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An evaluation of general English course from non-English major students' learning needs analysis

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Article info.	ABSTRACT
  Keywords 	*This paper is aimed to evaluate general English course (GEC) at the Southern Transport College (STC) from analyzing learning needs of non-English major students to improve the quality of the course, meet students' learning needs, and the national criteria of curriculum design. The non-English major students' learning needs are defined as encompassing students' reactions to GEC, language input, language skills, use of knowledge, teachers and teaching methods, testing and assessment, and learning outcome. Since the needs analysis and course evaluation were complex tasks with various possibilities of the needs, interviews of students and teachers were conducted to collect qualitative data purposing to strengthen the quantitative data from two questionnaires. The two questionnaires on students learning needs and their evaluation of GEC were adapted from the original version of Stufflebeam's (1983) CIPP evaluation model or Context, Input, Process, Product approach and Sarah Cook's (2005) ADDE model - Analysis, Design, Delivery, Evaluation model - in Likert scales. The questions for interviewing students and teachers were adopted from interview questions in Mahmoud's (2014) study. The data were analyzed to answer the two research questions: (1) What are non-English major students learning needs? (2) To what extent does general English course satisfy students' learning needs? One hundred forty-eight students and four teachers got involved in the study as participants. The findings revealed that students at STC were most interested in knowledge and language input provided from GEC. It also revealed that the students preferred extracurricular activities, watching videos or small group discussions in the language learning process. From the students' evaluation of GEC, it was seen that their learning needs were different from the actual course they received. The students fairly agreed with teachers and teaching methods, testing and assessment, but the actual course did not entirely satisfy students' learning needs. Implications for teachers and school administrators are provided.*

1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of education in Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject to Vietnamese students from primary schools to universities. Non-English major students (EFL) would like to learn English because they had more functional or external needs, such as the need to pass examinations, or for possibly, career opportunities. Therefore, EFL students' learning needs analysis is an essential step in foreign language curriculum design and course evaluation for EFL students in non-native English speaking countries. This study is conducted as an EFL students' learning needs analysis in order to evaluate general English Course (GEC) at elementary level (A2) at a college in the Mekong Delta, with an expectation of finding out the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum to ensure the course makers to decide whether the curriculum should be revised, compared, continued or completed (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1988).

It is believed that GEC provides foundational English knowledge for academic study or social communication to EFL students. However, EFL students prefer studying reading and writing to listening and speaking skills, therefore they often face difficulties in practicing listening and speaking in real communications. In addition, students cannot use language contents in GEC for their academic study after finishing GEC. Moreover, no evaluation research of GEC conducted in the Mekong Delta was found. Understanding this gap in the literature of English course evaluation, this study aims to: (1) gain insight into EFL students' learning needs in taking GEC; (2) identify whether their actual English course satisfies their learning needs or not; (3) improve the quality of GEC to meet EFL students' leaning needs.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term "evaluation" in language education has been defined in a variety of ways. Many researchers provided definitions of evaluation in relation to a process and a product. For example, Brown (1989) defined it as "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within a context of particular institutions involved" (p.223). In contrast, Lynch (1996) defined evaluation as "the systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgments or decisions" (p.2). This definition was too broad since it made no direct reference to evaluation as both a process and a product. In recent years, however, Jacobs (2000)

has maintained that EFL program evaluation is a multidimensional process in which the political, ideological, social and cultural aspects of program components need to be critically investigated in order to judge their relevance to learners' needs in a particular context.

According to Middlewood and Burton (2001), evaluation in education is realized to define, clarify and set criteria, and based on the criteria to find out objective value, quality, benefit, performance and importance of the evaluation. This emphasizes the importance of program evaluation including language policy, materials, curriculum, administrators, students, teachers, methods and external consultants, in order to determine the merit or the achievement of a particular program (Lynch, 2003).

Several studies have shown that it is necessary to understand and be aware of learners' needs to correspond to course design or specific contexts (e.g., Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Brindley, 1989; Long, 2005; Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2017). With Widdowson (1981), needs refers to the present or future requirement of learners, and what they expect to learn after they finish the language course. Likely, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) classified learners' needs into two types such as target needs (necessities, wants, and lacks), and learning needs. Brindley (1989) stated that needs may be equally to learners' "wants" or "desires" which refers to what the students themselves would like to learn in addition to their program requirements. Berwick (1989) defined "needs" as "the gap between the current situation and the anticipated future state" (p.52). According to Long (2005), the determination of learner needs in foreign language teaching is a prerequisite that becomes increasingly more important for efficient course design. Meanwhile, a study of Lüdtke and Schwienhorst (2010) confirmed that a needs analysis is seen as a beneficial tool for a language centre that thinks strategically and seeks long-term development.

