Dialogues in Humanities and Social Sciences
2026, VOL. 4, NO. 2, 9-17
ISSN (P): 3078-8838; ISSN (O): 3078-8846

OPEN ACCESS

Students' Perceptions of Factors Shaping English Learning Needs: A Case at a University in Vietnam

Lê Thị Phương Thảo[1*], Linh Truong Thi[2]

1 Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0156-4046
2 Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. Email: linhtt@tdmu.edu.vn
* **Corresponding Author: Lê Thị Phương Thảo**. Email: thaoltp@tdmu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

Understanding students' English-learning needs is critical for effective curriculum design and teaching in higher education. This study investigates undergraduate students' opinions on internal and external factors influencing English-learning demands at a Vietnamese institution. The study included 240 students, with equal representation across all four year levels. The study used a structured questionnaire to investigate internal factors such as motivation, confidence, career goals, and self-perceived proficiency, as well as external factors such as curriculum, teaching methods, learning materials, facilities, peer influence, extracurricular activities, and family support. The findings suggest that students see both internal and external variables as key effects on their English learning needs, with no discernible differences between year levels. The study also found a strong link between learner-related dispositions and institutional and environmental support. These findings emphasize the importance of preserving curriculum quality while expanding extracurricular and authentic communication opportunities to effectively enhance students' English acquisition in Vietnamese higher education.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 February 2026
Revised 10 May 2026
Accepted 10 June 2026
Published 15 June 2026

KEYWORDS
English learning needs, needs analysis, internal factors, external factors, student perceptions, higher education, Vietnam

Introduction

Many non-English-speaking countries have adopted English as a strategic resource for academic success, career advancement, and international communication. In Vietnam, the significance of English in higher education has been heightened by globalization and educational reform, as students are now expected to cultivate communicative competence alongside their disciplinary knowledge. The identification of students' English learning requirements has become a central concern in curriculum planning and instructional design as universities respond to these demands.

Needs analysis has been acknowledged as a fundamental element of language program creation, especially in learner-centered and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Nonetheless, students' English learning requirements are influenced by factors beyond the mere demands of the target language. They are affected by a blend of internal elements (e.g., motivation, confidence, self-assessed competency, job aspirations) and external factors (e.g., curriculum, pedagogical approaches, learning resources, facilities, peer support, and extracurricular opportunities). These elements interact to influence students' perceptions of their needs and their engagement with English learning.

CONTACT Lê Thị Phương Thảo. thaoltp@tdmu.edu.vn Vietnam

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Dialogues in Humanities and Social Sciences.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attributions-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Although prior studies have investigated specific variables such as motivation or curriculum effectiveness, fewer studies in Vietnamese higher education have examined internal and external factors within a single analytical framework. In addition, limited attention has been paid to whether students' perceptions differ across year levels. Such evidence is important for designing responsive and sustainable English programs that address learners' needs throughout their university studies.

To address this gap, the present study investigates students' perceptions of internal and external factors shaping English learning needs at a university in Vietnam. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

Question 1: How do students perceive internal and external factors influencing their English learning needs?

Question 2: Do students' perceptions differ across years of study?

Question 3: What is the relationship between internal and external factors shaping English learning needs?

By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence to support needs-based curriculum development and more effective English language education in Vietnamese universities.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on English Learning Needs

Needs analysis emerged prominently in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where course design was closely linked to learners' communicative requirements in target situations (Munby, 1978). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) later expanded this view by distinguishing between target needs (what learners need to do in the target language) and learning needs (what learners need to learn effectively). This distinction shifted attention from outcomes alone to the processes and conditions that support learning.

Nation and Macalister (2010) also considered needs analysis as part of language curriculum design, working alongside environmental analysis and teaching-learning concepts. In this framework, curriculum decisions are based on a combination of students' goals, the university's setting, and available teaching materials. This viewpoint is especially pertinent in higher education, since students' demands are fluid and shaped by individual ambitions and educational contexts.

Modern research also stresses that the needs for learning a language vary depending on the situation and might alter over time (Long, 2005). As students advance in university, their academic requirements, educational experiences, and professional aspirations may change. So, looking at both internal and external factors gives us a better picture of what students think they need to learn English.

Internal Factors in English Learning

Internal factors are cognitive, psychological, and emotional characteristics of the learner that affect their engagement in language acquisition and their performance. Motivation is one of the most important factors that can indicate how well someone would do in a second language (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2001, 2009). Students who have defined academic or career goals often have more instrumental motivation. This might affect what they expect from English classes and which abilities they think are most important.

