



The Study of EFL Students' Participation into Evaluation and Use of the Course Book for the General English Course: A Case at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract

Utilizing a course book is one of the most popular teaching materials in every classroom. It plays an important role in both English teaching and learning and is considered one of the most efficient tools to examine the education quality. There have been many studies on the evaluation of course books in the world; however, up to present researchers find there has just few studies related to the evaluation of the course book LIFE for the General English course in the Vietnamese context. Thus, the study was carried out to find out how English as a foreign language (EFL) students would evaluate and use the course book LIFE (A2-B1) for General English courses. The participants of the study were 100 non-English major students of different classes at Bac Lieu University, Vietnam. The instruments used to collect data for the study were a 100-item questionnaire and the interviews with 7 random students participating in the questionnaire. The results revealed that most of the students had a positive evaluation on the course book; however, they had different strategies for their learning and use of the course book. The findings of the study suggested that EFL teachers should pay attention to their students' evaluation to gain some insights in order that they would have flexible teaching methods and use of the course book to help their students improve English knowledge and skills in the future.

Key words: *Course book, Course book evaluation, General English course, Bac Lieu University, Non – English majored students*

1. Introduction

In the English as a second language (ESL) classroom, course books play a significant role as a tool and tutor, and guidebook of the curriculum. They have a great effect not only on teacher's methodology, but also on the course's syllabus. Teachers throughout the world use course books to guide their instruction, so textbooks have great influence on how content is delivered (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997). According to Schmidt, McKnight, and Raizen (1997) textbooks are identified as playing an important role in making the leap from intentions and plans to classroom activities, making content available, organizing it, and setting out learning tasks in a form designed to be appealing to students.

O'Neil (1982) claims that there are four justifications for the use of course books.

Firstly, a large portion of a course book's material can be suitable for student's needs, even if not specifically designed for them. Secondly, course books allow for students to look ahead, or refresh themselves with past lessons. They remove the element of surprise in student's expectations. Thirdly, course books have the practical aspect of providing material which is well-presented in inexpensive form. Finally, and I believe most importantly, well-designed course books allow for improvisation and adaptation by the teacher, as well as empowering students to create spontaneous interaction in the class.

According to Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) both suggested that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond generalized assessments and it aids them to obtain helpful, precise, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material. Also Chambers (1997) who points out that the activity of evaluating a certain book is frequently very beneficial once it is taken by everyone involved in the



teaching and learning process. However, Vellegna (2004) also, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest: “The textbook is an almost universal element of English language teaching. ...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook, p.135.” All in all, course book evaluation plays a crucial role in English education and especially in a General English course since students lack awareness on the role of English studies. Hence, it is really essential for both teachers and school advisors to conduct research on students’ evaluation of course books to gain some insights on students’ learning needs and strategies, and course book use in order to improve the teaching quality. Consequently, it provides researchers with not only challenges when doing their research, but also benefits for lecturers and learners’ teaching and learning outcomes.

Contextual background

English, one of the most dominating languages of the world, has a great impact on every field of work. In Vietnam, it is a compulsory subject for students from primary schools to universities. Most non-English majored students learn English to pass a final exam, to have a good job in the future, or to satisfy their passion. In response to the demands of teachers and students’ proficiency in foreign language (English), in September 2008, the Vietnamese Prime Minister approved the project “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, 2008-2020”, also called the National Foreign Language (NFL, Vietnam) Project 2020. The project aims to comprehensively renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system, as well as developing new teaching and learning programs at different levels. The ultimate objective of this project is that by 2020 Vietnamese teachers and students are expected to be able to use a foreign language, especially English, confidently, in teaching and studying. This project was adapted from the CEFR (Common European Framework of References) and widely applied in Vietnamese school for curriculum evaluation. The CEFR distinguishes between four kinds of language activities: reception (listening and reading), production (spoken and written), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (translating and interpreting). A language learner can develop various degrees of competence with a set of six *Common Reference Levels* (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2).

In the researchers’ present teaching context, the university has changed some textbooks in order to fit students’ learning quality and level. Since the NFL project 2020 commences, the school advisors start to use this course book LIFE (A2-B1) to help students be able to achieve the target level B1. After two years of applying the course book, the researchers would like to conduct the report on students’ evaluation and use of the course book in order to provide teachers with some insights about students’ learning to provide a better methodology of teaching. In brief, since the important role of course books as well as the demand of teachers and students’ proficiency in English, it is essential to evaluate whether a course book is fixed with students’ learning needs and use in order to have good preparation for lecturers’ method and teaching in the futures.

Literature reviews

What course book is

According to Richards (2015), there is no difference between the definition of “course book” and “textbook” for teaching second languages. He contends that these two terms can be used interchangeably. All things considered, the researcher uses the terms “course book” and “textbook” for similar meaning in this study.

A course book, known as a textbook, is one of the most popular teaching materials in every classroom. It plays a vital role in both English teaching and learning. It is considered one of the most efficient tools to examine the education quality. However, it is really difficult to choose an appropriate course book which can be fixed with particular learners. In terms of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, a course book includes the essential elements of language, learners’ cultural background, as well as a level of linguistic proficiency. Correspondingly, it is vital for school teachers and advisors to choose the most appropriate course book for their class. With a variety of viewpoints, it is not easy to find a consensus on the definitions of a course book. Sheldon (1988) contends that textbooks symbolize “the visible heart of any ELT program” and they offer significant advantages for both students and teachers. He



claims that course books - written by eminent experts in the field of language teaching - depend not only on its approaches, methods and content, but also on learners' expectations and teachers' teaching methodology. Likewise, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) support Sheldon's (1988) work by referring to textbooks as "effective agents of change, playing a significant role in innovation". One of notable definitions of a course book is given by Cunningsworth, 1995 (as cited in Awasthi, 2006) "A textbook is defined as an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective source of presentation of materials, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect predetermined language objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain confidence". In current researchers' regard, the course book LIFE A2-B1 (by John Huges, Helen Stephenson and Paul Dummett) has been adapted in the university for over a year. The aim of this course book is to help students become more proficient in English after three courses of General English. In addition, students are able to achieve B1 level in the CEFR framework.

