

Vietnamese Learners' EFL Acquisition: From Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how English as a foreign language is acquired to help Vietnamese teachers and learners of English understand how competence in English develops from the use of language for authentic communicative purposes to the ability to demonstrate academic language in all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vietnamese learners step up the levels of English by first learning how to perform the language for conversation, and then using English for their academic work. The focus of the study is given to a survey of an experimental group and a control group of high intermediate level students of English at a university in Vietnam. The experimental group received the treatment, which is the familiarization of students to more standardized tasks. The settings for language acquisition range from context-embedded situations to context-reduced ones, and the tasks of language performance move from cognitively undemanding activities to cognitively demanding ones along with the timelines for learning social and academic language. The tasks were collected and analyzed to see whether proficient students, though would require contextual support, would need more cognitively demanding tasks. The results of the study may show that the students in the experimental group perform significantly differently from the ones in the control group, and work out conditions in which EFL Vietnamese learners can acquire basic communication skills and academic language proficiency in terms of receptive and productive skills. Suggestions for the more effective methodology towards EFL Vietnamese learners' high performance are provided.

Keywords: interpersonal communication skills, cognitive academic language proficiency, context-embedded, context-reduced, cognitively undemanding, cognitively demanding, experiential, textual, meta-functions

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Introduction

English as a foreign language has become popular in many fields in the world. A good command of English has become the key to being successful in finding good careers. It requires a great deal of effort in learning and an effective teaching method to students to contribute to making progress upon their completion of English language courses. An investigation into the effective use of language for authentic communicative purposes and the ability to demonstrate advanced academic language in all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, suggests that language instructors should take into consideration a suitable methodology to benefit EFL learners. In addition, the new approach will help language instructors to judge the success of their teaching and will help English language learners identify areas to improve their language proficiency.

In this article, the author tried to investigate Vietnamese (L1) students' English (L2) performance at a university in Vietnam. There has been significant research on how L1 students have acquired the second language from communicative skills to language proficiency during their course of language learning. However, there is still the need to see how L1 students develop their L2 performance from the use of language for authentic communicative purposes into the ability to demonstrate academic language, and how teachers help students develop linguistic competence from communicative competence. The purpose of this study was to investigate how English as a foreign language was acquired to help Vietnamese teachers and learners of English understand this development through the explanation of the theory of second language acquisition (SLA) by interpreting the linguistic concepts of Halliday (1985), Martin (1992) and Egging (1994), the bilingual perspective (Cummins, 2000) and the perspective of comparative and contrastive linguistics (Brown & Yule, 1996 & Cao, 2004). The investigation is merited for two reasons: 1) the students' language performance should show a relationship between the post test and the treatment of the experimental group; 2) if such a relationship exists at the university, it may be possible to work out the method that best benefits L1 students in SLA. This study will lead to the suggestion of an all-round method, which is more suitable for EFL Vietnamese learners to go from basic interpersonal communicative skills to cognitive academic language proficiency.

Literature Review

EFL Vietnamese learners step up the levels of English by first learning how to perform the language for conversations, and then using English for their academic work. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) involves the context-embedded, everyday language that occurs between conversational partners. This takes the average second-language learner at least two years to acquire. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or the context-reduced language of academics, takes five to seven years under good conditions to develop to a proficiency level (Cummins, 2000). The literature reviews in this study will discuss the systemic theory, the bilingual perspective, and the perspective of comparative and contrastive linguistics and indicate the features of communicative competence and linguistic competence.