One very useful approach to educational evaluation is known as the Context, Input, Process, Product approach (CIPP), developed by Stufflebeam (1983). Harrison (1993) emphasized that the CIPP model enables evaluators to intervene the evaluation process when needed, both before and during the program and it also gives the possibility of evaluation for only one component. The Stufflebeam's CIPP model is an attempt to make evaluation directly relevant to the needs of decision-makers during the phases and activities of a programme. It is recommended as a framework to

systematically guide the conception, design, implementation, and assessment of service-learning projects, and provide feedback and judgment of the project's effectiveness for continuous improvement.

In this research, Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation model has been adapted. The reason why this model has been chosen is that it is feasible in foreign languages curricula and involves various evaluation types in the current research including students' reactions, language input, skills, knowledge, teachers and teaching methods, testing and assessment, and students' learning outcome. The findings from this study will help the teachers and administrators revise the curriculum of GEC in order to improve the quality of GEC and meet the legitimate learning needs of students.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is to answer the two following questions:

1.What are non-English major students learning needs?

2.To what extent does general English course satisfy students' learning needs?

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

Participants were freshmen who were attending two-year courses at the Southern Transport College (STC) in the school year of 2016-2017. One hundred and forty-five participants who were selected from a total of 221 students in 4 classes responded to the questionnaires. Seven students were chosen from 148 participants to join in the interviews. Four of them were selected from the volunteers and the others were appointed randomly by the researcher. Most of the participants were male students whose majors were in Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Waterway Accounting. Informants' background knowledge was overcoming examinations of English for general purposes from lower and upper secondary schools, and their English learning experiences were around three to seven years. The participants' ages were from 18 to 30 years old. The type of education was fulltime students who attended class in daytime, and the GEC was taught as compulsory subject. Besides, the researcher interviewed four EFL teachers who have had experiences of general English teaching at STC for 6-10 years. Teachers' responses were considered as evidence to confirm the information of students' evaluation and seek their own view of points about GEC as well.

4.2 Instruments

4.2.1 Questionnaires

The two survey questionnaires were used to collect the quantitative data. They were adapted from the original version of Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation model (1983) and Sarah Cook's the ADDE model (2005), and followed the five-point Likert-scale from a stronger endorsement to a weaker endorsement of needs and satisfactory: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neutral, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree. Each survey questionnaire has 57 items in order to measure the seven clusters: (1) students' reactions, (2) language input, (3) language skills, (4) use of knowledge, (5) teachers and teaching methods, (6) testing and assessment, (7) learning outcome. The clusters and items in the questionnaires are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Clusters and items in the questionnaires

Clusters	Questionnaire items	Total number
1. Students' reactions	1 - 6	6
2. Language input	7 - 16	10
3. Language skills	17 - 28	12
4. Use of knowledge	29 - 35	7
5. Teachers and teaching methods	36 - 47	12
6. Testing and assessment	48 - 52	5
7. Learning outcome	53 - 57	5
	Total:	57

Because the participants were students with low level of English competence (approximated A1 to A2), the questionnaires were designed in bilingual versions to avoid misunderstanding with a desire to obtain the most reliable data. The questionnaire on students' learning needs was piloted with 36 students who majored in Civil Engineering at The Western Construction College in Can Tho. With the questionnaire on students' evaluation of GEC, 25 senior students majored in Mechanical Engineering at STC were asked for their responses. The reliability coefficients of the two questionnaires were $\alpha = .787$ and $\alpha = .902$ respectively. These figures have suggested that the questionnaires were acceptable to be used for conducting research with a larger number of participants.

4.2.2 Interviews

After collecting and analyzing the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were made to collect qualitative data in order to demonstrate the information from the questionnaires was reliable and to gather further information to ensure the validity of this study. Interview questions for EFL students were designed into bilingual version with

two formats: (1) multiple choices in which respondents could select multiple items about which ones satisfied their learning needs; (2) free discussions of the items which did not satisfy their learning needs, and they were asked to give suggestions to develop the GEC in order to meet their learning needs. Interview questions for EFL teachers were designed in English version. EFL teachers' evaluation of GEC will help to strengthen the reliability and validity of the data from students' evaluation.