Types of Course books

There are different types of teaching materials depending on specific purposes and contexts. Robinson (1991, 58) divides course books into two kinds: published textbooks and in-house materials. According to the author, choosing published or in-house materials is a challenge for specialists in the field of English language teaching. In addition, he presents some viewpoints on these two types: (1) In-house materials are likely to be more specific and appropriate than published materials and have greater face validity in terms of the language dealt with, and the context presented in it, (2) In-house materials may be more flexible than published textbooks, (3) The writers of in-house materials can make sure of the suitability of methodology for intended learners. However, it is noted that making in-house materials is time-consuming and expensive.

In Tomlinson's (2010) study, there are numerous principles for learners and lecturers to take into consideration, as follow: (1) Language input: a prerequisite for language acquisition is that the learners are exposed to a rich, meaningful and comprehensible input of language in use. (2) Language experience: in order for the learners to maximize their exposure to language in use, they need to be engaged both affectively and cognitively in the language experience. (3) Positive affect achievement: language learners who achieve positive affect are much more likely to achieve communicative competence than those who do not. (3) Mental resource use: L2 language learners can benefit from using those mental resources which they typically utilize when acquiring and using their L1. (4) Learners' awareness: language learners can benefit from noticing salient features of the input and from discovering how they are used. (5) Frequent use of language: learners need opportunities to use language to try to achieve communicative purposes.

Counter-arguments about the role of course book for General English Course

It is undeniable that course books are essential pedagogical tools for both languages teaching and learning. Considering different factors affecting the course book, it is obvious to have course book evaluation in order to deal with both advantages and disadvantages for its better use in specific context. Richards (2001) raises an additionally number for and against arguments on course book's role in EFL teaching and learning. Linguists provide more detailed illustration about the role of course books by examining its advantages and disadvantages. Some benefits of a textbook are described as follows: (1) they provide structure and syllabus for a program; (2) they help standardized instruction; (3) they maintain quality; (4) they provide a variety of learning resources; (5) they are efficient; (6) they can train teachers; and (7) they are visually appealing. In addition to the above mentioned groups of linguists, there are a number of authors whose attitude towards textbook usage lies somewhere between the two extremes (e.g. O'Neill, 1982; Prodromou, 1988; Alptekin, 1993; Graves, 2000; Harmer, 2001). They claim that textbooks represent merely a framework for one's teaching, which can be reinforced by additional materials based on the needs and preferences of a specific group of students. In brief, most linguists and authors' views on course book's role show that course book plays an important role in EFL teaching and learning.

From these viewpoints, course book undoubtedly benefits both teachers and learners in improving their language skills, enhancing language knowledge as well as providing opportunities for educational training in future. A course book is designed with a general purpose of language teaching and learning.



Consequently, there is no perfect course book due to its use in specific context for particular purposes. Teachers and learners, therefore, have a wide choice of course books that are the most appropriate for their specific context.

COURSE BOOK EVALUATION

Definitions of evaluation in education

Evaluation undoubtedly plays a crucial role in the teaching-learning process. In fact, it helps teachers and learners enhance both teaching and learning. Correspondingly, evaluation is considered a continuous process and a periodic exercise. The term “evaluation” in language education has been approached in a variety of ways. In the present study, the researcher would like to make a reference of “evaluation” in the academic perspective – English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course evaluation – in order to evaluate GEC.

Different authors show different notions of evaluation. In the early time, Richards (2001) describes evaluation as “the systematic collection and interpretation of evidence leading as a part of process to a judgment of value with a view to action.” In the linguist’s view, evaluation comprises four key components: systematic collection of evidence, its interpretation, judgment of value and with a view to action. In the recent year, Jacobs (2000) proposes his views on EFL program evaluation as “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’ need in particular context.” According to the author, program evaluation should be based on the utilization of both internal (teachers, students, course books, and teaching methods) and external variables (social, cultural, economic issues).

All in all, it is evident that course book evaluation is a multidimensional and multifaceted process with various purposes. In the current study, course book evaluation is more limited to only learners’ evaluation of the course book. The researchers aim at students’ evaluation in their ways and opinions and usage. For more than one year using the course book, students realized how it benefits or challenge their styles of learning, as well as try to find out appropriate use of the course book in their own ways.

Roles of course book evaluation: due to the recent growth of materials in the ESL publishing industry, guidelines are necessary to raise teachers’ awareness to various course book designs. As the aims of the course book should correspond as closely as possible to the teacher’s own methodology, it is of great importance that teachers evaluate course books in terms of their ability to realize these aims. O’Neill (1982) and Cunningsworth (1995) present similar viewpoints, as “A well-designed course book which allows for adaptation and a certain degree of learner spontaneity is generally regarded as the most visible tool in the balanced teacher/learner relationship. At best they should provide only a framework for which this interaction and improvisation occurs”. In fact, evaluation is a very important requirement for the education system. It fulfills various purposes in systems of education like quality control in education, selection/entrance to a higher grade or tertiary level. From this regard, at Bac Lieu University, the school advisors has used the course book LIFE A2- B1 (John Huges , Helen Stephenson and Paul Dummet) for nearly two years. Furthermore, the students’ level in a local school is not really equivalent to the standard premise to other educational institutions. Hence, this course book definitely reveals certain advantages as well as shortcomings to both lecturers and learners. All of these things shed light on the researcher’s need and purpose to carry out this research.

