

Factors influencing English proficiency: An empirical study of Vietnamese students

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CHRONICLE

Article history:

Received: December 12, 2020

Received in revised format:

December 29 2020

Accepted: February 4, 2021

Available online:

February 4, 2021

Keywords:

Language proficiency

Student demographics

Vietnamese students

ABSTRACT

This study tries to explore how distinctive or not the Vietnamese students are in learning English, thus investigating factors influencing the language proficiency of Vietnamese students. The study suggests the significance of five intrinsic factors related to the students' characteristics (which are learning purpose, learning ability, learning method, hard-working, and self-awareness) and three extrinsic factors that are related to demographic factors, parental indicators, and schooling-environment in determining the English proficiency of Vietnamese people. Data was collected from online questionnaires sent to more than 2500 students from eight famous universities in Vietnam and converted into an excel version before translated into SPSS and EVIEW. Research results show that intrinsic factors, especially learning methods, play a vital role in shaping Vietnamese students' capability to learn a second language. From educators' perspectives, the higher level of English exposure the students are equipped at school, the higher their language proficiency. Finally, we compare the difference in learning language ability among genders and ages. The findings suggest that girls and minorities are less proficient in language than others.

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1. Introduction

Today, the concepts of a high-skilled workforce are very common in organizations in terms of philosophy and technique (Long & Richards, 1990). It can be seen as a key element in shaping intangible assets in any organization since it is a sustainable competitive advantage and determines the human resource capability (Pasban & Nojedeh, 2016). A high-skilled labour force plays a pivotal role in transforming the national economic structure (World Bank, 2014). The national economic strength depends on the quality rather than the number of human resources. *“Their potential capacity and capability are at once, our richest and most precious possession. Every field of endeavour will benefit as we provide greater opportunities for the training of skills and the development of talent and leadership”* (Yang, 1967). On the supplying side, education is essential and irreplaceable in equipping its workforce with the right skills will, therefore, be an important part of Vietnam's effort to accelerate economic growth and further its economic modernization in the coming decade and more (Badea et al., 2015; World Bank, 2014). Evidence shows that 60% of Vietnamese students got good or distinction when they graduated. However, Vietnamese human productivity reached 11.142 USD, equal to 7.3%, 37%, 44,8%, and 55,9% of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indone-

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sia, and the Philippines (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). Moreover, the number of unemployed Vietnamese people at working age in the second quarter of 2020 is approximately 1.300.000 people, about 172,000 of whom are above university levels, accounting for nearly 14%. These comparisons suggest a paradox in Vietnamese human capital quality. They also point out the importance of equipping students with interpersonal skills during their college time because the more skilled students are trained, the higher productivity they could propose. Language proficiency is one of the most important factors determining students' academic skills since their capabilities are enhanced when learning a new language. Being proficient in a second language also helps people adapt more easily to a different culture. The ability to communicate with those who speak other languages can be conducive to achieving career goals. For example, English is an international language of the world; it is the lingua franca of business. Thus, organizations require their employees to use English proficiently to understand and communicate well with their stakeholders (including shareholders, suppliers, customers, employers, and other employees) across borders. Language proficiency is also a determinant of the future success of any organization, human capital quality particularly. This is because the nuances and subtleties go towards building strong connections. They can be the difference between winning or losing contracts and establishing - or failing to establish - long-lasting business relationships.