Systemic functional theory

Eggins (1994), following the studies by Halliday (1985) and Martin (1992), worked out a theoretical linguistic model that can help to clarify the conceptualization of systemic functional linguistic theory, in which she proposed three meta-functions in the analysis of discourse semantics. The three meta-functions are comprised of three characteristics: (1) the first one is “interpersonal”, such as expressing a person’s attitude toward negotiation; (2) the second one is “experiential”, such as the process of nominalization (turning verbs into nouns) from the spoken language to the written version; and (3) the third one is “textual”, such as how a person’s utterances link together and are related to what he or she has just said and to the context around him or her. Eggins explained the concepts by giving a typical example. In this, the sentence expressing the speaker’s intention to drink some bottles of wines can be said as follows:

“I suggest we attack the reds”

in which

- 1) The meaning is interpersonal when it expresses our attitude and takes up the role which means a friendly suggestion, open to negotiation;
- 2) The meaning is experiential when it focuses on the actions that we, as human agents, should carry out (attack), and the entities (the reds) our actions will have an effect on;
- 3) The meaning is textual when it is about how what we are saying links together and is related to what we have just said and to the context around us.

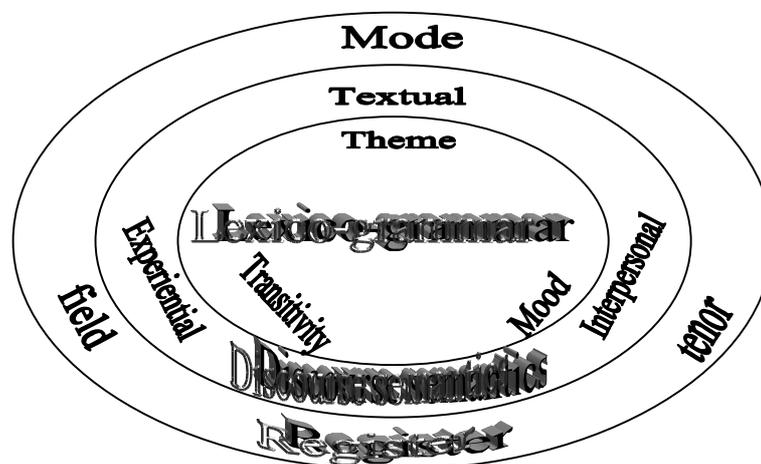


Figure 1 The Systemic Functional Theory (Eggins, 1994)

Interpersonal versus Experiential meta-functions

In Figure 1, in terms of discourse semantics, experiential meanings focus on the action that human agents should carry out while interpersonal meanings focus on the role relationships with other people and their attitudes to each other. Among the three meta-functions above, the experiential meanings usually go through the process of nominalization as we move from the spoken language (human actors and action

process) to the written version. Therefore, experiential meanings (nominalization) appear objective in academic contexts. Accordingly, BISC is involved with interpersonal meanings while CALP is related to the experiential meanings.

Textual meta-function (cohesion)

The textual meanings are clarified with the use of discourse markers, which are the signals or cues that point to the important ideas and features of a text, and play a very important role in making the text coherent. They link ideas together. According to Martin (1992:168), the semantic system conjunctions can be realized through paratactic and hypotactic relationships within the clause complex and through cohesive conjunctions. Texts, which are produced in this mode and are often in the written form, realize conjunctions as semantic relations between processes involving nominalization. Therefore, cohesive devices are said to be used in academic contexts when CALP is taken into account.