Approaches on course book evaluation: textbook evaluation, according to Cunningsworth (1995), would involve “the careful selection of materials examining whether they reflect the needs of the learners, the aims, methods and values of a specific teaching program”. Absolutely, when school advisors make choice of a course book, they need to take into consideration of divergent traits, such as course objectives and curriculum, skills presented, learners’ needs and teachers’ belief. Ellis (1997) makes similar points: “textbook evaluation helps the teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and it further facilitates them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook materials”. The author’s approaches are shown in the table below:

**Table 1** Summary of Ellis's (1997) approach to evaluation

Stage of evaluation	Features considered
Predictive	(i) Evaluation of a textbook based on the results of evaluation carried out by experts. (ii) Evaluate a textbook based on the checklists and guidelines available in the literature.
Retrospective	Evaluation of a textbook while it is in use and after it has been used, based on its impact on users to decide whether to continue using it or not.

Robinson (1991), McGrath ((2002) and Tomlinson (2003) classify materials evaluation into three types: *pre- use* (A quick look through a textbook (artwork, illustrations, appearance, content pages, etc.) to gain an impression of its potential value.), *whilst –use* (Evaluate the following criteria (1) clarity of instructions; (2) clarity of layout; (3) comprehensibility of texts; (4) credibility of tasks; (5) achievement of performance objectives; (6) potential for localization; (7) practicality of the materials; (8) teachability of the materials; (9) flexibility of the materials; (10) appeal of the materials; (11) motivating power of the materials; (12) impact of the material; and (13) effectiveness in facilitating short-term) and *post- use evaluation* (Impact of the textbook on teachers, students and administrators.)

Accordingly, Littlejohn (1998) proposes a three level analysis of course book evaluation: *preliminary* (Statements of descriptions, Physical aspects of the materials, Main steps in the instructional sections) *summative* (Subdivision into constituent tasks, An analysis of tasks: What is the learners expected to do? Who with? With what content?) and *formative evaluation* (Deducing aims, principles of selection and sequences, Deducing teacher and learner roles, Deducing demands on learner's process competence.)

The author starts with level 1 evaluation (objective description) on statements found within materials, such as publication date, intended audience, the types of materials (e.g. 'general' or 'specific' purpose, 'supplementary ' or 'main course'), the amount of classroom time required, and how the materials are to be used (for self- study ,in any order , etc.). In addition, he analyzes some physical aspects of materials such as durability, use of color, section division, and distribution of means of access in order to provide data for conclusions about teacher – learner roles.

For the level 2 evaluation (subjective analysis), he establishes as precisely as possible a definition of what a task is, based on the literature of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). It means "what we give students to do in the classroom" (Johnson, 2003, p.5; cited in Littlejohn,1998, p.188); what the learner has to do; whether their focus will be on form, meaning or both; what cognitive operations will be required; what form of classroom organization will be involved (e.g. individual work, whole class); what medium will be involved; who will be the source of language or information. The final level draws general conclusions from level 1 and 2's findings and proposes apparent underlying principles of the materials. The author examines the allocation of material sections, roles proposed for teachers and learners, turn-taking and input- output source. In brief, the author aims at describing roles of the materials as a whole in language teaching and learning with the analytical framework in material evaluation.

In-use or formative evaluation by (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003), takes place during the learning process. Consequently, learning outcomes from the course are modified to deal with improvement in the future. Post-use or summative evaluation by (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003) is ordinarily performed at the end of the course with an aim to determine whether the program was successful or effective. Adapted from the course results, the advisors make a decision on using the material again or not. According to Williams (1983), a course book should aim at some important principles related to guidance for non-native teachers, needs of second-language learners, and the relevance to socio-cultural environment. More specifically, an ESL textbook, should give introductory guidance on language items and skills (GENERAL), suggest aids for the teaching of pronunciation (SPEECH), offer techniques for teaching structural units (GRAMMAR); distinguish the purposes and skills on vocabulary (VOCABULARY), provide guidance on the initial presentation of passages (READING), demonstrate various devices in compositions exercises (WRITING), and contain appropriate pictures, diagrams, tables, etc. (TECHNICAL).



In current study on course book evaluation, the researcher aims at two types of evaluation: formative and summative due to the fact that students have no choice on the course book that they study. The schools advisors choose the materials that they think are appropriate for their students and for the curriculum.

Course book evaluation framework

Course book evaluation has been under research with a variety of influential researchers, such as Byrd (2001), Cunningsword (1979, 1984 & 1995), Ellis (1997), Harmer (1991, 2001), Mc Donough & Shaw (2003), Sheldon (1988), Skierso (1991), Tomlinson (2003, 2008), Ur (1996), Williams (1983). A textbook evaluation framework can provide a systematic way to ensure all relevant items are considered (Cunningsworth 1995, Mc Grath 2002). The three stages in the technical educational activities interrelated, namely: (1) input is community needs and resources; (2) process is about learning; and (3) output is workforce skills (Kumar 2011). With the CIPP evaluation model will be produced four types of decisions, namely: 1) decision in planning that affects the choice of goals and objectives; 2) make decision that ensure the design of strategies and procedures are optimal to achieve the goals; 3) implement the decision: the work done to bring and improve by selecting the designs, methods, and strategies; and 4) repeat the decision to establish continuity, change or terminate the program activities.

