

# The TOEIC® Test as an Exit Requirement in Universities and Colleges in Danang City, Vietnam: Challenges and Impacts

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## ABSTRACT

Accompanying the globalization of the English language, a global commercial testing industry has been established, specially merchandising goods known as standardized English proficiency tests. As Templer (2004) argues, these tests have increasingly controlled access into privileged educational and occupational paths in the professional and corporate world, and affected many local language policies. In Vietnam, among high-stake exams, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) introduced in 2001 has gradually assumed a greater gate-keeping role. This paper investigates the impacts of TOEIC® as a graduation requirement for university students in Danang City, Vietnam with certain inferences for the current situations in the country being made. The paper begins with some background information about English certification exit requirements at tertiary levels and an introduction to the sets of questionnaire conducted with administrators, teachers and students in Danang's universities and colleges as part of this research. The next section comments on the context that induced the introduction and implementation of the policy of using TOEIC® certificates to determine graduation eligibility. The main part of this paper examines in detail some challenges and impacts of the policy, incorporating the voices of key stakeholders. Finally, the discussion section evaluates the efficiency of the policy, followed by some recommendations to the policy practitioners.

**Keywords:** TOEIC®, exit requirement, challenges, impacts

## INTRODUCTION

Accompanying the globalisation of the English language, a global commercial testing industry has been established, specially merchandising goods known as standardised English proficiency tests. As Templer (2004) argues, these tests have increasingly controlled access into privileged educational and occupational paths in the professional and corporate world, and accordingly affected many local language policies. Heated discussions and concerns have centred on the impacts of standardised tests on societies and on languages other than English, and how national and local authorities manage entry to language education and language rights (Tollefson, 2002).

In Vietnam, among high-stake exams, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) introduced in 2001 has gradually assumed a greater gate-keeping role. First, it is used as a basis for

recruitment and promotion in competitive labour markets such as information technology, the airline industry and international trade. In the higher education sector, policies have come in effect, utilising TOEIC® certificates as standards for learning outcomes since November 2005 (Thanh, 2005), and officially as one graduation requirement since 2010 (Quang, 2010). This increasingly confirms the role of the English language in Vietnamese society. While TOEIC® is claimed by Educational Testing Service or ETS® to help upgrade tertiary education standards and create a globally competitive labour force in Vietnam (AMEC, 2010), the excessive use of this test has been questioned in terms of serving the social or linguistic needs of different groups.

This paper investigates the impacts of TOEIC® as a graduation requirement for university students in Danang City, Vietnam with certain inferences for the current situations in the country being made. The paper begins with some background information about the role of the English language and the TOEIC® test in Vietnamese tertiary education system; English certification exit requirements at tertiary levels in Danang City, Vietnam; and an introduction to the sets of questionnaire conducted with Vietnamese administrators, teachers and students in universities and colleges in Danang City as part of this research. The next section comments on the context that induced the introduction and implementation of the policy of using TOEIC® certificates to determine graduation eligibility. The main part of this paper examines in detail the specified policy, particularly its challenges and impacts, incorporating the voices of Vietnamese administrators, teachers and students at Danang universities and colleges. The discussion section evaluates the efficiency of the policy, followed by some recommendations to the key stakeholders involved.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The role of the English language and the TOEIC® test in Vietnamese tertiary education system**

The most remarkable expansion of English language education in Vietnam has been witnessed during the period from 1986 till present. It was initiated by a nation-wide economic reform called Doi moi [Renovation] at the 1986 Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party, integrating the country's multifaceted activities in those of the region and the world (VOV News, 2006). Vietnam's entrance to ASEAN and ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1995, the implementation of the Vietnam-US Bilateral Trade Agreement, and taking WTO membership in 2007 have increased the needs for a skilled labour force with good command of English (Kieu, 2010). In this context, English education has been prioritised at all levels of the Vietnamese education system: as one among six national exit exams at Junior and Senior Secondary School and as a compulsory subject studied by 94% undergraduates and 92% graduates at Vietnamese institution (Hoang, 2011). In his detailed research, Hoang (2011) also notes that Vietnamese students have to complete 14/140 credit hours<sup>i</sup> of English (equal to 10% of the total credit hours) in most undergraduate programs, 7/50 credit hours (equal to 12%) in most graduate programs, and 3 credit hours in doctoral programs. Undergraduates generally take 200 hours of English at university over four academic years (Ton & Pham, 2010). Yet, this instruction is delivered in a manner which does not allow the vast majority of students to achieve sufficient levels of competence to pass the certifications required for recruitment. This has resulted in a boom in private English classes across the country to such an extent that "there are now more teachers and students of English than of any other subjects" (Hoang, 2011, p. 12). However, as Ha (2007) contends, the communicative competence in English of most Vietnamese employees are still very limited, and many freshly graduated students fail to find jobs in foreign companies because of the English language requirements.