The bilingual perspective

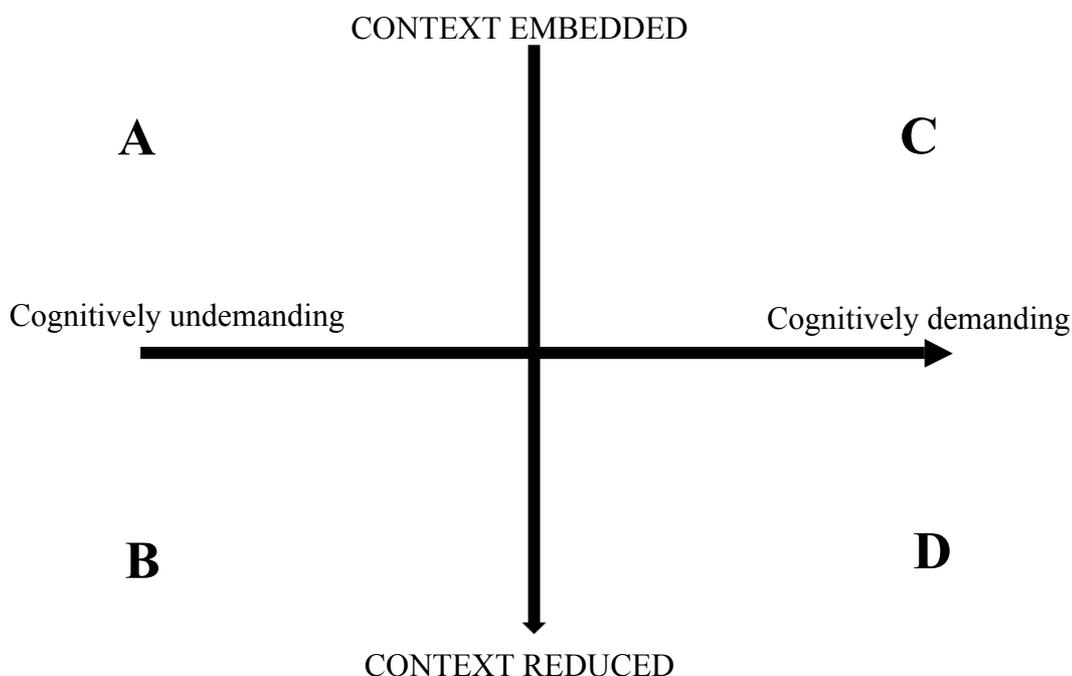


Figure 2 Model for assessing task difficulty (Cummins, 2000)

As Cummins (2000) states: “Conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible”, a learner who is good at his or her own language could possibly know how to learn to use another language more easily. In Cummins’ concept, this is called the “Common Underlying Proficiency”, which works as the background to perform L1 and L2. According to Cummins’ model in Figure 2, tasks range from cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding; and from context-embedded to context-reduced. In a context-embedded task, whether it is cognitively undemanding (A) or cognitively demanding (C) relies on the sources of information that the learner can access. For example, the learner can explain the illustrations of what is being talked about or raise relevant questions. In a context-reduced task, whether it is cognitively undemanding (B) or cognitively demanding

(D), the learner is required to listen to a long conversation or a lecture or read academic texts, and the sources of information that the learner can access are limited. In a cognitively demanding and context- reduced task (D), EFL learners may find it most difficult at the initial stage of learning English. However, EFL learners should develop the ability to accomplish such tasks, which is essential for academic success.

The perspective of comparative and contrastive linguistics

A learner is said to acquire a foreign language when he or she not only has correct pronunciation of, correct use of words, correct use of grammatical structure, correct and appropriate use of functions and notions in specific communicative situations. Besides, he or she knows how to express himself or herself both receptive and productive skills, that is, effectively in listening, reading, speaking and writing in communicative tasks. Moreover, that person also shows the ability to use the target language to survive in the target language community such as to use the language to find a job and to maintain employment. In addition, that person can compare and contrast two languages and two cultures in terms of linguistic characteristics that English and Vietnamese have and do not have in common.

English	Vietnamese
<p>▶ English is subject-prominent and topic-prominent (Brown & Yule, 1996) (Topic) (Comment) Eg. This book / I have read</p>	<p>▶ Vietnamese is topic-prominent (Cao, 2004) (Topic) (Comment) Eg. Cuốn sách này/tôi đã đọc (This book I have read)</p>

Table 1 The comparison between English and Vietnamese

Table 1 tells us that English is subject-prominent (Cao, 2004). Furthermore, English is also subject-prominent and topic-prominent (Brown & Yule, 1996) while Vietnamese tends to be topic-prominent (Cao, 2004).

Communicative competence and linguistic competence

There are some aspects that can be considered criteria for a learner to focus on and acquire as the background to assess his or her language acquisition as can be seen in the following table.