4.3 Data analysis

4.3.1 Questionnaires

The data collected from the survey were analyzed by the software SPSS version 18.0. The raw data were statistically analyzed by the following tests: *Scale Test, Descriptive Statistics Test, One Samples T-Test, Pair Samples T-Test* to check the reliability of the questionnaires, find out the average level of participants' agreement with pre-questionnaire on need and post-questionnaire on evaluation, see the differences between the students' learning needs and their evaluation of the actual course, check the mean score of each cluster in order to find out which one was evaluated higher.

4.3.2 Interviews

The interviews were transcribed for analysis. To analyze the interview data, an interview protocol was employed with the following steps of analysis: (1) develop a framework of themes for investigating within an interview protocol; (2) analyze the transcribed data and code the information relating to themes investigated; (3) organize the theme data coded into the interview protocol; (4) search for the similarities and differences among students' learning needs and the actual general English course which they took; (5) interpret the data from the interview protocol; and (6) report the results.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSSIONS

5.1 Results from quantitative data

5.1.1 Students' reactions to General English course

In general, the students' reactions to the actual GEC were positive. The percentages of students' learning needs and their satisfaction of GEC were over 80%. Forty-one percent of students agreed with QN.I6, it means 59% of them confirmed that they learned GEC not just because it was a compulsory subject, they learned GEC because they liked studying English and they were "looking forward to studying". The result shows that participants' satisfaction of the actual English course was above average but lower than their needs.
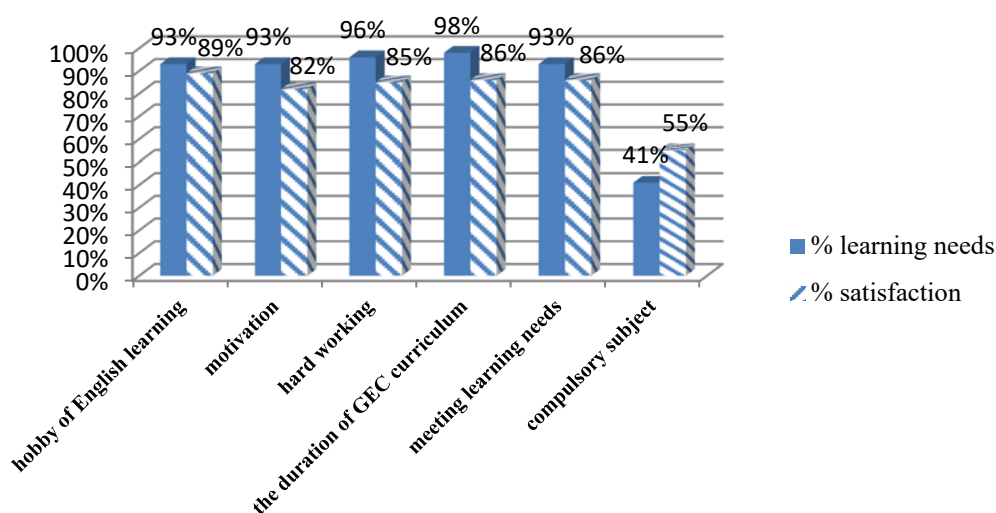

Fig. 1: Students' reactions to General English course

(Responses to pairs of items (1-1, 2-2, 3-4, 4-5, 5-3, 6-6) in QN and QE)

5.1.2 Language input

The degree of the participants' satisfaction of the language input in Figure 2 was at very high values in some aspects such as materials, learning topics, daily life, and vocabulary. However, some items like updated information, short reading texts, listening speed, interesting practical exercises, and pronunciation were not highly evaluated. The reasons for these problems might be found out from the information of qualitative data. The results suggest

that educators, program designers and teachers should make plans to improve the quality of these