In this study, the authors will shed light on how students study a second language and how their language proficiency can be improved. This is because students are the backbone of a country's future, directly shaping the future Vietnamese workforce. Once pinpointing the contributory factors in this issue, our research group hopes to help people seek suitable solutions corresponding with each influencing factor to address the question of augmenting the Vietnamese workforce's English proficiency. In other words, this study will investigate the role of language proficiency and its determinants, which include both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors are individual ability, awareness, hard-working, and motivation, while extrinsic factors comprise student demographic, home environment, and school environment. From the research results, it can be said that intrinsic factors play a vital role in shaping Vietnamese students' language proficiency. Students learning a foreign language must have the ability, method of study, hard work. However, learning a foreign language is completely different from learning other logic subjects. This means that intelligence does not pose a strong position in determining the student's proficiency in a second language. In particular, learning English is the most important factor, directly determining language proficiency. Furthermore, we found that demographics factors also influence language proficiency significantly. Indeed, female and minorizers seem to have a lower level of language proficiency than others. Finally, from the educator's perspective, exposing students to more English practice via teaching structure can enhance students' language proficiency. Those in the advanced or international study with a higher level of language exposure seem to be more proficient in language than others.

2. Literature review

Researchers have paid much attention to defining and measuring language proficiency since the 18th century because of its irreplaceable role in shaping the national economy and enhancing global organizations' competitive advantages (Lukmani, 1972; Cumming, 1989; Tran & Richard, 2007). However, there is no consistency among the academics' perception of the proficiency definition and measurement. In a particular context, proficiency demonstrates what a language user can do regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired (Bialystok, 1994). This demonstration is dependent on how the learner can be exposed to the second language. In a broader context, the evaluation of proficiency is not limited to the content of a particular curriculum taught or learned. Some authors argue that proficiency is the ability to use language in real-world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language. Thus, language proficiency is an individual's ability to use language with accuracy that transfers meaning in production and comprehension. Motivation is one of the main factors determining the proficiency level of people in learning a foreign language (Dornyei, 1990; Dornyei, 2001; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2001; Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft, & Evers, 1987; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Scarcella & Oxford, 1995; Warden & Lin, 2000). They suggest the importance of motivation in influencing the learning process in which students use their learning strategies to interact with native speakers, then complete language tests, before keeping the language efficiency level after learning (Ely, 1986; Ely, 1986; Spolsky, 1989; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Motivation is influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic indicators: the learners themselves and teachers or parents – who encourage and inspire students to study a foreign language. While intrinsic motivation emphasizes the learning process, students are more geared towards extrinsic motivational goals in learning (Dornyei, 1990; Dornyei, 1994; Rabia, 1996). Attitude – an intrinsic factor, has a strong association with learners' ability to learn a second language (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). Research findings show that learners who have a positive attitude and a good sense of purpose in learning a new language actively participate in more in-class activities and oral practices than others, thus gaining more language proficiency themselves (Minghe & Yuan, 2013). In this study, we will examine the impact of five intrinsic factors comprising learning purpose, learning ability, learning method, hard-working, self-awareness, and three extrinsic factors related to student demographic factors, parental factors, and schooling environmental factors. The hypotheses are as follow:

Hypothesis 1: Intrinsic factors have a positive correlation with the proficiency of learning a new language.

Many scientists and researchers have pointed out that intrinsic motivation (hard-working attitudes, positive learning purposes, proper self-awareness, and learning methods, and so on) (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011) can help to promote language learners' passion and make them follow their interests and goals (Alizadeh, 2016). Sharing the same viewpoint, (Gardner, Lalonde, & Moorcroft, the role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning: Correlational and experimental considerations,

1985) states that attitude also impacts students' efficiency. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and proficiency in learning a new language.

Hypothesis 2: The home environment is positively correlated with language proficiency.

In the 1960s, several scholars were reluctant to agree that genetics, home environment, and other explanations were the main responsibility for school failure (Schneider & Lee, 1990). According to this perspective, low performing minority children lacked the cognitive, linguistic, and other skills necessary for school success because their parents did not provide a home environment that was conducive for learning formal school-related attitudes and tasks (Hess & Shipman, 1965)

Hypothesis 3. School environment directly impacts language proficiency.

The facilities like school building, classrooms, teachers' availability according to the number of students, and other basic teaching and learning requirements directly impact students' performance (Sirin, 2005). It is mostly observed that students can have more opportunities to learn and practice with the school's proper and necessary facilities. The school plays a vital role in delivering education and the learning environment needed for learners' language achievements. A better school environment not only improves their learning but also helps in lessening the drop-out of the students (Pearson et al., 2000)

Hypothesis 4: Student demographic is associated with language proficiency.

