

Repositioning ESL Instruction for Art and Design Students in Vietnam: A Curriculum and Assessment Framework

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Abstract ID: 1946

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and the boom of the digital creative economy, language is no longer merely an academic tool but has become a universal key that opens doors to international integration. For students in creative arts and applied fine arts, English proficiency paves the way to global design trends, specialized software, and high-quality technical documentation, while allowing them to work directly with international clients and partners. However, the reality of English language instruction at specialized universities in Vietnam, typically represented by the University of Arts and Design (UAD), reveals several limitations:

- Misperceived view of the subject: Students often perceive English as a compulsory "minor subject" required only for graduation, rather than a vital survival tool in their design careers.
- A lack of real-world connection: General English instruction remains overly academic, lacking a clear connection to technical terminology, aesthetic thinking, and the actual professional environment of a designer or artist.
- Outdated assessment methods: Testing focuses too heavily on grammar, paper-and-pencil sentence structures, as well as the practice of pure English language skills, rather than evaluating their ability to pitch ideas and defend projects in English.

2. Research questions

1. What specific mismatches exist between the current English language curriculum and the professional communication needs of art and design students at the University of Industrial Fine Arts?

2. How is this mismatch shaped by the institution's educational vision, mission, language policy, and assessment practices?

3. How can a reformed curriculum and assessment framework be constructed to successfully reposition ESL instruction for applied fine arts education?"

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. From English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the Creative Sectors

In Art and Design, language does not function in isolation; it is constantly paired with visual thinking. Students need English to explain design concepts, materials, layouts, colors, and artistic messages rather than simply relying on everyday social conversation topics. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is designed to meet the specific needs of learners with a particular professional or academic domain. Language learning in this field must prioritize a learner-centered approach to curriculum design (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Woodrow, 2017).

3.2. Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Authenticity

Project-Based Learning (PBL) allows students to acquire language naturally by executing real-world tasks (such as executing a design brief, developing a brand identity, or conceptualizing an exhibition). This method stimulates problem-solving skills and facilitates natural language acquisition due to the authenticity of the communicative context. (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Larmer et al., 2015)."

3.3. Communicative Competence Assessment and Creativity in Art

Unlike engineering or business disciplines that demand absolute precision in data and terminology, communication in the arts prioritizes expressiveness, persuasiveness, and creative thinking. Consequently, applying traditional standardized grading criteria (which heavily penalizes minor grammatical errors) unintentionally stifles the confidence and expressiveness of design students. (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010)."

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Collection Tools:

- 4.1.1. Curriculum Analysis: Reviewing current English course syllabi to evaluate time allocation, learning objectives, and textbook usage.
- 4.1.2. Classroom Observation: Conducting random class observations of non-English major classrooms to assess student-teacher interactions, teaching methods, and student attitudes.
- 4.1.3. Semi-structured (Informal) Interviews: Conducting in-depth interviews with 8 English lecturers and 20 students from various departments (Graphic Design, Fashion Design, Interior Design, etc.) to understand their actual communication needs and the barriers they encounter.

Part 1: Interview Questions for Students (20 Participants)

Target: To explore students' perceived language needs, learning motivations, and their experiences with the current curriculum and assessment.

1. Perceived Needs and Professional Context

- Can you briefly introduce your major (e.g., Graphic Design, Fashion Design, Interior Design) and what a typical career path looks like for you?
- In your opinion, how important is English to your future career as a designer or artist?
- What specific professional tasks do you think will require you to use English once you graduate (e.g., writing art-work descriptions, emailing international clients, pitching design concepts)?

2. Experience with the Current Curriculum

- How do you feel about the current English classes you are taking at the university?
- Do you feel the topics covered in your current English textbooks (e.g., global warming, computer benefits) are helpful or relevant to your specialized art/design studies? Why or why not?
- What are the biggest challenges you face when trying to express your creative or artistic ideas in English?

3. Assessment Practices and Motivation

- What is your opinion on the current English tests (midterm and final exams) used by the university?
- Do you feel that paper-and-pencil grammar tests or general social skill tests accurately reflect your true ability to use English in your specialized field?
- If you could change the way English is taught or tested at your university (such as presenting a design portfolio or working on a practical project in English), what would you prefer?

Part 2: Interview Questions for English Lecturers (8 Participants)

Target: To investigate pedagogical challenges, alignment with institutional policy, and readiness for curriculum/assessment reform.

1. Educational Vision and Institutional Alignment

- How do you perceive the primary goal of teaching English to non-English majors in an art and design university like UAD?
- To what extent do you think the current English curriculum aligns with the university's mission to produce globally integrated designers?
- What are the major institutional or policy barriers you encounter when trying to make English more relevant to art and design students?