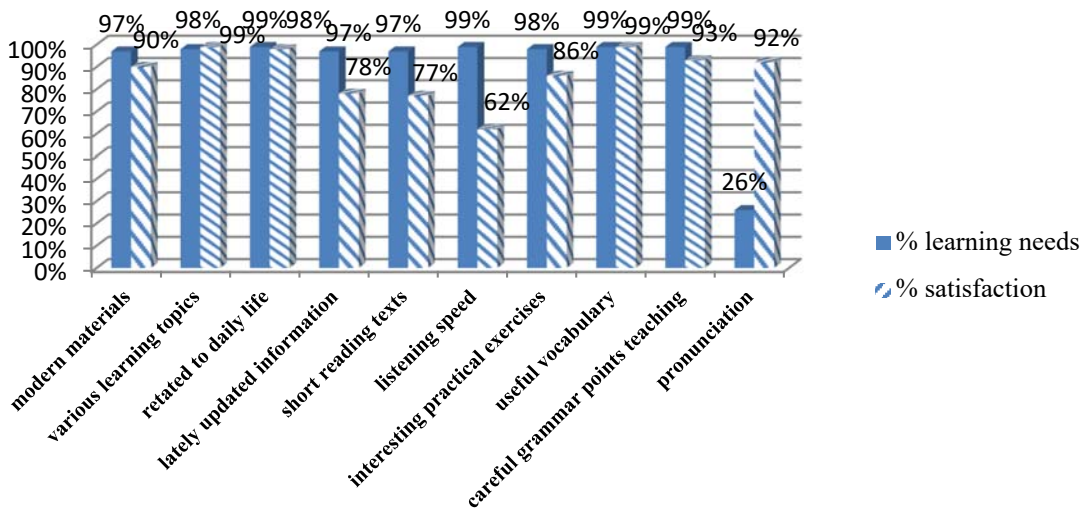aspects in order to meet students' learning needs and gain the highest result in the teaching process.

Fig. 2: Language input

(Responses to pairs of items (7-7, 8-8, 9-9, 10-10, 11-11, 12-12, 13-13, 14-14, 15-15, 16-16) in QN and QE)

5.1.3   Language skills

There were some differences between students' learning needs and students' satisfaction regarding language skills. Most of the items in language skills cluster of students' learning needs scored over 80% demonstrating that there is a desire to develop all language skills through GEC. However, there are

only 55% of participants agreed that they have been developed all four skills. To be more specific, the degree of participants' satisfaction of language skills was different from one another (listening: 64%, reading: 50%, speaking: 52%, writing: 69%). The students reflected that their language skills were not improved as their desire at the beginning of the course.
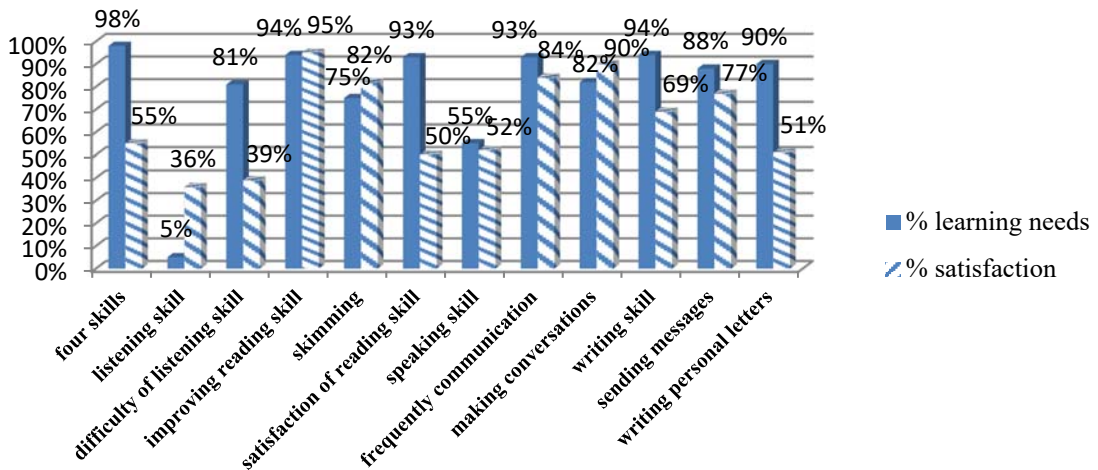

Fig. 3: Language skills

(Responses to pairs of items (17-17, 18-18, 19-19, 20-20, 21-21, 22-22, 23-23, 24-24, 25-25, 26-26, 27-27, 28-28) in QN and QE)

5.1.4   Use of knowledge

Figure 4 showed a significant difference between students' learning needs and students' evaluation of

GEC. Participants' satisfaction of knowledge provided from GEC was high in some aspects: foundation knowledge, basic vocabulary, useful grammar points, helpful to future job; however, the degree of

their satisfaction was lower than average level in daily communication because they could not answer