For a long period, scholars in the fields of language education, second language acquisition, and bilingualism have paid huge attention to the influence of gender on learning language outcomes (Ehrlich, 1997; Pavlenko, 2001; A., Palvenko, 2001; Pavlenko et al., 2011; Halpern, 2001). Among various variables related to students' demographic, age, and gender run parallel with other factors and strongly influence the language learning process (Shakouri & Saligeh, 2012). Differences in levels of confidence when performing attests. For instance, boys often show a higher level of confidence. However, characteristics shown in class girls are more active and attentive than their counterparts are among two examples of how gender can affect how students learn English (Hashwani, 2008). Therefore, the student demographic is associated with language proficiency.

3. Methodology

3.1. Empirical model

Model 1: $LAN = \alpha + \beta_1 \times INS + \beta_2 \times HEM + \beta_3 \times STD + \beta_4 \times STE + \varepsilon$ Where: $\alpha, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ and β_4 are coefficients; ε is error, STE is a dummy variable.

If $STE = "1,"$ it refers to basic program and "0" otherwise.

STD comprises a set of control variables (while ages and working experience are discrete variables, gender, religion, and ethnicity are dummy variables). The meaning and role of different variables are presented in Table 1

Table 1
List of dependents, independent and control variables of the regression models

Variables	Meaning	Determined by	Role
LAN	Language proficiency	Listening	Dependent variable
		Speaking	
		Writing	
		Reading	
INT	Intrinsic factors	Learning purpose	Independent variable
		Acquiring knowledgeability	Independent variable
		Learning method	Independent variable
		Hard-working	Independent variable
		Self-awareness	Independent variable
STD	Student Demographic	School-year	Independent variable
		Gender	Independent variable
		Work experience	Independent variable
		Religion	Independent variable
		Ethnicity	Independent variable
HEM	Home Environment	Father education	Independent variable
		Mother education	Independent variable
		Parental support	Independent variable
		Educational level	Independent variable
STE	School Environment	Family income	Independent variable
		Basic Program	Control variable
		International Program	Control variable
		Advance Program	Control variable

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Because in-deep research of Vietnamese students, we completely choose the high-rank multidisciplinary university in Vietnam, based on data of Webometrics Ranking of World Universities (2020), with a wide range of majors such as economics (#13 National Economics University, #47 Banking Academy, #48 Foreign Trade University, #68 Academy of Finance and Accounting, #103 Thuong Mai University), biology, science and technology (#2 Hanoi University of Science and Technology), law (#77 Hanoi University of Law), education (#1 Vietnam National University Hanoi). The sample size is presented in Fig. 1.