Vietnamese decision-making bodies are aware that to catch up with the fast globalisation process, sizable inputs and major changes should be made to upgrade the currently low English teaching and English use standards. One measure recently introduced has been to teach fundamental subjects in English in “advanced programmes” at two national universities (Hanoi National University and Hochiminh National University) and three regional ones (Danang University, Hue University and Thai Nguyen University) for 20% of the top students (Hoang, 2011). Another measure has applied international standards to English teaching and assessment. At a national workshop TOEIC – Tieu chuan quoc te danh gia trinh do tieng Anh trong he thong dao tao Dai hoc Vietnamii held on November 25th 2005, Deputy Minister of Ministry of Education and Training (or MOET) Banh Tien Long communicated MOET’s intention to “use TOEIC®<sup>iii</sup> to build an assessment framework for undergraduates’ English proficiency” and encouraged institutions to convert TOEIC® scores into credit points for their studentsiv (Thanh, 2005). He also indicated the Ministry was considering using TOEIC® to evaluate students’ English levels before graduation (Thanh, 2005).

What has been much debated is the mismatch between the actual capacity of Vietnamese institutions and the English policy imposed by MOET. In fact, no universities and colleges at the time were able to develop their assessment frameworks based on TOEIC® scores. This was due to either managerial problems, lack of English teaching staff and necessary facilitiesv, or the low English entry levels of students (Ha Vi, 2008). Yet, only three years later, in early 2008, MOET gave an official instruction, requiring universities and colleges to articulate their graduation standards<sup>vi</sup>, among which is the English requirement, by the end of the same year. MOET did not state explicitly that TOEIC® would be the preferred exit certification for the English subject. Nevertheless, it appeared institutions should imply this from MOET’s previous announcement in 2005 and from the increasing preference of labour markets for TOEIC® certificatesvii. Therefore, TOEIC® came to be seen as preference for teaching and assessment in the curriculum. It was also predictable that within those short three years, with no major increases in resources and students’ English entry levels, many institutions had to reconsider or delay their English exit requirements (Oanh, 2009).

In this context, MOET had to issue another written announcement in 2009, extending the reporting day of exit requirements until January 15th, 2010 (The Tuoi Tre Daily, 2010). This time, several sanctions, such as cancelling the operation of courses, disregarding the validity of the qualifications or reducing admission quotas, were threatened to be applied to institutions that were unable to report their graduation standards to MOET in time. However, according to Ms. Tran Thi Ha, the head of the Higher Education Department – MOET (The Tuoi Tre Daily, 2010), out of 376 universities and colleges nationwide, only 65% could comply with MOET’s requirements. Nevertheless, the standards reported varied greatly among schools, even in those located in the same areas and offering the same majors, or varied among different majors within an institution that offers exactly the same English courses to all their students. For instance, Hochiminh University of Industry accepts the National English Certificate level C; Hochiminh University of Transportation asks for an IELTS® overall score of 4, while the University of Technical Pedagogy requires a TOEIC® score of 350. Students from Hochiminh National University only need to submit the National English Certificate level B, yet it must be issued by this institution. This caused 65% of its students in the academic years 2006-2010 to fail to graduate because they were not informed in a timely manner (Quang, 2010). In brief, the actual implementation of MOET’s policy has been so diverse that many refer to this as “loan chuan dau ra Tieng Anh” [English certification exit requirements in a great mess] (Quang, 2010).

## **English certification exit requirements at tertiary levels in Danang City, Vietnam**

Located in the commercial and educational centre of Central Vietnam and Vietnam's most dynamic city<sup>viii</sup>, the Higher Education sector in Danang has seen the need to upgrade its English language education. There are currently 24 universities and colleges (Hanoi University of Pedagogy, 2011), and 55 vocational colleges in Danang City (Danang Employment Web Portal, 2011). These provide more than 62 disciplines at undergraduate level, 13 at Masters' level, 10 at doctorate level and other professional training programmes. In response to MOET's policy of using TOEIC® in graduation assessment frameworks, representatives from some universities in Danang have signed an agreement with ETS Vietnam to include TOEIC® as their English Educational Standards in 2008 (Tuoi Tre Online, 2010). According to this agreement, participating universities were supposed to use the TOEIC® score chart to place students in suitable levels, exempt certain students from taking compulsory English subjects at the school, and to determine graduation eligibility (Tuoi Tre Online, 2010). Other institutions that have not yet articulated their English certification exit requirements also have tended to use TOEIC® for the same purpose to keep up with the standards of their neighbouring colleges and to "secure their trade names" in the eyes of future students (Oanh, 2009). In the private education sector, Duy Tan University is currently the single institution to have articulated the required TOEIC® scores for graduation (Trang, n.d.). As a whole, for institutions in Danang City, business-major students usually need to achieve a minimum TOEIC score of 450, social-science majors a score of 400 and technical majors a minimum score of 400.