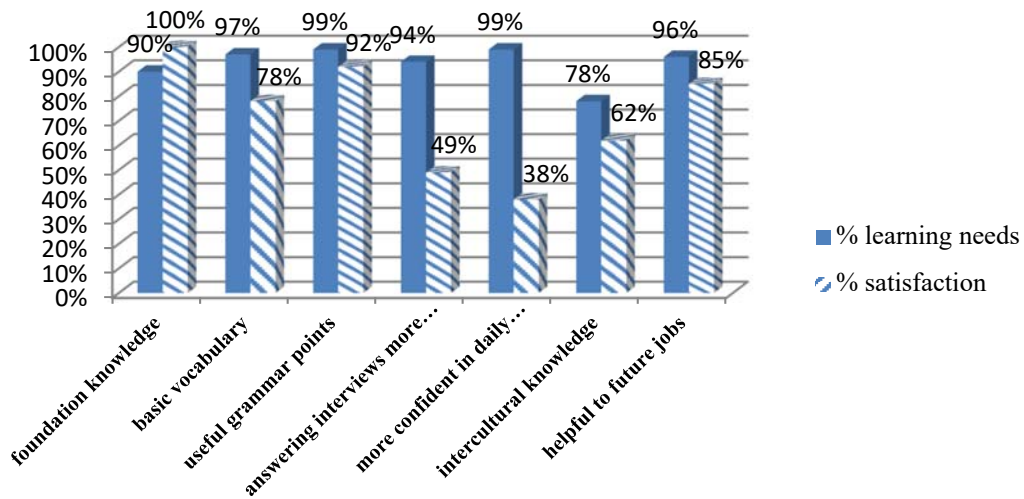the interviews as confidently and fluently as they had expected.

Fig. 4: Use of knowledge

(Responses to pairs of items (29-29, 30-30, 31-31, 32-32, 33-33, 34-34, 35-35) in QN and QE)

5.1.5 Teachers and teaching methods

In Figure 5, it can be seen that the participants highly evaluated most of the items about teachers and teaching methods. However, the items 36 and 41 had negative meaning, they were limitations of the actual GEC because of no native English speakers in class and no extracurricular activities during the course. Comparing students' learning needs and their evaluation, it can be inferred that what they

have been supported was corresponding to their learning needs. Teachers have been successful with their teaching methods, they have combined four skills (listening-reading-speaking-writing) in a period to maximize the benefits and reduce the limitations of each skill. The results of students' and teachers' interviews will be reported in the following part to supply more information about teaching methods.
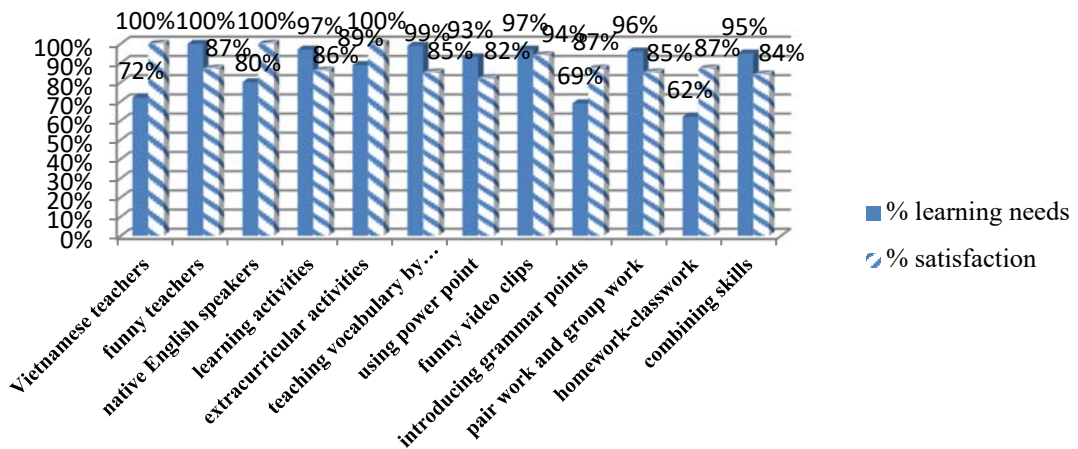

Fig. 5: Teachers and teaching methods

(Responses to pairs of items (36-37, 37-40, 38-36, 39-39, 40-41, 41-38, 42-42, 43-43, 44-44, 45-45, 46-46, 47-47) in QN and QE)