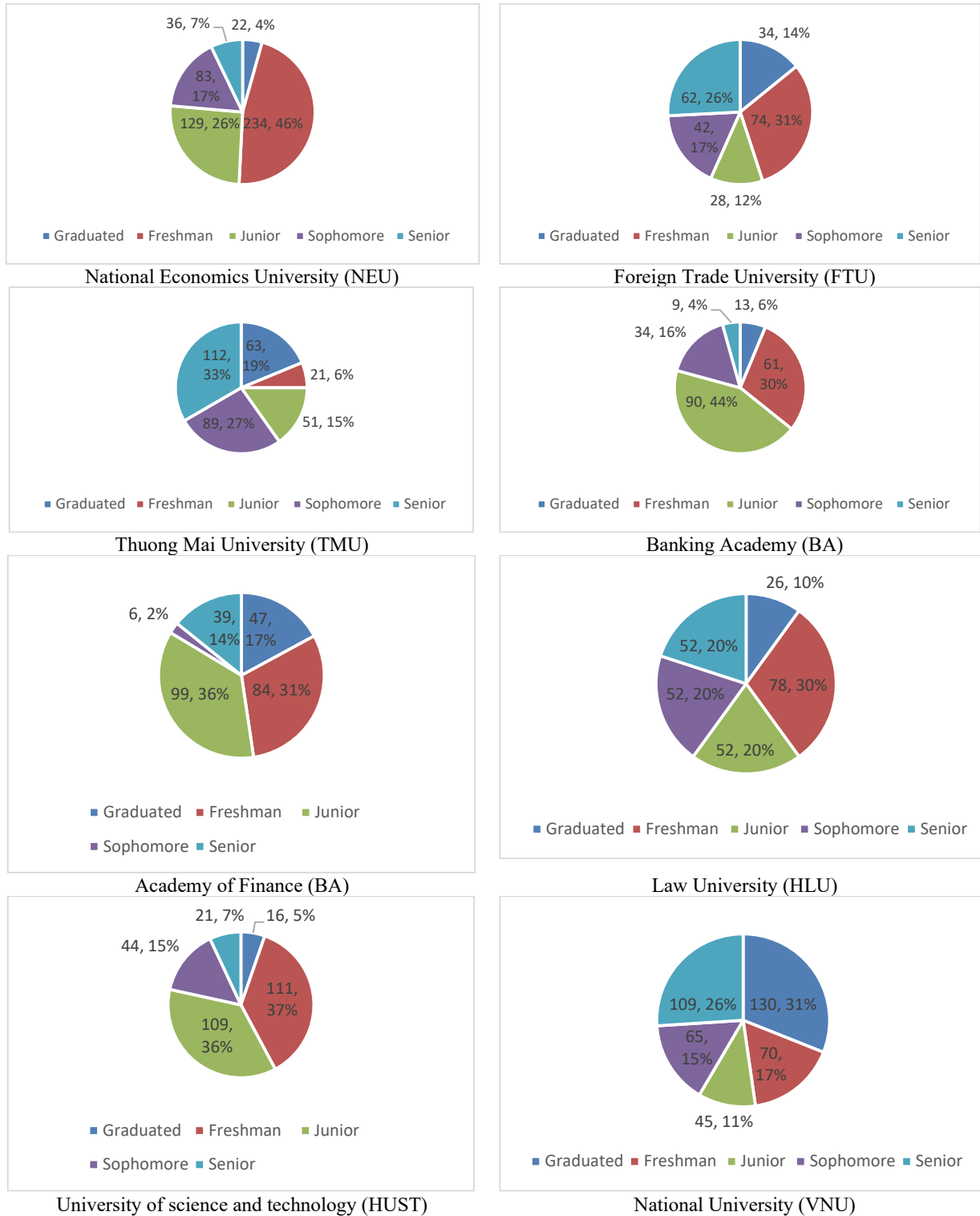


Fig. 1. Research samples

Research data were collected from primary data provided by our questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent randomly to more than 400 students per chosen university, including freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and alumni. Furthermore, we also interview students from these schools to determine rational evaluation criteria for ensuring reliability, transparency, and accuracy. With the questionnaires given out at eight different universities, we conducted 2542 observations to get the best estimate. On that basis, a regression model is set up for analysis and verification with specialized software such as EVIEW 10 and SPSS 22.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Fig. 2 compares the IELTS scores of students in eight different Vietnamese Universities: Academy of Finance, Banking Academy, Thuong Mai University, Vietnamese National University, Foreign Trade University, Hanoi University of Law, and National Economics University and Hanoi University of Science and Technology. Overall, most students taking our survey got under 5 IELTS bands while those obtaining IELTS bands above 7.0 were under 10%, indicating the low level of language proficiency within Vietnamese students.