Self-efficacy, or learners' views in their capacity to do language activities well, is another crucial internal aspect (Bandura, 1997). When it comes to studying English, self-efficacy is closely related to how confident you are in your speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills. More confident students are usually more likely to speak up, take part, and keep going even when things get tough. On the other hand, students who are not confident may feel anxious and try to avoid situations.

Students' self-perceived competency influences how they understand their learning needs (Ellis, 2008). Learners who see shortcomings in speaking or pronunciation, for example, may seek additional communicative practice, whereas those concerned with grammar or vocabulary may prefer more structured training. Furthermore, attitudes such as enthusiasm for English and recognition of its relevance can boost learner engagement and reinforce the perceived need for progress.

According to educational psychology studies, self-perception and confidence are positively related to academic engagement and persistence (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Thus, internal factors are crucial to understanding how students recognize, prioritize, and respond to their English learning demands.

External Factors in English Learning

External factors refer to environmental, institutional, and social influences that shape students' language learning experiences. In higher education, these factors commonly include curriculum design, teaching methods, learning materials, facilities, peer interaction, extracurricular opportunities, and family support.

Curriculum design plays a key role in needs-based education by determining learning objectives, content, sequencing, and assessment (Nation & Macalister, 2010). A well-aligned curriculum can help students see the relevance of English to their academic and professional goals. Teaching methods also shape student perceptions; communicative and interactive approaches are often associated with higher engagement and confidence (Littlewood, 2007), while the quality of teacher feedback strongly influences student satisfaction and learning progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Learning materials and facilities further affect learning opportunities. Authentic, relevant, and appropriately challenging materials can support skill development (Richards, 2001). Access to technology, multimedia resources, and supportive learning spaces can also enhance exposure and interaction (Chapelle, 2001).

From a sociocultural perspective, peer collaboration supports language development through interaction, scaffolding, and shared problem-solving (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, extracurricular opportunities (e.g., English clubs, exchange activities, online communities) and family support can reinforce classroom learning and promote learner autonomy (Benson, 2011). These factors extend learning beyond formal instruction and may significantly influence students' perceptions of what they need to improve.

Research Gap

Previous research has demonstrated the significance of both learner-related and institutional factors in language acquisition; yet, numerous studies have investigated these dimensions in isolation. In the context of Vietnamese higher education, empirical research that integrates internal and external influences within a cohesive framework remains scarce.

Moreover, limited research has compared perceptions across various academic years to investigate potential variations in students' university paths.

This study examines students' perceptions of internal and external factors influencing English learning demands, variations across year levels, and the interplay between these two categories of factors within a Vietnamese university context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The design was selected to collect standardized data from a relatively large sample and to enable both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses of students' perceptions.

Participants

The participants were 240 undergraduate students enrolled in English-related courses at Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. To ensure balanced representation across academic stages, the sample included 60 students from each year level (Year 1 to Year 4).

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although this sampling approach may limit generalizability, it is suitable for a case study that aims to identify patterns within a specific institutional setting.

Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire measured two major constructs:

Internal factors: interest in English learning, awareness of English importance, career goals, self-perceived proficiency, motivation, and confidence.

External factors: curriculum, teaching methods, learning materials, facilities, peer influence, extracurricular opportunities, and family support.

The instrument was developed based on relevant literature in needs analysis and second-language learning, and then adapted to the local university context. A pilot administration was conducted to improve item clarity. Reliability analysis indicated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients above .85.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during the academic term with the permission of the course instructors. Students were informed of the study's purpose and assured that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Completed responses were collected and coded for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Statistical software was used to analyze quantitative data. First, students' perceptions of internal and external factors were compiled using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. The association between year level and variations in the combined internal and external factor indices was then examined using MANOVA. Additionally, year-level variations in each index were examined independently using ANOVA. Lastly, the link between the internal and external factor indices was evaluated using Pearson correlation analysis. For all analyses, a significance level of $p < .05$ was used.

Results

Descriptive Statistics of Internal and External Factors

To investigate the key variables affecting students' English learning requirements, both internal and external factors were scrutinized through descriptive statistics. Internal factors pertain to individual attributes, including students' interest, motivation, confidence, and awareness, whereas external factors involve the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, learning resources, and support from family or peers. In Table 1, you can see the average scores and standard deviations for each item.