1	pronunciation	vocabulary	grammar
2	listening	speaking	reading
3	function	notion	theme/topic
4	grammatical competence	socio-linguistic competence	discoursal competence
5	task fulfillment & communicative activities	using language to survive in target community	strategic competence
6	ability to compare & contrast L2 & L1 ability to compare & contrast L2 culture & L1 culture		

Table 2 Aspects of second language acquisition

Communicative competence

A learner is said to possess the communicative competence when he or she not only has correct pronunciation, correct use of words, correct use of certain grammatical structures, but also has the correct and appropriate use of functions and notions in common topics and specific communicative situations. In other words, he or she should have the ability to understand and select appropriate language choices according to different socio-cultural contexts (e.g., greeting friends and greeting elderly persons), to select between a variety of possible options of linguistic forms and content to match the appropriate social cultural context and norms (e.g., making a request: *If you don't mind, I would like to open the window now.*), to select an appropriate interpretation of the language according to the existing context or unfolding reality (e.g., making an indirect command in a hot room which needs air-conditioning: *It feels hot in here.*). In this way, his or her ability to take into consideration any of the following communicative functions when he or she is engaged in:

- a) The status of the speakers
- b) The purpose of the interaction
- c) Norms or conventions

Linguistic competence

A learner is said to acquire linguistic competence of a foreign language, in addition to communicative performance of language skills, he or she should have the knowledge of the language structure and the ability to use this knowledge to manipulate its meaning system in all modes of communication such as to use the language to find a job and to maintain the employment in a foreign country. These linguistic features that need to be possessed are as follows.

- a) Phonology (phoneme, pitch, stress)
- b) Morphology (root word & affix)
- c) Syntax (the sentence patterns of language: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.)
- d) Semantics (the meaning of language: vocabulary, meanings of words; multiple meanings: synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, metaphor and similes)

Phonology: stress

English is a multi-syllabic and inflected	Vietnamese is a monosyllabic and uninflected
Eg. STUdents	Eg. Các sinh viên (Students)

Table 3 Phonology in English and Vietnamese: stress

Linguistic competence: pitch

English	Vietnamese
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ghost ▶ Mother ▶ Tomb ▶ Horse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ma ▶ Má ▶ Mã ▶ Mã

Table 4 Phonology in English and Vietnamese: pitch

Linguistic competence: intonation

English (intonation)	Vietnamese
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ You are working. ▶ You are working?(rising intonation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Anh sắp làm việc. ▶ Anh sắp làm việc chứ (hả)? <p>Vietnamese people use the particle: chứ / hả at the end of question.</p>

Table 5 Phonology in English and Vietnamese: intonation

Linguistic competence: Morphology: root word & affix

English	Vietnamese
▶ Happy	▶ Hạnh phúc
▶ Unhappy	▶ Không hạnh phúc
▶ Unhappiness	▶ Sự bất hạnh

Table 6 Morphology in English and Vietnamese: root word & affix

Linguistic competence: Syntax

English	Vietnamese
(adj) (n) A white car	(n) (adj) Một chiếc xe hơi màu trắng

Table 7 Syntax in English and Vietnamese

From the perspectives of the SLA issues, this study addresses the following research questions:

Research questions

1. How do EFL Vietnamese students develop their language performance from the use of language for authentic communicative purposes into the ability to demonstrate academic language?
2. How do teachers help EFL Vietnamese students develop their linguistic competence from communicative competence?

Method

A two-group design was used in this study. The focus of the study is given to a survey of an experimental group and a control group of high intermediate level students of English at a university in Vietnam. The experimental group received the treatment, which is the familiarization of students to more standardized academic tasks. The quasi-experiment, in which the students had to take the pretest and the posttest, was used.

Participants

The study was conducted from December, 2014 to April 2015. The participants belong to an experimental group (21 students) and a control group (19 students) of English, who had finished studying high intermediate intensive English courses and took the speaking tests which satisfied the requirements of the testing philosophy. All the participants had already learned the communicative skills. The participants took the tests at end of the course during the investigation.