5.1.6 Testing and assessment

In Figure 6, it can be seen that the participants' knowledge of testing and assessment was above the

average level. That means they have ability to determine the goals of formative and summative assessments. They highly evaluated the actual English

course and evenly higher than their needs in some items. They highly evaluated the appropriateness

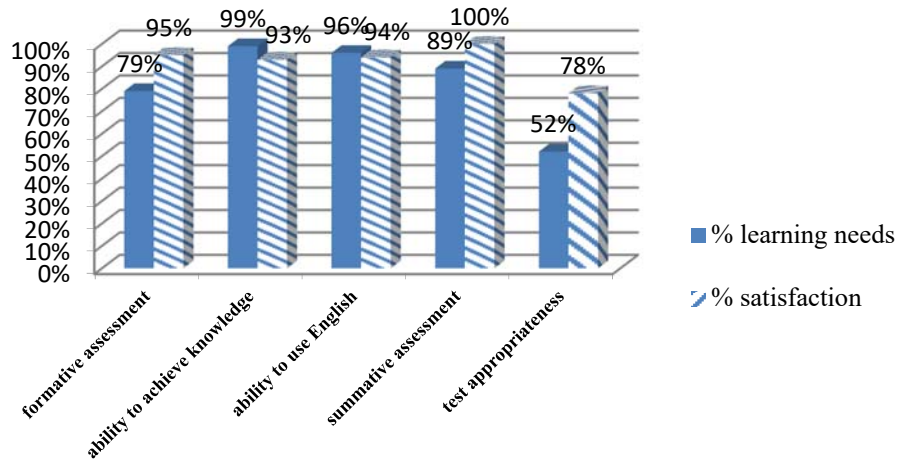and validity of the tests, and the results of testing will present and discuss in the next part.

Fig. 6: Testing and assessment

(Responses to pairs of items (48-48, 49-49, 50-50, 51-51, 52-52) in QN and QE)

5.1.7   Learning outcome

The results, in Figure 7, showed that students evaluated the actual GEC lower than their learning needs except item 55 (QE) "passing the final exam" (83%). Only sixty-two percent of them thought that their English competence was at level A2 and they were willing to take the national examination of

level A2. The problem was that they highly evaluated the appropriateness and validity of the tests, but why 17% of them failed in the final exam. More information about their learning styles, knowledge, and test taking will be reported and discussed in qualitative data.
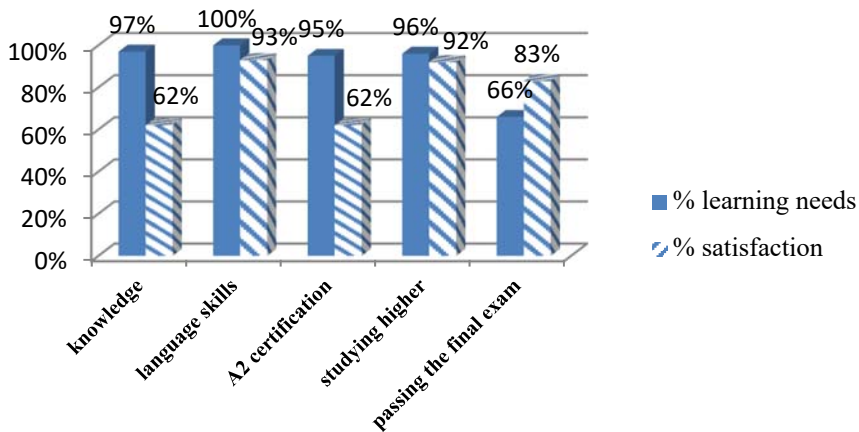

Fig. 7: Learning outcome

(Responses to pairs of items (53-54, 54-53, 55-56, 56-57, 57-55) in QN and QE)

5.2   Results from qualitative data

In addition to the results from quantitative data, the qualitative data supply more profound information from the interviews of seven EFL students and four EFL teachers. The students' interviews aim to find out the reasons why the students

were not satisfied with some aspects in the actual GEC and look forward to seeking more information about their expectations of their English course. The teachers' interviews purposed to confirm the information about students' evaluation and seek their own view of points about improving the quality of

GEC in order to meet students' learning needs but still keep the rules in the curriculum design as well.

5.2.1   Students' interviews

Question 1: What were you satisfied with GEC?