## **Introduction to the sets of questionnaire for Vietnamese administrators, and teachers and learners of English in Danang City**

Arguments in the main part of this paper are based on the opinions of Vietnamese administrators, teachers and students at Danang universities and colleges. It is because most institutions in Danang are committed to using the TOEIC® standards (The Tuoi Tre Daily, n.d.), but only a few have published their TOEIC® certification exit requirements. If they do, they only apply this policy to newly admitted students starting the academic year 2010. Three sets of questionnaires (Appendix A, B and C) used for this opinion survey were written in Vietnamese and sent via emails to three groups of participants – administrators, teachers and students – to get an insight into the issues more comprehensively. So far, responses have been received from ten institutions. However, the data collected will not be examined using quantitative method. Rather, comments by participants have been selected to develop in-depth arguments for this paper.

## **CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE**

To continue developing arguments for this paper, it is beneficial to review the context that induced the introduction and implementation of the policy of using TOEIC® certificates to determine graduation eligibility in Danang City.

Firstly, in the context where the English language has global recognition and as the 1986 open-door policy in Vietnam has ceaselessly boosted foreign trading and investment activities, most city planning and development activities in Danang are attached to the importance of having an international standardised assessment tool of English proficiency. Trang (n.d.) argues that most employers reject applications because the candidates do not have the required English level rather than due to these applicants' professional skills. Partly for this reason, some foreign-owned companies, especially in tourism sector, would rather base their offices in Hochiminh City, Hue City or Hanoi Capital, where they

can find more capable staff to communicate with the foreign supervisors (Trang, n.d.). Danang People's Committee believes that if it can encourage more attention to the benefits of the English language, then it is more likely to increase its competitiveness index (Hong, 2011).

Secondly, increasing international competition in the education sector in Danang is one key push for the specified policy. Currently, several proposals to set up international universities have been approved by the local government (Nhu Quynh, 2011). Several other international universities, like Japan's FPT University, are already running, with a commitment to produce high quality human resources for Vietnam (FPT University, 2009). More international universities in Danang are opening for admission from academic years 2012 and 2013 and currently running universities can produce more internationally competitive global workforce than local institutions. This means public and locally funded universities and colleges in Danang really need to upgrade their educational quality, including English education. The regional Danang University, for example, while maintaining the memorandum with ETS® to include TOEIC® in English proficiency assessment, has claimed to upgrade to international standards by 2040 with English as the medium of instruction in most subjects (Education and the Era Newspaper, 2009). This will create even more pressure for neighbouring institutions to urgently direct their attention to internationally valid English certificates.

The orientation towards such international standard certificates as TOEIC® is an instance of a significant change in education and language policy. MOET's guideline and then an increasing potential of institutions using TOEIC® to determine their students' graduation eligibility not only secure the role of English in the society. The language has surpassed any other foreign languages like French, Russian and Japanese, which are still offered to Vietnamese students, to be a "must" for learners in order to get a degree. Also, English has expanded further than its instrumental role as a school subject in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) country to be essential in multiple economic spheres.

## **THE ISSUE**

There is not yet a definite answer about the effectiveness of the policy or its long-term impacts since universities and colleges in Danang are at the very beginning of introducing and reconsidering the TOEIC® certification exit requirements. However, concerns have already arisen, mostly among students and teachers, requiring a more cautious approach from institutions. From the feedback in the survey with administrators, teachers and students at ten universities in Danang, this paper discusses two major issues from the implementation of the policy: the challenges for both teachers and students and the impacts on the university sector and the influences on wider society.

### **Challenges for teachers and students**

The policy to use TOEIC® to decide students' graduation eligibility in Danang's institutions has increasingly confirmed the gate-keeping role of the English language and accordingly, disadvantaged certain groups of students. Generally, students enter universities or colleges with relatively low English levels. In a survey at 18 universities nationwide by ETS®, first-year students score on average 220-245 out of 990 in the TOEIC® scale system (Ha Vi, 2008). Accordingly, the majority of these learners will need to have at least 480 contact hours to achieve a TOEIC® score of 400-500, the minimum standard that most institutions are considering for their English-certification-exit assessment framework. In my survey, however, institutions assign in total only 240 contact hours of English, divided among the first 4 semesters throughout 3-5 academic years. It is then illogical to "require learners to learn basic, locally adapted English at university and then graduate with an international certificate" (Ha Vi, 2008). It is also challenging since TOEIC® certificates are only valid for two years. If students take TOEIC® tests right after

they complete the first 4 semesters, by the time they graduate, their TOEIC® certificates may have already been expired. Else, if they wait near the graduation day to take the test, it is possible that, for not having practiced English during the last 2-3 years at the institution, their English skills are no longer sufficient for them to sit for the test (Lan, 2012).