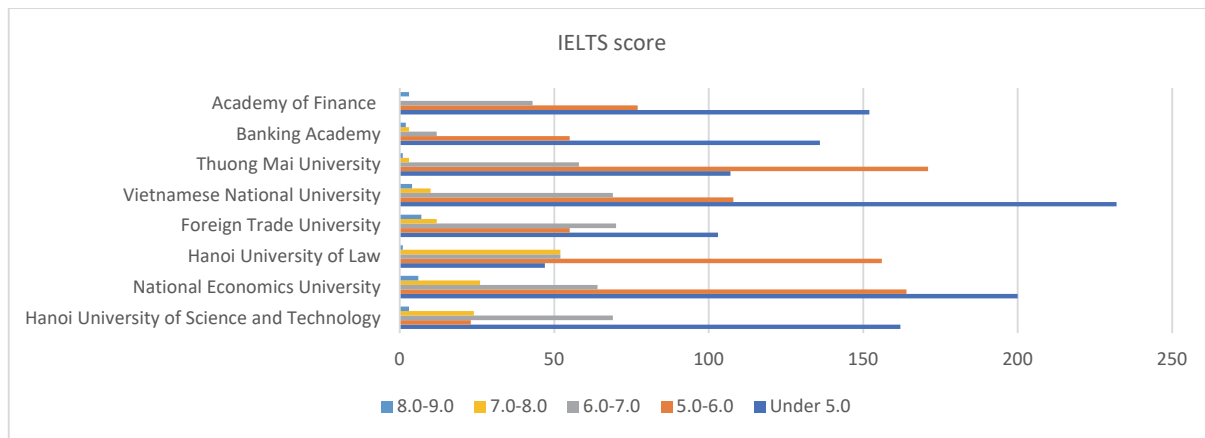


Fig. 2. Students' IELTS score

To begin with, the percentage of students obtaining IELTS under 5 in Vietnam National University constituted just over 20%, which was higher than that of Hanoi University of Science and Technology, National Economics University, Hanoi University of Law, Foreign Trade University, Thuong Mai University, Banking Academy, Academy of Finance with 14.2%, 17.6%, 4.1%, 9%, 9.4%, 11.9%, and 13.4% respectively.

On the other hand, the proportion of students with IELTS band 5-6 in Thuong Mai University made up 21.1%, followed by 2.8%, 20.3%, 19.3%, 6.8%, 13.4%, and 9.5% that of students from Hanoi University of Science and Technology, National Economics University, Hanoi University of Law, Foreign Trade University, Banking Academy, Academy of Finance University in that order given. Furthermore, the figures for students in IELTS band 5-6 of University Banking Academy and Foreign Trade University, which were the same, were 4% higher than that of Hanoi University of Science and Technology.

By contrast, students' IELTS band 6-7 in Foreign trade university accounted for 16%. Vietnamese national university and Hanoi University of Science and Technology were roughly the same students with 6-7 band with 15.8%. In contrast, the Banking Academy figures were five times as small as that of Foreign Trade University. It is noticeable that in Hanoi University of Law, far more students achieving band 7-8 accounted for 52 students while none of the students at Academy of Finance reached that band. However, although students' 7-8 IELTS score in Foreign Trade University was lower than other universities, Foreign trade university became the top university where the most students gained 8-9 IELTS score, doubled that of Academy of Finance and Hanoi University of Science and Technology, was three times that of Banking Academy, and seven times that of Thuong Mai University.

Fig. 3 shows five heterogeneous intrinsic indicators ranging from hard-working, learning purpose, acquiring knowledgeability, learning method, and self-awareness in terms of gender. Fewer girls acquire knowledgeability and learning methods than boys', whereas men's hard-working, self-awareness, and learning purpose are not as high as women.

Male student's language acquisition was supposed to be higher than female students. By contrast, the figures for girls' colleges' hard work, learning purpose, and self-awareness were 0.1, 0.04, and 0.12 higher than those of boy's colleges

Male students' self-awareness and learning purpose show slightly different figures at 3.13 and 3.17 in that order. Contrastingly, female students show a completely different picture: their level of hard work, learning purpose, and self-awareness occupied with 3.40, 3.16, 3.25, respectively.