In the particular context of Vietnam, the Decision No.1400/QD-TT was issued by Vietnamese's government in regard to the approval and operation of the National Project – Foreign Language 2020 is to renovate foreign language teaching and learning at all school levels in the Vietnamese national education system during the period 2008–2020. Le and Do (2012) further explain that throughout this project Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) expects that younger Vietnamese generations should be able to use English for effective communication to work and study in multilingual and multicultural environments. As can be seen from the objective of this national project, cross-cultural interactions have become a focal point in the language education policy of Vietnam. This goes against Nation's (2014) suggestion that language courses should be designed with a balance of four strands: (1) meaning-focused input (through listening and reading); (2) meaning-focused output (through speaking and writing); (3) language development (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation); and (4) fluency development. The internationally published textbooks were often too costly for Vietnamese parents and teachers (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007).

In the current study, the searchers use the MOET framework for student's evaluation of the course book LIFE A2 –B1. The reason for adoption is that this framework is appropriate for Vietnamese context of language teaching and learning. Furthermore, it involves various evaluation clusters and types, such as language input, skills, layout and appearance, and outcome evaluation. Most educational centers depend on these standard principles for evaluating a course booking Vietnamese context.

Course book use

Teachers' use of the course book

Course books play an important role in foreign language teaching and learning. According to Graves (2000: 175), a course book should be regarded as "one of the many sources teachers can draw upon in creating an effective lesson and may offer a framework of guidance and orientation". Additionally, he points out that the textbook provides confidence and security for an inexperienced teacher who finds adapting existing textbooks challenging especially for tailored work- related courses. First, the transmission teacher needs to maintain a high degree of control over the learners to create the conditions under which the subject matter can be taught. Second, the interpretation teacher prefers to disperse responsibility for learning among learners, where control is maintained by persuasion and appeal to the better judgment of the learners. Teachers use their teacher's books mainly to follow instructions for exercises and to reach out for extra materials and reproducible activities. With similar perspective to Barnes (1969, 1976) on teachers' use of the course book, Miller (1996) proposes the three common views as transmission, transaction and transformation.

In a transaction process, situations are created whereby students are able to interact with the material to be learned in order to construct knowledge. Constructivism is an educational philosophy



consistent with this view. In this perspective, knowledge is not passively received; rather, it is actively built up or constructed by students as they connect their past knowledge and experiences with new information (Santrock, 2004). Differences in each student's backgrounds and experiences result in their varied construction of interpretation, understanding, and meaning of the new information. In a *transformation process*, teacher's performance is to create conditions that have the potential to transform the learner on many different levels (cognitive, emotional, social, intuitive, creative, spiritual, and other). Transformational teaching invites both students and teachers to discover their full potential as learners, as members of society, and as human beings. The ultimate transformational goal is to help develop more nurturing human beings who are better able to perceive the interconnectedness of all human, plant, and animal life (Narve, 2001)

Grammar-Translation Method goes back to the close of the nineteenth century in the schoolrooms of Europe. There, the way into the new language was always through the students' own first language. Also, complicated rules were mastered and tested by means of translation, and success was measured in terms of accurate use of grammar and vocabulary rather than effective communication. Besides, there was no emphasis on the development of fluent speech. The *Direct Method*, in its turn, dates from the early years of the twentieth century, a time when new types of learners like immigrants, business people and tourists arrived in the USA. In this method the students' own languages were banished and everything was to be done through the target language. Thus, translation and first-language were abolished.

In brief, if the course book is the main teaching material available, educators are supposed to be sensitive to the need of adapting the contents of the book to accommodate the local needs of the students and all aspects of the learning process, such as curriculum, classroom interaction, school regulations and the educational policies. Some teachers understand that besides linguistic competence, sociolinguistic and discourse competences should be explored as well.

Learners' use of the course book

Driscoll et al. (1994) propose two prevalent questions with regard to students' use of the course book: (1) to what extent did that actually use their textbook?; and (2) when did they use their books, what did they use them for? In their study, students use their books in class mostly to answer questions and to look up vocabulary words. The authors claim that students tend to follow the cues of the teacher; they pay attention to those components of the course book (skills activities, inserted questions, photographs...) to which the teacher direct their attention. Derryberry and Wininger (2008) describe two types of motivations (extrinsic vs. intrinsic) to students' use of course book: "Motivation was not necessarily related to who was more likely to read the text, but intrinsically motivated students tended to read it more in-depth, even taking notes during reading". The authors gave students a choice in what textbook they would like to use and found that students intrinsically motivated were more likely to choose a more difficult text than those who were externally motivated and who chose the more basic text.

Many studies claim that most students had no experience with textbooks. They use their course book only when prompted by the teacher to do so, but even their reading tended to be directed toward answering specific questions, either in the book itself or raised by the teacher (Driscoll et al. 1994). All in all, students use course books as a framework or a guide for their study since it helps them to organize their learning both inside and outside the classroom and enables them to learn better, faster, clearer and easier on the absence of teachers' directness.

Implications for course book use

There are possibly three categories of evaluation that applied linguists subscribe, including pre-use evaluation, whilst (in)-use evaluation and post-use evaluation (Cunningsworth 1995; Ellis 1995, 1997; Tomlinson 1998, 1999, 2003; McGrath 2002; Mukundan 2004, 2009; and Tomlinson and Masuhara 2004). For each stage of evaluation, there are some essential issues for users to take into consideration. For the first phase (pre- use), Ellis (1997) and Mukundan (2009) aim at determining if the course book is adequate for use, including course book aims and objectives; contents; target learners; numbers, lengths and organization of units. The second stage for evaluation (whilst- use) plays a significant role for users since it provides teachers with information that help students to determine whether it is worldwide using the



materials again, which activities work and which do not, and how to modify the materials to make them more effective for future (Ellis 1997, p. 37). The final stage refers to the most important and valuable type of evaluation since it measures the actual effects of the materials on the users and provide reliable information (Tomlinson 1998, 2003). Specifically, this stage aims at providing feedback, documenting benefits and weaknesses as well as keeping a record of adaptations made to the book. This type of evaluation is helpful and useful for identifying the points of strength and weakness that emerge over a period of using the course books (Cunningsworth, 1995).