Data collection and procedures

The experimental group received the treatment in a course of fifteen weeks (two hours per week) which is the familiarization of students to more standardized academic tasks. After that, all participants took the oral exams. Each participant performed 6 tasks in the allotted time of 6 minutes. Each participants' responses were scored by two language instructors with a reference to the four-point rating rubrics designed in a similar way to that of ETS (Educational Testing Service, 2005). The tasks were scored, collected and analyzed to see whether proficient students would require contextual support, and would need more cognitively demanding tasks. To prevent raters' bias based on the mode of responses, raters independently scored answer items for each student. As part of an overall strategy to summarize results on all items in terms of meeting the passing-failing requirement of the author's university, the ratings were converted to scaled score: 0-30. To ensure the objectivity of the survey, the two raters' converted scores were then compared. Where discrepancies occurred and the discrepancies were not significant, the raters reevaluated responses and reached consensus on a score.

The major data in this study included the scored speaking responses. All the test results dealt with are within the jurisdiction of the university. Therefore, consent was obtained from the university authorities. To ensure the confidentiality, candidates' names were removed prior to the data entry; the raters' names were not revealed; and the permission of the school authorities was acquired. Therefore, the test scores were affected by such factors as communicative language ability, test method facets, and personal attributes (Bachman, 1997). The scored speaking responses were classified according to the points earned after being marked against the language conventions in the designed rubrics. After the collected data were analyzed, a method was suggested.

In this design, the comparisons between the two groups received the p value that emphasized the probability of facts. All participants taking the speaking tests were measured at fifteen weeks after the intake. The experimental design ensures the internal validity. The p value would show the statistical significance for the tests and the test-takers. In this study, the scores earned by the test-takers were assessed through a two-sample t test.

Reliability

The author analyzed the participants' scored speaking tasks and compared the scores. Reliability was assessed when the raters made judgments on the language produced by the test-takers. The interrater reliability was estimated when the scores were produced by two raters and a correlation coefficient was calculated between them (Brown, 1995).

Results

The results are discussed in terms of the components of the scored speaking tasks to see if the participants' awareness of linguistic features and the test results were related. The speaking task results were divided into levels corresponding to the designed criteria. Potential difficulties were that the test results might get involved with subjective factors due to the unavoidable element of human intervention, so the

survey results might create variables. Before taking the tests, the students had to finish the English course of high intermediate level for fifteen weeks in which they were taught language conventions. The speaking tests were integrated and independent speaking items that were aligned within a single theme or content area, reflecting the manner in which students naturally acquired and used the language in the classroom or in the real world. Each item provided the information and elicited the linguistic interaction that was necessary for students to complete the subsequent item.

For the first research question, the experimental group got the raw test scores in the pretest responses ranging from 1 to 3. For posttest responses, the experimental group got the raw test scores ranging from 3 to 4. The statistics of the converted scores are displayed in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Converted test scores in pretest and posttest speaking responses for the experimental group

Test-takers	Converted pretest responses	Converted posttest responses
1	10	13
2	11	15
3	13	17
4	14	18
5	15	17
6	17	19
7	17	17
8	14	18
9	10	15
10	15	17
11	14	18
12	10	13
13	19	24
14	10	14
15	9	13
16	15	17
17	19	22
18	13	18
19	18	23
20	17	17
21	15	19

The control group got the raw test scores in the pretest responses ranging from 1 to 3. For posttest responses, the control group got the raw test scores ranging from 2 to 3. The statistics of the converted scores are displayed in Table 9 below.

Table 9

Converted test scores in pretest and posttest speaking responses for the control group

Test-takers	Converted pretest responses	Converted posttest responses
1	13	13
2	11	13
3	13	15
4	10	15
5	15	17
6	17	15
7	15	17
8	14	17
9	10	15
10	15	17
11	13	15
12	10	13
13	17	22
14	10	17
15	10	15
16	15	17
17	18	17
18	13	13
19	19	19

All the respondents gave responses to the questions on various topics in the tests, and all the questions were answered in the same format. The results of the two-sample t test in Table 10 below suggest that probability values have statistical significance with p value (0.04851). In other words, the p values can calculate the possibilities of the scores being the foundation for future implementation.