It is also worth noting that English proficiency varies greatly among students from different social and educational backgrounds. In one placement test in 2009 for 334 university students in Danang, individual scores range between 50 and 850 out of 990 in the TOEIC® scale system. Currently, 80% of the learners, who have completed seven-year EFL education at secondary schools, are placed at Intermediate level of English. The rest who have had very little exposure to English are put in Elementary English classes. The latter group of learners either come from rural areas with limited resources in English or studied a different foreign language at secondary schools. N. Tran (personal communication, June 8th 2012), for example, had to study Russian before as her schools needed to give jobs to teachers of Russian already employed there for longx. For Y. Phan (personal communication, June 15th, 2012), an ethnic minority student who was directly admitted to Danang University of Education without having to take the national entrance examinationxi, basic English is already challenging: “If a TOEIC® certificate is required, it is as if the university gave me a freeway in but no way out.” With such low and varied English proficiency among students, consequences can also be quite serious if institutions fail to orient learners towards the English exit requirements. According to an administrator at Danang University of Polytechnics (personal communication, June 8th 2011), in 2009, her institution required final-year students to achieve a minimum TOEIC® score of 400. Written announcements were issued only six months before the planned graduation day. This resulted in around 1,500 students ineligible for graduation. Then, the university had to lower its English-exit requirement to a National English Certificate level B.

In addition to the lack of English proficiency, the cost for taking extra courses can be prohibitive for learners from lower-income backgrounds. Most students surveyed express a concern about the mismatch between the contents, task types and test-taking strategies in their institutions’ English curriculum with those necessary for the English exit exams. That is why they prefer to take extra courses at private language centres, where they can practice English with more individual attention from the teachers [N. Hung, personal communication, August 7th, 2012]. A TOEIC® preparation course for an estimated TOEIC® score range of 405-550 normally costs USD400.00 in most foreign-owned language centres in Danang City. Students can also enroll in courses instructed by Vietnamese teachers of English. The second option, despite saving learners half of the fees, is already equivalent to the tuition fees for a whole academic semester at universities (Hung, 2012). This also equates with the monthly salary of most lecturers in tertiary education. Consequently, the policy discussed in this paper has proved to be more accessible to wealthy students.

In brief, the specified policy has placed certain students, especially those from ethnic minority groups and poorer backgrounds, at a considerable disadvantage. This happens even though local authorities and institutions may not intentionally direct English language education towards the benefits of any particular communities. Besides, claiming to use TOEIC® standards to create an internationally competitive labour force for the city, institutions in Danang have failed to acknowledge their students’ practical needs and interests. Some students hardly intend to work in an English-speaking environment, so it would be more equitable for them to be assessed against criteria applicable to their circumstances (Phan, 2012)

Concerning the impacts of the policy on Vietnamese teachers of English, the most noticeable challenge is the changing role and recognition within the teaching professions. Firstly, the tension between



achieving the institutions' curriculum objectives and orienting students towards TOEIC® certification policy has encouraged more participation from teachers as language planners in the classrooms (The Tuoi Tre Daily, n.d.). As T. Ha (personal communication, August 7th 2012) argues, an emphasis on TOEIC® preparation activities will be at the expense of learning opportunities for students, which means learners' educational experience is possibly narrowed. Most teachers' responses to the questionnaires (Appendix A) address how available contact hours for their classes have been adapted to encompass either task types, content focus or test-taking strategies of the TOEIC® test. Thus, it can be argued here that these teachers are enjoying more control of the English lessons they teach, but they also have to make more careful decisions about their teaching and assessment procedures. Secondly, the recognition of teachers' expertise is increasingly attached to their successful experience with TOEIC®. As the test is globally valid, it is often assumed that only teachers who demonstrate good English skills and teaching methodologies can manage TOEIC® preparation classes well. While I was still teaching at a university in Danang, I often heard students commenting on two of my colleagues: "I don't think she's a competent teacher. She only teaches A, B, Cxii. I've never seen her teaching TOEFL or TOEIC". However, the pressure on Vietnamese teaching staffs is more from the competition to secure their jobs. Few teachers have taken the TOEIC® themselves or received TOEIC® training sessions. According to L. My (personal communication, June 8th 2011), only two out of fifteen teachers at her college were chosen to attend a TOEIC® workshop in Hanoi in 2009, but no more invitation from ETS® has been received ever since. It is then unreasonable to set higher standards for students' English proficiency while Vietnamese teachers do not receive regular professional development. It is likely that more native English teachers will soon replace Vietnamese ones - a case that is happening at Danang University of Polytechnics (H. An, 2012).