General English Course (GEC)

Definitions of GEC

English is the most popular language in the world, and is taught in a variety of schools in terms of a course. People from different regions learn English for different objectives. As a consequence, many linguists and authors have given a definition of English course due to learners' purposes. According to Hutchinson & Waters (1987), ELT can be divided into English for specific purposes course (ESP) and English for general purposes (EGP). English as specific purposes (ESP), is mainly focused on "needs analysis, text analysis and the training of learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their academic or professional situation" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Jordan (1997, p.4) claims that ESP can broadly be divided into two main kinds: "English for Occupational/Vocational/Professional Purposes (EOP/EVP/EPP).... and English for Academic Purposes (EAP)".

In this context, GEC consists of three courses: English 1 (45 periods), English 2(45 periods) and English 3 (60 periods). For each course students are equipped with specific language skills and competences (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing Grammar and Vocabulary) from basic to higher level of proficiency. The aim of each course is to help students become more proficient in English and be able to achieve B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference framework. Students are also provided foundational English knowledge and competences for academic study and social communication. At the end of the course, students are obliged to take the final test in order to examine whether they are eligible for the requirements of the course or not. Unless they pass the exam, they are to study that course in the following semester. GEC further provides students with language competence's proficiency as well as helps them more well- prepared for the achievement of level B1 from the six scale of national foreign language project 2020 in the CEFR framework.

Criteria of GEC

In order to make proper choice of course books, teachers and school advisors should count on a specific framework of evaluation. Consequently, Vietnamese six-level scale of English language proficiency is adapted from the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) as a proficiency framework for language curriculum assessment purposes. According to the CEFR, there are six broad levels with adequate coverage of the learning space, as follows: (1) breakthrough: corresponding to what Wilkins in his 1978 proposal labeled 'formulaic proficiency', and trim in the same publication 'introductory'; (2) waystage: reflecting the council of Europe content specification; (3) threshold: reflecting the council of Europe content specification; (4) vantage, reflecting the third council of Europe content specification, a level described as 'limited operational proficiency' by Wilkins, and 'adequate response to situations normally encountered' by trim; (5) effective Operational Proficiency: which was called 'effective proficiency' by Trim, 'adequate operational proficiency' by Wilkins, and represents an advanced level of competence suitable for more complex work and study tasks; and (6) mastery (Trim: 'comprehensive mastery'; Wilkins: 'comprehensive operational proficiency'): corresponds to the top examination objective in the scheme adopted by ALTE (association of language testers in Europe). It could be extended to include the more developed intercultural competence above that level which is achieved by many language professionals.

In the researchers' view, GEC refers to the first three- level, including A1, A2 and B1. GEC consists of three subdivided courses: English 1 (45 periods), English 2(45 periods) and English 3 (60 periods), as follows: the first course GE1, equivalent to A1 (breakthrough), prepares student for background knowledge in everyday life. It is for students with no or little ability to communicate in English. It focuses



on high frequency, useful vocabulary that students can actually use in their daily lives. Specifically, students can interact in a simpler way, ask and answer simple questions about themselves, where they live, people they know and things they have. In addition, students can fill in uncomplicated forms with personal details, use basic greetings and write short, simple postcards. All of the subdivided courses are strictly followed with the CERF (Cambridge University Press, 2001; p.26). Hence, students get familiar with the content and structure of the CERF in order to perform in the exam after they finish GEC.

Testing and assessment

Several scholars and researchers have studied about testing and assessment in English learning and the teaching process. In earlier time, Bachman and Palmer (1996, p.17) claim that “the most important consideration in designing and developing a language test is the use for which it is intended, so that the most important quality of a test is its usefulness”. They propose a model of test usefulness with six test qualities, including reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality. Simultaneously, the authors come up with three basic principles in the development and use of language tests with the maximization of the overall usefulness of the test, evaluation of individual test qualities in terms of their combined effect on the overall usefulness of the test, and the determination in test usefulness and appropriate balance among qualities in each specific test situation.

In the Vietnamese context, studies from different linguists show that students’ English level is not really high enough for their job competition in the globalized market. According to Pham (2004), about ten per fifty graduates in English classes have sufficient English skills for jobs such as interpreters, translators, tour guides or teachers of English. Accordingly, Ha (2007) claims that the level of communicative competence in English of most Vietnamese employees are still very low, and many freshly graduated students cannot get jobs in foreign companies because of the English language requirements. With the need to improve learners’ English language proficiency, in early 2008, Vietnamese Ministry of Education & Training (MOET) proposes a standardized test adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into Vietnamese context. The VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) test consists of six scale A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 but mostly it is applied from level 3 to level 5 (from A2 to C1) for Vietnamese learners. Non English majored students need to achieve level 3, which is equivalent to the level B1 of the CEFR framework. Like most of the CEFR-based test, VSTEP consists of four sections: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The innovation-setting the VSTEP as a graduation requirement – is expected to have impacts on what and how teachers teach and what and how students learn, thereby promoting students’ English skills development.

Hongli Li, Qi Zhong and Hoi K Suen (2012) claim that VSTEP has great impacts on students’ learning in two ways: academic and affective. The academic impact relates to the VSTEP’s influence on “students’ English - learning behavior, as this pertains to learning content (i.e., what students study) and learning methods (i.e., how they study)”, whereas affective impact refers to the VSTEP’s influence on “students’ affective conditions, such as goal orientation, motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety.” (Hongli Li, Qi Zhong and Hoi K Suen, 2012). Shortly, testing and assessment are useful tools to help teachers and administrators to make decisions about students’ linguistic competences, their level and achievement in classroom study. In the researcher’s context, CEFR and VSTEP are adopted from Vietnamese MOET for testing and assessment from students’ use of the course book LIFE A2 – B1 to be well prepared for achievement of level B1 after they finish GEC.