Table 1

Internal and External Factors Influencing English Learning Needs

Factors	Mean	SD
Internal Factors		
Interest in learning English	4.7	0.48
Awareness of the importance of English in the major	4.6	0.53
Career goals related to English	4.65	0.5
Current English proficiency	4.69	0.48
Personal learning motivation	4.56	0.55
Confidence in using English to communicate	4.68	0.49
External Factors		
English curriculum in the major	4.77	0.46
Teaching methods used by English lecturers	4.55	0.62
Learning materials, textbooks, and resources	4.47	0.67
Facilities, classrooms, and equipment	4.52	0.64
Peer influence or study groups	4.42	0.63
Extra English learning opportunities (centers, clubs)	4.21	0.81
Family influence (support, expectations, finances)	4.35	0.54

The results demonstrate that both internal and external factors were rated relatively high, with most mean scores above 4.20 on a 5-point scale. This means students are very aware of how these factors affect their English-learning needs.

Among internal factors, the highest-rated items were *interest in learning English* (M = 4.70, SD = 0.48), *current English proficiency* (M = 4.69, SD = 0.48), and *confidence in using English to communicate* (M = 4.68, SD = 0.49). This shows that students not only value English learning but also feel relatively confident in their abilities, which can enhance their motivation and long-term engagement. By contrast, *personal learning motivation* was slightly lower (M = 4.56, SD = 0.55), suggesting some room for improvement in sustaining individual drive.

For external factors, the *English curriculum* received the highest score (M = 4.77, SD = 0.46), reflecting students' strong approval of the program's design. This was followed by *teaching methods* (M = 4.55, SD = 0.62) and *facilities* (M = 4.52, SD = 0.64), which were also positively evaluated. However, some factors were rated lower, including *extra English-learning opportunities (M = 4.21, SD = 0.81) and family influence (M = 4.35, SD = 0.54), suggesting that outside support and extracurricular engagement are not as strong as institutional factors in shaping* students' learning.

All the results show that both internal factors (such as interest, confidence, and career goals) and external factors (like the curriculum and teaching methods) are crucial in determining what students need to learn in English. Nonetheless, external supports outside the classroom (family, clubs, community) seem to have a diminished impact and may necessitate further enhancement.

Differences Across Years of Study

This section examines whether there are significant shifts in how students perceive internal and external factors that influence their English learning demands over the course of four years. The researcher used both descriptive statistics and inferential tests, such as MANOVA and ANOVA, to answer this question.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the Internal and External Indexes, broken down by year of study. The average scores for both indices are consistently high, with all values exceeding 4.4 on a five-point scale. This indicates that students, regardless of grade, believed that both internal and external factors significantly influenced their English learning needs. The Internal_Index shows that the mean values range from 4.592 in the fourth year to 4.689 in the first year. The External_Index shows that the mean values range from 4.419 in the fourth year to 4.512 in the first year. There is a slight downward trend from the first year to the fourth year, but the changes are not substantial, and the standard deviations are relatively minor. These findings indicate a significant degree of consistency in students' answers.

Table 2

Mean Scores for Internal and External Influencing Factors by Year of Study

Year of study	Internal_Index (M ± SD)	External_Index (M ± SD)	n
First year	4.689 ± 0.356	4.512 ± 0.447	60
Second year	4.667 ± 0.357	4.490 ± 0.494	60
Third year	4.631 ± 0.374	4.464 ± 0.437	60
Fourth year	4.592 ± 0.420	4.419 ± 0.463	60
Total	4.644 ± 0.377	4.471 ± 0.460	240

The consistently high mean values across the four-year groups indicate that students generally agree that these things are important. Senior students have slightly lower averages than first-year students, but the difference is minimal and does not indicate a significant difference between the groups.

MANOVA Results

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine whether year of study affected both the Internal Index and the External Index. The MANOVA results showed that the year of research did not have a statistically significant influence, with Pillai's Trace = 0.010, $F(6, 472) = 0.387$, $p = 0.887$, and $\eta p^2 = 0.005$. This finding indicates that, when analyzing both indices collectively, there is no evidence of overall disparities among the four-year groups.

ANOVA Results

One-way ANOVAs were used to look into each index more closely. Table 4.9 summarizes the outcomes. The ANOVA result for Internal_Index was $F(3, 236) = 0.764$, $p =$

.515, and $\eta^2 = 0.010$, indicating no statistically significant difference between the four groups. Likewise, for External_Index, the ANOVA result was $F(3, 236) = 0.451$, $p = .717$, with $\eta^2 = .006$, once more indicating no significant differences. The impact sizes for both tests were negligible, indicating that the year of study accounts for minimal variance in the scores.

Table 3

ANOVA of Internal and External Factors by Year of Study

Dependent Variable	F(3, 236)	Sig. (p)	η²
Internal_Index	0.764	0.515	0.01
External_Index	0.451	0.717	0.006

It is also noteworthy to note that Welch's tests, which are strong against violations of the assumption of homogeneity of variances, supported these results (Internal_Index: Welch $F(3, 130.88) = 0.714$, $p = .545$; External_Index: Welch $F(3, 130.99) = 0.449$, $p = .718$). The agreement between the usual ANOVA and Welch's test reinforces the conclusion that the year of study does not significantly affect students' perceptions.