### **Impacts on the university sector**

The introduction of the policy among institutions in Danang may have both positive and negative influences on the university sector. One visible benefit is a healthier relationship between institutions and the society (Oanh, 2009). In fact, articulating English certification exit requirements is a response of commitment that universities and colleges are attaching their curriculum and outcomes to the needs of the society. This, in return, helps the key stakeholders to re-evaluate and adapt their educational activities with a clearer focus to the goals.

In reality, however, actual implementation and evaluation of the policy can be an exhausting activity for any institutions. According to the guidelines from ETS® (Thanh, 2005), to build an assessment framework for English exit proficiency, numerous measures need to be taken such as surveying the requirements of labour markets, diagnosing students' English proficiency, adapting the curriculums and course books, and training teachers and administrators. ETS® has offered to host the diagnostic tests for schools that are committed to use TOEIC® for their graduation assessment framework (Ngoc, 2012). Apart from that, none of the institutions surveyed have been able to take a measure until now. Consequently, these schools will run the risk that rather than assisting undergraduates to efficiently engage in demanding labour markets, TOEIC® qualifications will act as a gate-keeper, challenging not a small number of students. Else, given the institutions' determination to properly approach the policy, considerable monetary and human resources in the budget would need to be allocated to this (Ngoc, 2012), thus, affecting the prime focus and functions of the schools.

### **Influences on wider society**

This policy, introduced at a national scale and directly involving all the key stakeholders of the Higher Education sector, has resulted in a series of knowledge commercialisation activities. Before the year 2007, there were no private language centres that ran TOEIC® preparation courses. ETS® was the only

authorised body to host TOEIC® tests and issue the certificates. However, right after the policy was introduced, tens of private language centres began to penetrate into the market. Nearly every university and college now owns a language Centre to accommodate the need of their own students (N. Tra, personal communication, June 9th 2012). Danang Architecture University, for example, was only established in 2006 but is already home to about 5,500 students. Its foreign language centre, which used to offer only classes of National English Certificates, now mainly provide TOEIC® preparation courses: 22 classes are making profits for the school [N. Tra, personal communication, June 9th 2012]. Publishing sectors, testing franchises and authorized TOEIC® consultation offices are also flourishing. Trang (n.d.) doubts whether these hasty and commercialized responses to recently growing demands really address the original aims of TOEIC® tests as an international standard assessment of English proficiency. There is also a concern that when all institutions comply with the policy, it can be hard for ETS® to administer and score all the tests. If, however, sufficient rights are given to TOEIC® testing franchises, there may appear a “Vietnamised” version of the TOEIC® standards with the possibility of corruption and reduced test versions, like what has happened to localised National English Certificate Exams (T. Ha, 2012)

With TOEIC®’s gate-keeping role as discussed earlier, it is possible that in the near future, certain level of social inequality can be witnessed. Examining the impacts of high-stakes English tests in the world, Edwards (2006) emphasizes that “Never before in the planet’s history have so many of the poor spent so much to learn the language of the rich”. In the context being discussed, a whole new strong testing industry may accompany the specified policy, with an uneven allocation of social and economic capital. For example, students from lower-income backgrounds, if unable to afford fees for English courses and get one among international standardized English certificates, may not get good jobs. A friend of mine once complained that her application for a high-paying job was rejected on the spot because she could only show a National English Certificate Level B. For teachers and students of other foreign languages, there are few options other than restarting with English. Last year, there were only 17 applications to Russian Studies course at Danang College of Foreign Languages, so the course was cancelled. Some teachers of Russian after twenty years of teaching experience had to take two years training to become teachers of English (P. Yen, 2011).

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawn from personal experience and the data from the questionnaires, this part discusses the voices and interests behind the fast domination of TOEIC®. It then critiques the effectiveness of the formulation and implementation of the policy. Some relevant recommendations are also made in the end.