Research questions

The study attempted to investigate the way non-English majored students evaluate and use the course book LIFE A2- B1 (by John Hughes) after learning more than one year at school. For these purposes, the research questions were addressed as follows, first, how do non-English majored students evaluate the course book LIFE for the General English Course? And second, how do non-English majored students use the course book LIFE for the General English Course?



2. Objectives

The aims of the study were to investigate how non-English majored students evaluate the course book LIFE for their General English Course, and how non-English majored students use the course book LIFE for their General English course. In addition, the result of the study would propose a deep insight from non-English majored students' evaluation and use of the course book for teachers and administrators to enhance the teaching method and quality of General English Course at the university as well as to adopt the new course book in the future.

3. Materials and Methods

Materials: The course book used in GEC at BLU is LIFE A2 –B1, Vietnam Edition, reprinted with license from National Geographic Learning, and authored by John Huges, Helen Stephenson and Paul Dummet. This course book consists of one student's book, a teacher's book and one online workbook. There are 12 units in the course book with different topics and activities. In addition, students are provided with two access codes in two years to do activities and exercises on the website www.MYELT.heinle.com. There are two hidden codes and the access instruction in Vietnamese language on the first page of the book to help them easily create and manage their account. Besides, teachers can create forums on this website to manage students' participants and tasks in each course.

Research design: the current research followed the descriptive design with the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. As a consequence, this method aims at describing and interpreting data with quantitative information from surveys and questionnaires and qualitative information for semi-structured interviews. The researcher uses this mixed methods approach for specific reasons. Firstly, it provides a better understanding of a research problem or issue than either research approach alone (Creswell, 2008). Secondly, the researcher will be more confident about the result of the findings if the outcome from the questionnaire and survey corresponds to those from interview instrument of the same phenomena (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Finally, whether a mixed method design results in data convergence or not, it is likely to provide more valid and reliable data and thereby allow the researcher to have greater confidence in his conclusions (Deborah , 2010). In the current study, the surveys were first used to collect quantitative data of non-English majored students' perceptions on the CEFR and VSTEP to examine to what extent students get aware of the CEFR and VSTEP examination after they finish GEC. After that, a questionnaire was used to collect information about students' evaluation on the course book LIFE A2- B1 based on the framework of the CEFR and VSTEP. Finally, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to demonstrate how students' use of this course book in order to check the reliability of the questionnaire and ensure the validity of the evaluation process.

Participants: the participants of the study consisted of a hundred of randomized non-English majored students in the year of 2017-2018 in Bac Lieu University (BLU), in the Mekong Delta about 120km from Can Tho University. Most of the participants were female students in six classes whose majors were in Business Administration, Information Technology (University and College levels), Elementary Education (class 1 and 2) and Literature. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old. Students' background knowledge was passing the examination of English for a general purpose from high schools around three to seven years. All of the students studied English with the course book LIFE A2-B1 for at least one year. General English course is taught as a compulsory subject at school.

Questionnaire and survey: one hundred participants were randomly chosen to perform the survey on the non-English majored students' perceptions of the CEFR and VSTEP framework and answer the questionnaire on the evaluation of the course book LIFE A2 – B1. The characteristics of participants are described with more details as follows: male: 30 (number), female: 70, age from 18-20: 97, from 21-25: 3; Fields of study: Business Administration: 3, Literature: 19, Elementary Education 1: 19, Elementary Education 2: 24, Communication Technology (CT): 24 and Information Technology (IT): 31

Interviews: For interviews, seven non English- majored students were chosen from one hundred participants answering the survey and questionnaire to participate in the interviews. Four of them were selected from the volunteers, and the others were appointed accidentally by the researcher. The amount of the interviewees



was approximately chosen from each class in order to ensure the objectivity and prevent cheats in the interviews.

Research objects

General English course: the current curriculum of GEC at BLU was designed with 210 periods in total and was taught for the freshmen at the first semester. GEC includes three sub-courses English 1, 2 and 3 (E1, E2 and E3 respectively). There are 120 periods for E1 and E2 (60 periods for each sub-course) and 90 periods for E3. Every sub-course is taught in 15 weeks. The major teaching method is Communicative Approach, and there is only one teacher who teaches four skills for each class during the semester. A summative assessment will be held with two major tests: one midterm test in class and the other final test for all of non-English major students of the same course. The final test with four skills is based on not only the knowledge in the course book but also the framework of CEFR and VSTEP to ensure that students can be well-prepared for the B1 level in the future.

Research instruments: the current study consists of three main instruments with questionnaire, survey and interview. These instruments are used to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Survey: Zikmund (2000, p.167) claims that a survey research plays an important role in many disciplines when it comes to collecting primary data. A survey can help collect large amounts of data in an efficient manner, enhancing researchers' reliability in their thesis. In the current study the survey was developed to check for sure that students got background information about the CEFR and VSTEP frameworks that help them get involved in evaluating the course book LIFE A2 –B1. In addition, students were aware of testing and assessment type used in the VSTEP examination after they finish the GEC. The survey about non-English majored students' perception of the CEFR and VSTEP framework includes three clusters with 14 questions. It is designed basing on the CEFR framework adopted by Vietnamese MOET into circular for VSTEP examination (19/2015/TT-BGDĐT). Students were suggested to all of the circle appropriate choices that best fit their context. Items in cluster 1 about students' general perceptions of the CEFR and VSTEP framework with five questions is designed to help students get aware of the CEFR and VSTEP. Cluster 2 with five questions relates to four major skills in the VSTEP exams that help students get involved in its format. Cluster 3 consists of four questions about testing and assessment in VSTEP exam since students need to get level B1 from this framework after they finish GEC.