2. Instructional Challenges and ESP Integration

- From your teaching experience, how would you describe the students' general motivation level toward learning English? What factors drive or hinder their motivation?
- What difficulties do you face when trying to teach English to art and design students (e.g., lack of specialized art materials, your own background in art/design terminology)?
- How do you feel about shifting the current general curriculum toward an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach that focuses more on visual vocabulary and design projects?

3. Alternative Assessment and Feasibility

- What is your evaluation of the current standardized testing system (multiple-choice/essay exams on general social topics)?
- How feasible do you think it is to implement a flexible assessment framework—such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) or English portfolio presentations—in your classes?
- What criteria do you think should be prioritized when grading an art student's English performance: grammatical accuracy or communicative effectiveness in explaining their creative ideas?

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. The Presence of a Traditional Four-Skill Model Lacking Practical Application

Through curriculum analysis and classroom observation, the study found that although the current curriculum is designed to integrate all four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing), the learning content remains heavily general.

- For example: Students have to practice writing essays discussing the benefits of computers or the negative impacts of global environmental pollution, while they do not know how to write a short artist statement (artwork description) for their own creations or compose a professional email to send their portfolio to international clients.

5.2. Analysis of the Four Dimensions

Dimension	Current Reality	Consequences
Educational Vision	Focuses on acquiring basic academic linguistic knowledge.	Students lack motivation and perceive English as disconnected from real life.
Institutional Mission	Aims to produce globally integrated designers, but lacks a clear supporting language strategy.	Graduates possess high technical design skills but face limited career opportunities at multinational companies.
Language Policy	Sets graduation requirements based on domestic, international, or internal standardized certificate exams in multiple-choice and essay formats.	Students learn to pass the course instead of practicing real-world communication.
Assessment Practices	Assessment based on tests (midterm and final) focusing on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing on general social topics.	Creates high psychological pressure, failing to promote the learning motivation to present creative ideas in English.

7. References

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4.2. Analytical Framework (Four Dimensions):

The collected data were analyzed based on four core dimensions of institutional language education:

- 1. educational vision;
- 2. institutional mission;
- 3. language policy;
- 4. assessment practices

6. Policy Implications

To address this mismatch, this study proposes a breakthrough curriculum and assessment framework, shifting from "General Language Teaching" to "Creative and Professional Applied Language Teaching". [Learning Objective: Learner-Centered]

6.1. Experiential Curriculum Design

- Minimalist ESP Integration: Reduce lessons with topics unrelated to art and design; instead, introduce visual vocabulary related to shapes, composition, colors, materials, and art movements.
- Project-Based Learning (PBL): Students work in teams to complete a hypothetical design project (e.g., packaging design for an exported Vietnamese coffee brand), conducting research, team discussions, and product presentations entirely in English.
- Portfolio Presentation: Instead of writing a final course essay, students will build a personal portfolio in English and present it to the class to defend their creative work.

6.2. Flexible Assessment Framework

The new assessment framework proposes shifting the primary focus from "English proficiency" to "Communicative Effectiveness & Professional Applicability".

- 6.2.1. Formative Assessment: Evaluation is based on student progress throughout the project weeks, teamwork cooperation, and speaking confidence.
- 6.2.2. Proposed Rubric Criteria:

Assessment Criteria	Proposed Weight	Detailed Description
Communicative Effectiveness	40%	Ability to convey design concepts clearly and persuasively, ensuring the audience understands the artistic vision.
Creativity & Professionalism	30%	Correct use of specialized art/design terminology; visually engaging slides and portfolio presentation.
Linguistic Accuracy	30%	Grammar and pronunciation at an acceptable level without causing severe misunderstanding (prioritizing active expression over flawless grammar).

6.3. Recommendations

Repositioning English instruction for art and design students at the University of Industrial Fine Arts is not only an urgent academic requirement but also a strategic step toward enhancing the international competitiveness of Vietnam's creative workforce.

- 6.3.1. For the University: Adopt greater flexibility in graduation language policies, recognizing alternative assessment formats such as English projects or portfolio presentations rather than rigidly applying language skill practice tests and international certificates
- 6.3.2. For English Lecturers: Actively acquire foundational knowledge in fine arts and design to better understand and accompany students, transforming the English classroom into an open space for artistic discourse
- 6.3.3. For Students: Shift mindset from "learning for exams" to "learning for career use," utilizing English as a powerful tool to project their unique creative identity to the world.

This study aims to contribute a practical, viable model for ongoing discussions on sustainable foreign language educational reform at specialized universities in Vietnam and comparable ESL environments globally. (Nguyen, 2017; Phan, 2017; Tran, 2020)."