The remarkable expansion of the TOEIC® in Vietnam in general and in Danang City in particular more or less elicits a deliberate push and support by some influential bodies. ETS® claims itself to be “a nonprofit institution with the mission to advance quality and equity in education by providing fair and valid assessments, research and related services for all people worldwide” (ETS, 2011). Its promotion of the TOEIC® tests in Vietnam is claimed to be for the purpose of upgrading the country’s educational standards and producing an internationally competitive labour force (Thanh, 2005). However, before 2007, TOEIC® was still a less well-known English certificate compared to TOEFL® and IELTS®. To gain more market share in Vietnam, its staff has been more actively approaching individual institutions, offering to administer English placement tests for schools, and organising TOEIC® information sessions and training workshops for teachers of English. The latest workshop in Danang in March 2011 with the attendance of 22 teachers from 9 institutions was considered to be successful (IIG Vietnam, 2011) since the message about the benefits of TOEIC® had been communicated through. In brief, an aspect of



deliberateness rather than pure neutral has interfered in MOET's policy and Danang institutions' commitment towards using the TOEIC® standards. Any approaches to the policy also need to take this issue into consideration.

Even though the effectiveness of the policy in Danang City is yet to be seen, the unsolved challenges as discussed have hinted at the unfeasibility of implementing the policy at the moment. The limited qualified human resource together with the lack of necessary materials and facilities and the time-constrained curriculum allocated to the teaching and learning of English at institutions make it unfeasible for students to achieve the required TOEIC® score. Besides, a number of students with low levels of English or from poorer backgrounds may be disadvantaged in taking supplementary TOEIC® preparation courses. Then, it is more practical if institutions choose a locally based English test to decide graduation eligibility of currently final-year undergraduates. However, in the long run, it must be confirmed that the use of certain English certification, including TOEIC® certificates, as an exit requirement should remain an aim. It is because companies have been more interested in using an internationally recognized standard or the TOEIC® standards for recruitment; and Vietnamese institutions themselves need to be competitive among new foreign-invested international universities. In that case, students need to be informed right at the start of their tertiary lives so that they allocate enough time and attention to improve English skills and practice for the English exit tests. English programs and teacher training should also be modified in a way that could encourage learners' production of the target language. Other issues related to ethnic minority students and those from low-income backgrounds are to be sensitively dealt with, depending on the practical needs and interests of these learners.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 credit hour equates with 15 contact hours in class.

<sup>ii</sup> [in English: TOEIC – international assessment standards of English proficiency in Vietnamese tertiary education system]

<sup>iii</sup> TOEIC® or Test of English for International Communication was introduced in Vietnam in 2001. It claims to be a “global standard for English communication skill assessments” (ETS, n.d.)

<sup>iv</sup> This means students who gain high scores in the TOEIC® test can submit their certificates and will be considered to be exempted from taking compulsory General English courses at their institutions.

<sup>v</sup> According to Ha Vi (2008), more than 54% of universities and colleges do not administer English placement tests. Most classes have over 48 students, while there are only about 28 computers per one lab for practising receptive English skills. Labs are only used once every ten classes for listening exercises. Normal classes are centred on reading and grammar activities only.

<sup>vi</sup> Vietnamese institutions used to run courses without having any guidelines about the expected outcomes of their students. Therefore, students were usually unaware of the pathway of their courses; and outsiders, including employers, could not evaluate the educational quality of the institutions. According to this policy by MOET, universities and colleges have to articulate (or clarify) their graduation standards for the courses they are running and are going to open.

<sup>vii</sup> More jobs are demanding applicants to hold a TOEIC® certificate. In foreign-invested companies, a TOEIC® score of 600, for example, is required for engineers, researchers and sellers, and of 500 for technical officers (Tuong, 2004). Meanwhile, most top-paying Vietnamese companies have lifted the requirements for TOEIC® scores to 450 or 500 (Lan Huong, 2008), which was much higher than the English graduation standards of most institutions at that time.

<sup>viii</sup> Provincial Competitive Index or CPI is designed to rank and evaluate the capacity, performance and willingness of local governments to improve business-friendly regulatory environment for the locality to develop. Danang has the highest PCI (Provincial Competitive Index) for the past two years (Nhan Dan Newspaper, n.d.).

<sup>ix</sup> There are two semesters per one academic year at tertiary level in Vietnam. College students take 3 academic years while university ones take 4 to 5, depending on their majors.

<sup>x</sup> Vietnam received strong military and civilian support from Soviet Union between the year 1954 and 1975, and maintained a deep political relationship with the Eastern Bloc until 1986. During that time, Russian became a dominant foreign language chosen to study by 60% of the students (Nguyen, 2007)

<sup>xi</sup> MOET has a policy to encourage Vietnamese students from different ethnic minority backgrounds to enter universities and colleges. Those students can undertake a one-year academic preparation course and then are directly admitted to certain institutions. Else, they can take the national university entrance exam like the majority of Vietnamese students but will be awarded bonus marks (Le, 2010).

<sup>xii</sup> This refers to level A, B and C in the National English Exams.