Questionnaire: *Designing*: For students' evaluation of the course book, the researchers used a questionnaire adapted from Vietnamese MOET's framework (Circular 31/2015/TT-BGDĐT). Questionnaire with sixty six items was used for Non English – majored students from different classes. There are two main parts with some clusters related to the course book LIFE A2 – B1 (authored by John Hughes et al.) Part I – *Demographic data*. This part aims to document the respondents' overall information on their gender, age, major, telephone number and email address. Part II – *Evaluation on the course book LIFE A2 – B1 (authored by John Hughes, Helen Stephenson and Paul Dummett)*. This part was designed with sixty-six items in five clusters to collect non-English majored students, including General Evaluation, Layout and Appearance, Topics, Tasks and Exercises and Skills. In this section, participants were requested to put a check in their level of agreement on the five scales, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Semi-structured interviews: in response to students' use of the course book LIFE A2- B1, the one-to-one interview was carried on with seven different students. According to Creswell (2008), a semi-structured interview combines a pre-determined set of open questions providing opportunities for both interviewers and interviewees to explore more particular exchanges. Unlike a structured questionnaire, it allows respondents to discuss and raise issues that the interviewers may not have considered, and does not limit its respondents to a set of pre-determined answers. In the current study, the interviews were designed with open-ended questions to enhance students' chances of issue discussions on the course book use in GEC. The interviews aim at strategies that non-English majored students use for their study with the course book LIFE A2- B1.



4. Results and Discussions

Results from demographic information

Participants with different background may affect the current study to a moderate extent. Hence, the details about participants will be carefully discussed in terms of the differences of factors: gender, age and major to supply an overall picture of all the participants. Firstly, there is a remarkable difference in gender among the participants in the current study. With the data presented in the previous part, the number of female participants is 70 (70%), higher than male students with 30 (30%). Due to particular majors in BLU, female students are always more crowded than male ones. Gender is somewhat influential to learning outcomes and thoughts and therefore, results in awareness in course book evaluation. Secondly, age distribution of the sample would be reported. The participants are from 18- 25 years old. The majority of the participants from 18 to 20 are 97 (97%), and the remainders from 21- 25 has got only 3% of all. Briefly, there is not much difference in the age of the samples for the course book evaluation.

Finally, the samples used for the current study are from 6 classes with 5 majors. The numbers of participants in each class was roughly different, as in Business Administration (3 students, 3%), Literature (19 students, 19%), Elementary Education 1 (19 students, 19%), Elementary Education 2 (24 students, 24%), Information Technology (31 students, 31%) and College of Information Technology (4 students, 4%). The statistics is presented in Figure 1.

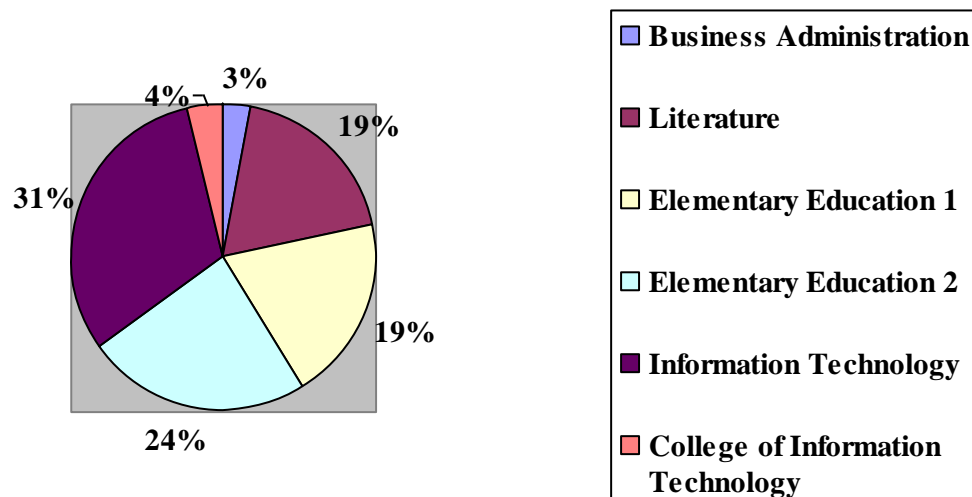


Figure 1 Distribution of participants' majors

Briefly, there were many factors in the demographic information in the samples that could be seen not to be in the homogeneity. Though they might affect the results of the study more or less, they represented the variety and diverse in the participants' evaluation about the course book, and thus needed to be taken into consideration more carefully for data analysis.

Means of participants' overall evaluation on the course book LIFE

There were 100 students' samples chosen for data collection. The questionnaire with 66 items was adapted from Vietnamese MOET Circular No. 31/2015 / TT-BGDDT. The data obtained from the questionnaire were subjected to the SPSS version 20.0 for data analysis. The results of the questionnaire were to check whether participants' evaluation of the course book was statistically high or not, and whether it was different from the test value of 3.5, an above average level of agreement. Additionally, a reliability analysis was run to confirm the information from the data. The results showed that the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire of students' evaluation is much higher with $\alpha = .952$.



The mean score of the questionnaire was 3.68. This mean was higher than the average score of the whole study $M = 3.0$, but lower than the scale 4.0 (agree) in the five-point Likert scale. It indicated that the participants show positive views on the course book. The researchers, following Sheorey's classification (1999) of mean score: high (3.5 of higher), medium (2.5- 3.4), and low (2.4 or lower), chose the test value of 3.5 the above average of agreement. From the results it was seen that non- English majored students' evaluation of the course book was at high level.