Most of the participants were satisfied with topics in the course book, contents of the topics, vocabulary, teachers and teaching methods, and testing and assessment. The items which they were not satisfied with were grammar points, pronunciation, and learning outcome.

Question 2: Why weren't you satisfied with the other(s)?

They were not satisfied with "grammar points" because there were not a lot of interesting practical exercises in class, and they did not have chance to work in groups; therefore, they could not discuss to find the answers exactly.

With "pronunciation", five participants responded that teachers did not concentrate on practicing pronunciation for them in class. Some pronunciation parts in the course book were not taught, so they usually made mistakes in pronouncing the words.

However, the causes were not only from the teachers but also from students themselves. In fact, many non-English major students did not like studying English, so they did not spend much time for doing homework or practice English outside classrooms. Five out of five students responded that they did not "*practice pronouncing English through video clips at home*".

In general, the effectiveness of developing pronunciation for students in GEC was not good because there were no cooperation and effort from both teachers and students in teaching and learning process.

Three participants were not satisfied with "learning outcome" because they "*didn't go to class regularly*". Therefore, they failed some skills in the GEC such as speaking and reading, and lacked test taking skills.

Last but not least, EFL teachers did not have an in-depth investment for improving all language skills and knowledge of students. Secondly, the participants loved studying grammar rather than pronunciation because they would like to have a lot of interesting practical exercises in groups but they did not spend time for practicing pronouncing English.

Question 3: What skill(s) have you been improved? What most?

Most students agreed that their listening, reading, speaking, writing skills and sub-skills (skimming, making conversations, sending messages) have been improved, but only one among seven students thought that their sub-skills were improved most. The skill that they thought was developed most was listening skill.

Question 4: What skill(s) has not been improved? Why not?

Five out of seven students responded that their soft-skills have not been improved because there was not much group work.

In comparison with the answers of the interview question 2, students also complained they did not have many chances to work in groups. As a result, their soft-skills in group working such as negotiation, discussion, meeting holding, presentation…, which were not improved much through GEC.

From the results of students' interviews, it can be concluded that teachers did not create an effective learning environment to enable students to develop their speaking, writing, and soft-skills.

Question 5: If there is a national examination of level A2 organized at school, will you register?

Five over seven students said: "No". There were two reasons for this problem. First, they were not confident enough to take the national exam, and they thought they needed more time to review their skills and knowledge. The second reason was that they just needed overcome the final exam. It is easy to explain for this reason because the interviewees fail in the final exam. Therefore, their immediate goal is passing the exam. However, the major goal of administrators at STC is to give students chances to gain the certificate of level A2 so that they will get certain benefits for their future job application.

5.2.2   Teachers' interviews

Question 1: Have you ever used any supplemental teaching materials? What skills for?

All of the teachers have used supplemental teaching materials in their teaching process. The similarity between them was they used supplemental teaching materials for listening skill. Also, it is the reason for the answer of the interview question 3 of students that their listening skill was improved most through GEC. The difference between the four teachers was that two of them supported for four skills while the first teacher did not find any supplemental teaching materials for writing skill, and the third teacher only concentrated on developing students' listening skill.

Question 2: What skills of students have been improved through GEC? What has not much?

The teachers shared the same view of point which students have been improved listening skills. Three over four teachers confirmed that their students have been improved both listening and speaking skills.

Students' writing skill has not been improved much because they might be lazy or did not like practicing writing at home.

Question 3: Which methods have you regularly used in your teaching?

Three over four teachers used Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), but the third teacher did not used it. Three teachers combined more than one method in their teaching; however, the second teacher worshiped CLT. Two over four teachers used Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Grammar Translation Method (GTM).

Sometimes, it is necessary to translate some difficult words into Vietnamese for EFL students. In this case, GTM should be used. However, in this case, the two teachers seem to abuse GTM for the purpose of saving time. Comparing to the interview question 2, the male teacher ever said that some reading texts were long and difficult for students to find the detail information. This is the reason why he translated or encouraged his students to translate anything in the reading texts.

Question 4: If you could change something in GEC, what would you like to change?

Most of them would like to have more time for students to practice speaking skill and do more reading exercises to develop reading skill, have more time for both inside and outside activities. They said they would spend 10 periods for extracurricular activities, 20 periods for developing students' vocabulary and reading skill through reading tasks in class.

Besides, they would also rebuild some reading tasks related to Vietnamese culture context and give students more intensive reading.

Question 5: What do you suggest for the administrators of our school in the future?

