying what they need to improve. If the evaluation is done in detail and scientifically, the results obtained will help students continue to develop after the project and lecturers can improve their teaching in general as well as the implementation of the future projects. If possible, students should conduct self-assessment. If the student's self-assessment results and the instructor's assessment results contradict each other, both sides need to discuss to accurately determine the project's output.

Good implementation of each step in the total process will affect the success of the project. Although in each step of each project, depending on the project's goals and the student's ability, the roles of students and lecturers can be different, but basically students are the implementers and the lecturer is the instructor, supporter, especially in organizational work. Accordingly, students' opportunities to use English to communicate in English projects should be maximized, helping to develop learners' communicative competence.

With the above mentioned purpose, we have built up and conducted an English project called "My Hanoi..." for FOT's students, which was the further step following up the results of the prior survey and interviews. The project applied the model of Markham (2009) including five steps: *1. Craft the driving questions; 2. Plan the assessment; 3. Map the project ; 4. Manage the process; and 5. Assess the project's outcomes.* The theme of this project was Hanoi cuisine. The reason why we left the "... " mark after "Hanoi" is that if this project was a success, we hope to continue similar projects in the future with different themes of Hanoi tourism, such as history, culture, handicraft villages and entertainment. The project was operated from 15 July to 30 September 2023. Here are some details of the project:

#### *Participants:*

- 20 FOT's students in their first year were selected to take part in the project.

(The first year students were chosen because they were the least competent in English and had not many chances to communicate with foreigners before. However, in their second year, they will have to take the practicum at enterprises which are international hotels and travel organizations and may take part in many events that require them to speak English. Therefore, we think they should be the ones that benefit from the project the most. By the time of implementing the project, they had just finished their first year at FOT and completed 02 courses of English for tourism. They had not taken any courses of specialised English. Their English level was around A2 level according to the CEFR scale.)

To select the students for the project, we created a list for them to register, including their speaking and listening scores in their nearest speaking test. Students with average scores (ranging from 6-7.5) were chosen. Students with lower scores were unselected because with the requirements of the language tasks within the projects, their level may be too low to fulfill the tasks.

- 04 international volunteers (in which 02 of them are frequent and 02 are casual) signed up to join our project.

To recruit volunteers, we created a poster with clear and detailed information about the project and posted on social facebook groups. The candidates needed to be highly competent in oral English and will be able to do basic assessment work. Interestingly, all of the volunteers have a background in tourism-related work and are native-speakers (one of them was a tour leader, another one was working as a receptionist in a hotel in Hanoi, the third person used to do training in hotel management and the last person was a Youtuber whose main contents were on reviewing tourism experiences in Vietnam. Two of the volunteers were from the USA, one of them is Australian and another one is British).

- 05 FOT's teachers of English (also the researchers) played a role as a tourist in the food tours with students. We chose participation observation method to both support the conversations between the students and volunteers and to observe students' behaviors as well as language expression during the tours.

*Objectives of the project:*

When carrying out the project, we aim to enhance the English communicative competence of FOT's students. Besides, as our students are tourism-majored, they are expected to be able to introduce the beauty of Hanoi cuisine to international visitors.

*Process:*

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the project, students were required to take a pre-test. The test included communicative tasks which were familiar to them as they had practiced before. 05 elements of the communicative competence were assessed through the test: vocabulary control, phonological control, sociolinguistic competence, fluency and thematic development. The elements were selected from the data of the interviews and based on the requirements of their English courses and actual contexts.

- Students then attended the orientation meeting in which they met the teachers and volunteers for the first time. They discussed in groups to decide the themes of the food tours they want to do. Each tour was subject to a different theme. The tours took place in 04 consecutive weeks.

- Each week, they did a food tour on a certain theme in which they acted as the hosts while a foreign volunteer and a researcher were their guests. During the project, the students made four tours under the following themes:

- 1<sup>st</sup> tour: *Street food in Hanoi*

- 2<sup>nd</sup> tour: *Food of foreign origins*

- 3<sup>rd</sup> tour: *Popular drinks in Hanoi*

- 4<sup>th</sup> tour: *Home-cooking - Handmade dishes at home*

They were expected to prepare commentary about food-related topics within the tours and answer questions from guests. After each tour, the volunteers sent them feedback on their language competence based on their performance on tours. The feedback sheet was provided to the volunteers by the researchers.