## **APPENDICES**

### **Questionnaires for Vietnamese administrators, and teachers and students of English at universities and colleges in Danang City, Vietnam (English version)**

#### **Appendix A. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR VIETNAMESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH**

This questionnaire is designed for Vietnamese teachers of English teaching at Vietnamese universities, colleges or vocational colleges. It seeks information about your experience as a teacher of English with the TOEIC® test, your recent teaching and assessment practices towards the TOEIC® test at your institution, and your views about the impacts of the test and of the English language in Vietnam. The part of my research that relates to this questionnaire involves reporting on specific institutions and individual responses. Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may skip questions you do not wish to answer; however, I do hope that you will answer as many questions as you can.

**Background information:**

Degree(s) you have completed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of the institution you are teaching at: \_\_\_\_\_  
English course(s) you are teaching: \_\_\_\_\_  
Level(s) of students you are teaching: \_\_\_\_\_  
Size of English classes at your institution: \_\_\_\_\_

**The role of the English language in Danang**

1. What do you think about the role of the English language in Danang?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How important is English to you (e.g. in your daily life/your profession)? Please specify:  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. In your opinion, should any Vietnamese minority language(s) or foreign language(s) other than English be taught?  
☐ No.  
☐ Yes. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Tick where appropriate the descriptions of your students:  
☐ They come from rural areas where English resources are limited.  
☐ They come from urban areas where English resources are abundant.  
☐ They come from rural areas where English resources are abundant.  
☐ They come from urban areas where English resources are limited.  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are certain groups of your students disadvantaged when learning English because of their social/geographical backgrounds?  
☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Yes. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are most of your students motivated to learn English?  
☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Yes. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Teachers' experience with the TOEIC® test**

7. As far as you know, what changes have been applied to New TOEIC® test?  
☐ Reading. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Listening. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Have you ever taken the TOEIC® test?  
☐ Not yet  
☐ Yes. Please specify the time: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Have you attended any TOEIC® training sessions?  
☐ Not yet  
☐ Yes. Please specify the time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Impacts of the TOEIC® test on teachers' teaching and assessment procedures**

10. How do your students find English courses at your institution?  
☐ Too difficult

- 
- ☐ Appropriate  
☐ Not challenging enough
11. Do you include TOEIC®-related resources in your English lessons at university?  
☐ No. Please specify some resource(s) that you use \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Yes. Please specify some resource(s) that you use \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you orient your teaching activities towards the TOEIC® test?  
☐ No.  
☐ Yes. Please tick where appropriate what is included in your teaching activities:  
☐ Task types.  
☐ Test-taking strategies.  
☐ Focus of the TOEIC® test.  
☐ Time constraint of the TOEIC® test.  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do semester exams at your university cover part(s) of the TOEIC® test?  
☐ No  
☐ Yes. Please tick where appropriate:  
☐ Reading section(s) \_\_\_\_\_ %  
☐ Listening section(s) \_\_\_\_\_ %
14. Are the TOEIC® resources at your institution enough for teaching and learning requirements?  
☐ No. If not, please tick where you get the materials needed:  
☐ I do not collect any materials  
☐ I collect materials from colleagues  
☐ I collect materials from external libraries  
☐ I collect materials from bookshops  
☐ Yes
15. Is there anything else you would like to comment on about English language teaching in your institution?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR VIETNAMESE ADMINISTRATORS**

This questionnaire is designed for Vietnamese administrators working for universities, colleges or vocational colleges in Vietnam. It seeks information about your institution's policies towards the English language and the TOEIC® test, and your views about the impacts of the test and of the English language in Vietnam. The part of my research that relates to this questionnaire involves reporting on specific institutions and individual responses. However, please note that you will be referred to by a pseudo name. Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may skip questions you do not wish to answer; however, I do hope that you will answer as many questions as you can.

### **Background information**

Name of the institution you are working for: \_\_\_\_\_  
English course(s) your institution is offering: \_\_\_\_\_  
English level(s) of students at your institutions: \_\_\_\_\_



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Size of English classes at your institution: \_\_\_\_\_

**The role of the English language in Danang**

1. What foreign languages are taught at your institution?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Which foreign language is your institution's priority? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What do you think about the role of the English language in Danang?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. How important is English to your institution? Please specify:  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Policies of your institutions towards the English language and the TOEIC® test**