According to the statistics of the current research, there were 95% students who needed the certificate of level A2, but only 62% of them were willing to take the national examination at the end of GEC.

Comparing the results of question 4, the similarity of them was increasing the periods of GEC curriculum. For instance, the curriculum of GEC should be 120 periods instead of 90 periods in the current

course. The second suggestion was opening a revision course for students before encouraging them to register for the level A2 examination in order to help students will be more confident to take the exam, and improve their English skills and test taking skills.

To up, the teachers have various teaching methods with experiences from 6 to 10 years. Their strong points are attentive to their students, clearly know students' learning needs and lacks, suggest some practical solutions in order to improve the quality of GEC. Nevertheless, they also have some certain limitations such as still hesitating about innovation of methodology, no balanced investments between the development of knowledge and skills for students.

5.3 Summary

In general, the current study has offered the integrative presentation of the results and discussions of the quantitative and qualitative data. The findings review: (1) non- English major students highly desired from GEC; (2) students highly evaluated some aspects in GEC such as language input, teachers and teaching methods, testing and assessment, but it was just above average level in some aspects like language skills, the use of knowledge, and learning outcome; (3) the EFL students did not spend much time for self-study; (4) the EFL teachers lacked of indepth investments in developing students' skills or knowledge; (5) the administrators should increase the periods of GEC curriculum for extracurricular activities and more practical exercises in class; (6) both the teachers and the students thought that students needed studying more before registering the national exam of level A2.

6 CONCLUSIONS

First, students need providing knowledge in GEC because GEC is foundation knowledge that helps them in academic study. They need GEC provides basic vocabulary, useful grammar points enable them to study English for Specific Purposes in term II and they can become more confident in daily communication.

The second learning need of students in GEC is language input with modern materials, various learning topics related to daily life, lately updated information, short reading texts, listening tapes with slow speed, interesting practical exercises, useful vocabulary, careful grammar points teaching, and improving pronunciation. Their learning needs of the skill improvement are significant high, but they are unaware of the importance of sub-skills which help de-

velop main skills such as "read for main idea" (scanning), "read for details" (skimming), "make conversation" (sub-speaking skill), "send English messages" (sub-writing skill)… This is their limitation of learning styles that needs to be supported by teachers immediately.

The participants highly evaluated the ways of testing and assessment, and teachers and teaching methods. They were satisfied with studying English through short, funny video clips, foundation knowledge for academic study, summative assessment, helpfulness for their jobs, useful vocabulary, appropriateness to students' English competence, related subjects to daily life, formative assessment, passing the final exam, various learning topics, and careful grammar points teaching. However, students' learning needs were not satisfied by the actual GEC in many extents such as the speed of listening tapes, all four skills, pair work and group work, the duration of GEC curriculum, knowledge of level A2, practical exercises, amount of basic vocabulary, information in the course books, reading passages, grammar points, daily communication, making conversations, intercultural knowledge, and testing students' ability to use English.

7 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

From the research findings basing on both quantitative and qualitative data, some pedagogical implications would be inferred in order that they might be helpful in improving the quality of GEC in the current school in particular and in the context of EFL in general.

Students should understand that General English course plays an important role in the development of synthesis skills, and the achievement of English knowledge and intercultural knowledge to integrate into the international community. Besides, the students should be active, self-aware, and responsible for their learning results.

Teachers need to put a great deal of thoughts into identifying students' learning needs in particular context in order to satisfy their leaning needs. Additionally, the teachers should concentrate on training students' pronunciation, plan and design activities which should be various, meaningful, pragmatic, and compatible with students' learning needs. Finally, yet importantly, in the teaching process, teachers should combine various teaching methods in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the limitations of particular method, avoid having a special favor with a single method.

Administrators should increase the amount of periods in GEC curriculum and add extracurricular activities to GEC as compulsory periods. Next, the administrators should invite educational experts to introduce modern methodology and give useful advice for the teachers in their own contexts. Additionally, modern materials and teaching facilities should be provided more such as pictures, video tapes, exercise books, and references in order to make English teaching and learning process be more convenient and effective. Moreover, the administrators should make good condition for EFL teachers and students to organize seminars, thematic discussions or extracurricular activities in English only and invite some native English teachers to train pronunciation for the teachers and students as well. Finally, they should open revision English courses and encourage student to attend by reducing tuition fee aiming to strengthen their English skills and test taking skills to satisfy students learning needs.

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