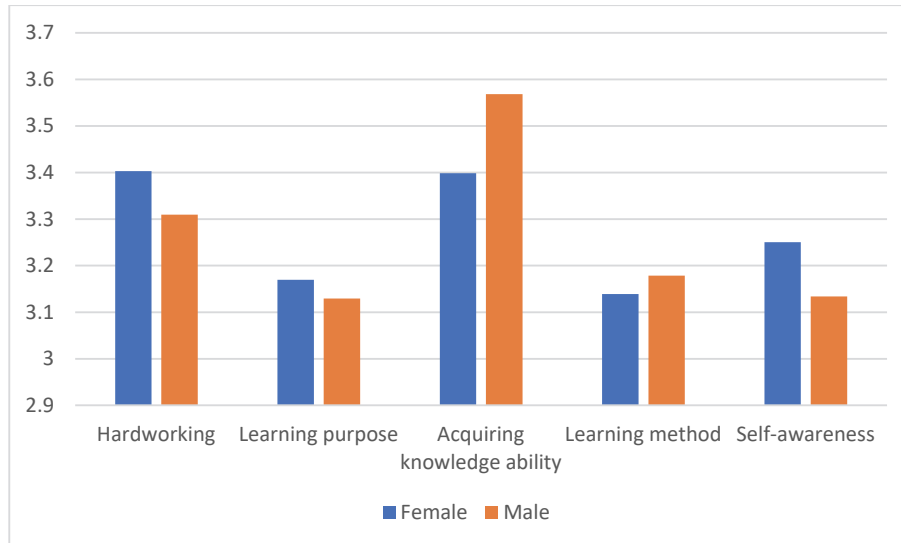


Fig. 3. The intrinsic factors affecting language proficiency

4.2. Regression analysis

Table 2 shows regression results for factors influencing language proficiency. Generally, independent variables and demographic factors have a statistical significance, except for part-time, learning purpose, ability, and awareness. R-squared = 26.65. This means students' language proficiency is explained by over 26.65 % of the changes in student intrinsic (INT), School Environment (STE), Home environment (HEM), and student demographic (STD). These results confirm the significant impact of intrinsic, extrinsic, and demographic drivers on students' language proficiency.

Table 2

Regression analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	0.34963	0.126803	2.757259	0.0059
YEAR	0.024427	0.01183	2.064758	0.039
GEN	0.160044	0.040484	3.953276	0.0001
PARTIME	-0.000712	0.015033	-0.047374	0.9622
RELIGION	0.289954	0.045806	6.330081	0
MINORITY	0.148053	0.072449	2.043543	0.0411
PROGRAM	0.472647	0.041125	11.49282	0
FA-EDUCATION	0.02479	0.022337	1.109802	0.2672
MA-EDUCATION	0.140098	0.023227	6.03176	0
PARENT SUPPORT	-0.155793	0.024224	-6.431222	0
FAMILY INCOME	0.134643	0.023637	5.69639	0
LEARNING PURPOSE	-0.006879	0.025277	-0.272146	0.7855
ABILITY	-0.069079	0.027534	-2.508901	0.0122
LEARNING METHOD	0.30768	0.026611	11.56217	0
HARDWORKING	0.262165	0.023683	11.06993	0
AWARENESS	-0.169217	0.025478	-6.641647	0
R-squared	0.266555	Mean dependent var		1.857986
Adjusted R-squared	0.2622	S.D. dependent var		0.948856
SE of regression	0.815023	Akaike info criterion		2.435073
Sum squared resid	1677.926	Schwarz criterion		2.471836
Log likelihood	-3078.978	F-statistic		61.20142
Durbin-Watson stat	2.067393	Prob(F-statistic)		0.000