In summary, both descriptive and inferential analyses demonstrated that there are no statistically significant differences in students' assessments of internal and external factors influencing their English learning needs across the four years of study. There is a tiny tendency for first-year students to report slightly higher mean scores than their senior peers, but the differences are small and not important. These findings demonstrate that students across all academic years share remarkably similar perspectives on the significance of both internal and external factors, highlighting the overall uniformity of the learning environment and program delivery.

Correlation Between Internal and External Factors

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between internal and external factors:

Table 4

Pearson Correlation between Internal_Index and External_Index

Variables	1	2
1. Internal_Index	1	
2. External_Index	.710**	1

Note. **p** < .01 (2-tailed). N = 240

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between most variables. For instance, students' interest in learning English was strongly correlated with their confidence in communication ($r = .728$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the English curriculum was positively correlated with teaching methods ($r = .641$, $p < .01$) and facilities ($r = .731$, $p < .01$). This suggests that students who perceived stronger external support (e.g., curriculum quality, teaching methods, resources, peer and family support) also tended to report stronger internal dispositions (e.g., motivation, confidence, awareness, and interest). The strength of the correlation indicates that internal and external factors are closely interconnected rather than independent influences.

Discussion

This study examined undergraduate students' perceptions of internal and external factors influencing English-learning demands within the Vietnamese university system. The results provide us with a great deal of useful information about needs-based language teaching.

First, the high scores on both internal and external aspects indicate that students perceive the demands of learning English as complex. Students did not think their demands were solely due to their own efforts or to the conditions at their university. Instead, they understood that both learner-related and contextual factors were important. This aligns with modern views of needs analysis, which see language-learning demands as changing and influenced by social factors (Long, 2005; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Second, the high scores for internal characteristics such as motivation, confidence, and perceived competence align with key theories in second language learning, including motivational theory (Dörnyei, 2009) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). Students who believe that English is important to their future goals and that they can improve are more likely to participate actively and clearly state their learning needs. This indicates that psychological preparation should be regarded as a primary component of needs analysis rather than a subordinate variable.

Third, the high scores on the curriculum and other external variables indicate that students generally rate the university's support highly. This aligns with curriculum design models that stress the need for goals, content, and pedagogy to work together (Nation & Macalister, 2010). At the same time, the lower ranking for extracurricular activities suggests a gap between what students learn in class and how they use language in real life. In EFL environments, insufficient contact outside the classroom may hinder communicative development, underscoring the importance of learner autonomy and extracurricular involvement (Benson, 2011).

Fourth, the lack of substantial changes among year levels indicates that perceptions of English learning needs remain generally steady during university studies. This could mean that the program is delivered the same way at all levels of the university, or that students develop core attitudes about learning English early and maintain them over time. In either scenario, the data show how important it is to meet students' needs systematically from the start of college.

The robust positive association between internal and external factors constitutes a significant contribution of the study. This outcome corroborates sociocultural theories that highlight the interplay between learner agency and environmental support (Vygotsky, 1978). A helpful curriculum and learning environment may boost motivation and confidence. On the other hand, motivated students may use institutional resources more effectively. These results show that English instruction needs to be more integrated and better aligned with students' needs.

Conclusion

This research investigated students' perceptions of the internal and external factors influencing English learning demands at a university in Vietnam. The results showed that students placed great importance on both internal factors (such as interest, motivation, confidence, and perceived proficiency) and external factors (such as the curriculum, teaching methods, learning resources, and support systems). This confirms that personal and contextual factors both affect how students learn English.

There were no statistically significant differences across year levels, indicating that students' perceptions remained largely unchanged throughout their time at university.

Moreover, the robust positive association between internal and external factors underscores the intimate interaction between learner dispositions and institutional support.

In general, the study helps us better understand the needs of Vietnamese higher education students learning English and offers ideas for building and teaching a needs-based curriculum. While institutional aspects were seen as good, more could be done to expand opportunities for real-life and extracurricular communication.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Bong, M., & Skaalvik, E. M. (2003). Academic self-concept and self-efficacy: How different are they really? *Educational Psychology Review, 15*(1), 1–40.

Chapelle, C. A. (2001). *Computer applications in second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Multilingual Matters.

Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research, 77*(1), 81–112.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms. *Language Teaching, 40*(3), 243–249.

Long, M. H. (Ed.). (2005). *Second language needs analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative syllabus design*. Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. Routledge.

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.