Table 10

The statistical significance

Group	Observations	Means	p value
Experimental	21	17.33	0.04851
Control	19	15.89	

The second research question is answered based on the survey of the tests performed by the test-takers to show how students' linguistic competence in speaking was acquired in terms of the percentage of respondents acquiring test criteria. For the experimental group 71.4% ($N=15$) of respondents were found to meet the criteria of the test (acquiring over 50% of the score in order to pass the tests). Similarly, for the control group, 47.4% ($N=9$) respondents were found to meet the criteria of the test (acquiring over 50% of the score in order to pass the tests). The statistics of the survey are clearly presented in Table 11 below.

Table 11

Percentage of respondents of both groups acquiring test criteria

No. of experimental group students	Percentage of experimental group respondents	Percentage of control group respondents	No. of control group students
15	71.4%	47.4%	9

From the comparisons in Table 10 and Table 11, the findings clearly indicate that the amount of exposure to a foreign language with the focus of the awareness of linguistic features integrated into the school syllabus has a positive effect on students' performance. Though respondents in the two groups gave different responses to the questions on various topics at different testing times, the statistics remain significant.

The results of the study may show that the students in the experimental group perform significantly differently from the ones in the control group, and work out conditions in which EFL Vietnamese learners can acquire a good command of English when they start to learn the language from basic communication skills to academic language proficiency in terms of receptive and productive skills.

Discussion

This study investigated how EFL Vietnamese learners develop their language performance from the authentic communication into the academic proficiency in L2 acquisition. It examined whether the percentage of the test-takers could meet the necessary requirements on high intermediate levels of language proficiency. The statistical findings indicate that there is no significant difference and that there is the statistical significance for the speaking tasks with the p value ($p = 0.048536131$) for the posttests taken by the experiment group and the control group. One possible explanation is that the better results came from the tests that were taken by students who had been given clear and systematic instructions of linguistic knowledge in advance of how to take the tests, and the students had spent an adequate amount of time familiarizing themselves with academic language. The competence and experience of the students in specific assignments may have contributed to their outcomes.

For the second research question of how teachers help EFL Vietnamese learners develop their linguistic competence from communicative competence, the effective methodology towards EFL Vietnamese learners' high performance is suggested as follows.

1. More linguistic practices should be assigned in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax.
2. A proper method of assessment should be designed such as criteria for academic writing and speaking.

To develop EFL Vietnamese learners' communicative competence, teachers of language must provide contextual situations (multiple and systematic language use

opportunities) teach appropriate language usage (form and content, styles of speech) and pronunciation (intonations, hesitations, pauses, loudness, pitch, stress and rate)

a) Strategies for Communicative Competency Development

- ▶ Questions & anticipatory answers
- ▶ Monitoring
- ▶ Making requests
- ▶ Role play
- ▶ Choral reading
- ▶ Chanting

b) Practices for Communicative Competency Development

- ▶ Repetition drills
- ▶ Memorization
- ▶ Formulaic expressions
- ▶ Verbal attention getters
- ▶ Answering in unison
- ▶ Talking to self
- ▶ Elaboration

Conclusion

This article, which focuses on the Vietnamese learners' EFL acquisition of formal English features from basic communicative skills, has taken a step in the direction of defining relationships between the interpersonal, experiential and textual meta-functions through the course survey of two student groups – the experimental group ($N=21$) and the control group ($N=19$) – to serve as the basis for a suitable teaching methodology. It is possible in a certain way that other school environments with a different complex of levels and learning materials may produce entirely different results.

The findings show that although the study investigates the experience of small groups of students in the single college setting for a speaking course of fifteen weeks, it may prove to be more effective when lecturers make students realize more of linguistic features.

Making EFL learners more familiar with academic English seems difficult and complicated for intensive English learners, but is more effective at improving learners' language proficiency. Further research should be replicated in other settings with different populations to see how well language competence develops.

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