Dependent Variable: LAN

The two variables positively impact LAN in that the coefficient of method learning and hard work equal to 0.30 and 0.26 in the order given. Although LAN is not affected by students' intelligence, learning purpose, and awareness, it is determined by 0.30 and 0.26 of the variation of the three independent variables and demographic models. Several independent factors, which are part-time, ability, learning purpose, and awareness, do not influence students' language proficiency. Similarly, FA education has no statistically significant association with LAN. When it comes to probe findings, Prob (F-statistic) = 0 < 0.05, it is supposed the statistical significance = 95%, INT, STE, HEM, and ISTD have a significant positive correlation with LAN, the several remaining variables including part-time, FA education, parent support, learning purpose, ability, and awareness are negatively associated with LAN. In other words, the higher the language level the students learn, the higher language their

capabilities are. Besides, male students' acquiring knowledge of language ability is much higher than female students. Interestingly, those who either follow religions or are not minority ethnic groups perhaps become proficient in language better than those who do not follow any creed. Moreover, by partaking in courses associated with international programs and advanced programs, students can master their language proficiency quicker than picking up the primary language programs. Surprisingly, father education does not influence children's language ability that is affected by MA-education. Likewise, family income positively impacts learners' linguistic proficiency. In other words, students coming from affluent families could milk an opportunity to get access to gain language from a very young age, whereas a reverse pattern can be seen in factors ranging from part-time, learning purpose, FA-education, awareness. Notably, the positive coefficient found in the learning method and hard work reveals that students' intelligence is not a significant factor in acquiring language, but because hard work and method learning play a crucial role in achieving the learners' language proficiency.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on Vietnamese students' language proficiency. The research results show that most Vietnamese students have low English proficiency levels since the majority of research participants, who are from the eight famous universities in Vietnam got under 5.0 on the IELTS test. This finding means that capability of using a second language is deficient and poor among undergraduates' students. From these findings, we suggest some recommendations as following to remedy the inadequacy of language proficiency:

From the students' perspective, it is necessary to consider the importance of the intrinsic factors in shaping and enhancing the ability to learn a second language. The research results emphasize the importance of endogenous factors, which are directly derived from students' motivation, hard work, learning spirit, and determination to learn a foreign language. These indicators are vital in determining the success of your language learning. More specifically, to learn a foreign language effectively, students are required to have ability, study method, hard work, and correct perception of the language. Learning a second language is completely different from learning other thought-oriented subjects in that it does not require students to be too smart. This is because we found that students' intelligence or ability to learn only has very little effect on the student's learning efficiency. Instead, the study method and diligence are the keys to students' success while learning a second language. Especially for the learning method, this is an extremely important factor that directly determines language proficiency. For example, the Jewish method of learning English is one of the most popular methods recognized by world science as the fastest and most effective method of acquiring language knowledge. This learning method requires learners to use self-study cards, learn by phrases, and put sentences in context.

From the perspective of parents, the study shows that parents' education, especially mothers', greatly impacts the formation of thinking and language preference of their children. Specifically, the higher the educational attainment the mother is, the better the child will learn a foreign language. We also show that high-income families are more likely to have children with better language skills than low-income families. The reason is that a parent's investment in education depends largely on their income. Since then, parents' care and investment in education are key to helping their children improve their foreign language skills, thereby developing their children capabilities. However, parents should not over-expect and put pressure on their children to study because family pressure is one factor that negatively affects the child's comprehensive development. Therefore, parents need to understand their children thoroughly and listen to their children to have appropriate supportive ways to encourage their children to enhance their foreign language skills.

From the educators' perspective, the creation of learning programs in which students have more opportunities to interact with native teachers is a good opportunity for students to develop their language skills. The study results have shown that students in programs that use English as the main language in learning and teaching often have better foreign language proficiency than those in traditional training systems. In other words, combining language training during college time for students in the learning process is necessary to hone and nurture their abilities. The study results also indicate the differences in language acquisition of students in different genders and in different regions and religions. The school should pay more attention to female students and ethnic minority students, who have a weaker ability to use language than others.

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