5. How many hours in total do students have for learning English at your institution?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What English certificate does your institution use as an exit requirement?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. When are students informed of the English certification exit requirements?  
☐ As soon as students enter the institution.  
☐ In students' final academic year.  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
8. What measures are taken by your institution prior to the publication of its English certification exit requirements?  
☐ Hosting workshops for teachers and students of English.  
☐ Diagnosing students' English proficiency.  
☐ Surveying the requirements of labour markets.  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
9. Have English curriculum and coursebooks been adjusted or developed in accordance with English certification exit requirements?  
☐ No.  
☐ Yes.
10. How many percent of the English teaching staffs at your institution have received/ will receive training about English certification exit requirements?  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. If your English teaching staffs have been/will be trained about English certification exit requirements, please specify the kinds of training:  
☐ Information sessions about exam formats.  
☐ Training about curriculum and material design to suit the exit requirements.  
☐ Training about English teaching methodology to suit the exit requirements.  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
12. Is TOEIC® preparation part of your institution's curriculum?  
☐ No.  
☐ Yes. Please tick the activities included in the curriculum:  
☐ TOEIC® skills and test-taking strategies  
☐ TOEIC® preparation materials  
☐ TOEIC® sample tests  
☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

- 
13. If your institution is using/ is thinking of using TOEIC® as an exit requirement, what are the reasons for so doing?
- ☐ Because this is required by Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training.
  - ☐ Because TOEIC® certificates are the preferred choice of most employers.
  - ☐ Because TOEIC® certificates are the preferred choice of most students.
  - ☐ Because TOEIC® certificates are also the preferred choice of other universities and colleges near my institution.
  - ☐ Because the TOEIC® test is more reliable than other tests.
  - ☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
14. Does/will the use of the TOEIC® test as an exit requirement in your institution disadvantage certain groups of students?
- ☐ No.
  - ☐ Yes. Please describe these groups of students \_\_\_\_\_
15. Is there anything else you would like to comment on about English language teaching in your institution?
- \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH**

This questionnaire seeks information about your experience as a learner and user of English, especially in relation with the TOEIC® test, and your views about the impacts of the test and of the English language in Vietnam. The part of my research that relates to this questionnaire involves reporting on specific institutions and individual responses. Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may skip questions you do not wish to answer; however, I do hope that you will answer as many questions as you can.

#### **Background information**

Name of the institution you are attending: \_\_\_\_\_

Numbers of year(s) you have studied English: \_\_\_\_\_

Language(s) you speak or have learnt besides English: \_\_\_\_\_

English course(s) you are taking at the institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Level(s) of the English course(s) you are taking: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **The role of the English language in Danang**

1. What do you think about the role of the English language in Danang?
- \_\_\_\_\_
2. How important is the English language to you?
- ☐ Very important. Please specify the circumstances where you use English: \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Not very important. Please specify the circumstances where you use English: \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Not important at all. Please specify the reason(s): \_\_\_\_\_
3. Does English interfere with your preference for another foreign language or a Vietnamese minority language?
- ☐ No.
  - ☐ Yes. Please specify that language \_\_\_\_\_

**Impacts of TOEIC® exit requirements on learning**

4. What English certificates are accepted as a graduation requirement for your major at your institution? Please specify the required level/score
  - ☐ National English exams \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ TOEFL® \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ IELTS® \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ TOEIC® \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
5. Is the required level/score achievable for you?
  - ☐ No.
  - ☐ Yes.
6. Where can you get the required certificate from?
  - ☐ English exit exams held by your institution.
  - ☐ English exit exams held by private language centres.
  - ☐ English exit exams held by an international authorised language centre (e.g. British Council, English Language Institute ELI, Educational Testing Service ETS)
  - ☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you informed of the English exit requirements by your institution?
  - ☐ No.
  - ☐ Yes. Please specify in which academic year you are informed of the requirements \_\_\_\_\_
8. Are English courses at your institutions sufficient for you to take the English exit test?
  - ☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Yes. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do English exit requirements influence your learning method?
  - ☐ No.
  - ☐ Yes. Please tick where appropriate:
    - ☐ I focus on the content areas of the test.
    - ☐ I practise strategies for taking the test.
    - ☐ I practise task types.
    - ☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
10. Which of the following resources can you easily have access to?
  - ☐ English-exit-exam preparation documents.
  - ☐ Sample tests.
  - ☐ Materials for English course(s) at your institution.
  - ☐ Supplementary journals, magazines, books and audios in English.
  - ☐ Other. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
11. Should only internationally standardised tests like TOEIC® be accepted as an exit requirement?
  - ☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_
  - ☐ Yes. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_
12. As far as you know, is English proficiency rewarded in your desired workplace?
  - ☐ No.

- \_\_ ☐ Yes. Please specify the domains where it may be rewarded (e.g. social benefits/career promotion) \_\_\_\_\_
13. Is it fair to use the TOEIC® certificate to decide your employment future?  
☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Yes. Please specify the reason \_\_\_\_\_
14. Do you think the TOEIC® can predict your performance at your future workplace?  
☐ No. Please specify the reason(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Yes. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
16. Is there anything else you would like to comment on about English language teaching in your institution?  
\_\_\_\_\_