- Besides the food tours, we organized other activities such as 04 training sessions in which students were trained on how to develop contents for each weeks' topic and practiced basic tour guiding skills. Another parallel activity was the communicative class. In each class, students met up with members of other groups and volunteers and played English games related to Hanoi tourism. We believed that besides going on tours as the main activities, the communicative class would give students chances to make friends and communicate with each other in English, then give them more inspiration and motivation to speak English more confidently.

- At the end of the project, students took a post-test to assess their communicative competence and evaluate their improvement compared to the pre-test. After that, the students and the volunteers were asked to do a questionnaire in order to evaluate the project's effectiveness.

#### *Summary of the results*

Overall, "My Hanoi..." project was a success. Almost every student showed improvement in their English communicative competence, especially their sociolinguistic competence, fluency, thematic development and vocabulary control. Both parties including the students and the international volunteers agreed that they were most impressed with the comfortable atmosphere during the conversations with each other and it gave them more chances to engage into the language and culture exchange.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The current research explored the situation of FOT's students' communicative competence, scrutinized the specific problems and possible reasons behind them, then offered solutions to deal with such problems. According to the survey results, most of the students of FOT had average communicative competence, only a small number of them stood out with excellent English competence. Since the Faculty always aimed at training high quality workers for the tourism industry, the results may not be as satisfactory as expected although it still meets the training standard and most of the enterprises receiving FOT's students for practicum or internship showed pretty high satisfaction towards their performance.

The problems that hindered the students from better English skills lied mostly on their vocabulary control, vocabulary range, phonological control, sociolinguistic competence, spoken fluency and thematic development. This results mainly from their lack of interaction with foreigners in actual contexts. Therefore, giving students more opportunities to be involved in practical activities in which they can use English to deal with the problems, especially problems that often occur in real life situations is crucial to improve their communicative competence. With students of tourism majoring in the Faculty of Tourism, we believe the project "My Hanoi..." could be an effective way to solve students' problems.

However, there are still some limitations that similar research in the future should overcome. One of the drawbacks lies in the scale of the survey. With only 65% of students responding to the questionnaire, the data collected may not be strong enough to represent the whole population of FOT's students. Besides, in terms of the interviews with enterprises, some positions in hotels (e.g., room attendants or bell attendants) do not require students to use English at work so often,

plus the working time was only 04 months, it is not long enough for the students to express their full English potential. Therefore, the data from the questionnaire and interviews with enterprises should be viewed under specific cases (i.e., students with better English competence) rather than used to declare the general competence of FOT's students.

Lastly, the results of this research affirm the previous studies' findings in which it pointed out that some possible reasons for the limitations of learners' CC lied in the lack of practical activities outside the classroom and limited chances of practicing English during and after school (Sebastianus, 2019; Le & Ngoc, 2017). Therefore, more interactive learning activities with actual context was considered the best solution for improving students' CC. Besides, the research findings mentioned that these activities should be put into the curriculum as a compulsory for all students, to increase their engagement and guarantee their participation. However, this suggestion should be put into careful and comprehensive consideration before widely applied.

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Trình bày bìa: NGUYỄN NGỌC ANH

Đối tác liên kết: Phân hội nghiên cứu và giảng dạy Tiếng Anh VietTESOL

SÁCH LIÊN KẾT

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**VIETTESOL INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION 2023**

**ELT FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY EXCELLENCE**

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Mã số: 2L-137ĐH2024

In 50 cuốn, khổ 21x29,7 cm tại Công ty TNHH In - Thương mại và dịch vụ Nguyễn Lâm

Địa chỉ: Số 352 Giải Phóng, P. Phương Liệt, Q. Thanh Xuân, TP. Hà Nội

Số xác nhận ĐKXB: 2358-2024/CXBIPH/09-220/ĐHQGHN, ngày 03/7/2024

Quyết định xuất bản số: 1266 LK-XH/QĐ-NXB ĐHQGHN, ngày 16/8/2024

In xong và nộp lưu chiểu năm 2024