Table 2 Students' evaluation of the course book LIFE

Clusters	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
General Evaluation	100	2.36	4.73	3.71	.41
Layout/ Appearance	100	2.43	5.00	3.82	.44
Topics	100	2.00	5.00	3.75	.48
Tasks/ Exercises	100	2.00	4.40	3.65	.49
Language skills/ Use of Knowledge	100	2.42	4.79	3.65	.39

The mean scores of all clusters in the questionnaire in Table 2 were higher than the average score of 3.0 (quiet agree), which meant that most non – English majored students gave either neutral idea or agree with each cluster in the course book. Specifically, students' evaluation on the course book's layout and appearance got the highest mean score of 3.8 - nearly reached the scale 4.0 (agree), showing that they appreciated its appearance and distribution of layout, such as the organization of contents, structure, pictures and paper's quality. The second highest mean scores were from participants' views on the course book's general evaluation and topics (3.82 and 3.75 respectively). These mean scores indicated that non-English majored students were much more in favor of their agreement of the two clusters above.

Participants' evaluation on general evaluation of the course book LIFE

The mean score of the General Evaluation cluster (Mean = 3.71) just reaches above the level of the average scale of 3.5, indicating that the participants' overall evaluation of the course book was quite high ($t = 5.14$, $df = 99$, $p = .00$). Their evaluation includes the course book's syllabus, contents, compatible level, course objectives and learners' learning needs. Furthermore, they then evaluated the language use, materials attached as well as the balance among skills presented in the course book. The results showed that the percentage of participants' overall evaluation about the course book LIFE was generally high. The highest percentage of overall evaluation came from course book design (93%). Participants predominantly agreed that the course book was well-designed in illustrations, and only 1% shows divergent viewpoint.

For the layout and appearance of the course book LIFE, the results illustrated that the mean of participants' evaluation of the layout and appearance of the course book reached the highest score (mean = 3.82) in comparison with the test value of 3.5 from course book's evaluation in other clusters. The result showed that not much difference between participants' evaluation of the course book and the test value was observed ($t = 7.41$, $df = .99$, $p = .00$). Of the entire clusters in course book evaluation, the layout and appearance one was highly evaluated since it came to participants' views at the first time they used and evaluated. This cluster partially contributed to learners' good impression since it came to their mind for satisfaction and interest in their use of the course book then.

From the data collection, the mean of participants' evaluation of the topic cluster of the course book got the above high level (mean = 3.75) in comparison with the test value of 3.5. The result showed no difference between participants' evaluation of the course book and the test value was observed ($t = 5.21$, $df = 99$, $p = .00$). Most participants quietly agreed that the topics presented in the course book were compatible to their level. With regard to how participants evaluated the topics presented in the course book LIFE in details, a brief analysis of non – English majored students' evaluation of the topic cluster was presented in table 4.9 below.

**Table 3** Percentage of topics cluster from non- English majored students' evaluation

No.	Statement	Scale				
		Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
III. Topics						
19	The topics in the course book are diverse.	0	4	7	75	14
20	The topics are logically distributed from less to more complicated.	2	1	19	73	5
21	The topics in the course book are related to students' daily life.	3	19	19	55	4
22	The topics presented in the course book are exam- oriented.	2	4	22	69	3
23	The topics of the course book provide students with different cultural and social background.	1	1	6	81	11

As can be seen from Table 3, the topics presented in the course book were diverse (89%). There were only 4% of disagreement and 7% of neutral. Twelve topics in the course book consisted of health, transport, adventure, work, language and learning, travel, history environment and nature helped learners get more information about different fields of life, and prepare knowledge for their final examination in GEC and VSTEP then.

Meanwhile, the lowest percentage fell into the relevance of learners' daily lives (59%). This meant that the topics in the course book were diverse, but it seemed that some of them had not much relevance to their life. These topics, according to some participants, related to competitions and history though they equipped learners with knowledge of different fields of life.

For participants' evaluation on tasks and exercises of the course book LIFE

The result showed that there was no difference between the mean of tasks and exercises cluster and the test value was observed ($t= 3.0$, $df= 99$, $p= .00$).

And the mean of the tasks and exercises cluster was just at above an average level. As a consequence, some participants slightly agreed with the design of tasks and exercises in the course book. The result showed that more than 80% of the participants, a high percentage of evaluation, agreed that the tasks designed in the course book were diverse and moved from simple to complex. In summary, for the tasks and exercises cluster, many of the participants got obstacles in the task level and task instruction. Though the result of the evaluation was above average, it could be a challenge for teachers to take into consideration for adaption of this course book in the future.

Participants' evaluation on the language skills and use of knowledge of the course book LIFE

The result is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics on participants' evaluation of language skills and use of knowledge

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Vocab	100	2.40	4.80	3.73	.45
Grammar	100	2.33	4.67	3.81	.34
Listening	100	1.50	5.00	3.37	.63
Speaking	100	2.50	5.00	3.71	.46
Reading	100	1.80	5.00	3.55	.55
Writing	100	2.00	4.80	3.71	.46
Pronunciation	100	2.20	5.00	3.68	.52

The results showed that most items in this cluster were not significantly different from 3.5, the mean for "quiet agree" in the five -degree scale, as illustrated in Table 4.

The mean scores of language skills and use of knowledge showed the difference among skills, ranging from 3.37 to 3.81. In participants' views, grammar was at the highest level 3.8, in comparison with



the above average scale of 3.5 ($t= 9.14$, $df= 99$, $p= .00$). This meant that most participants showed strong agreement on Grammar point on the course book LIFE. On the other hand, Listening skill got the lowest mean score 3.37 in comparison with the average level of 3.5, which meant less agreement in the five-degree scale ($t=-2.02$, $df= 99$, $p=.04$). The students' group data showed that Listening skill might be a challenge to non – English majored students since most of them showed neutral ideas on this skill.

Meanwhile, the Min score of Reading and Listening (1.80 and 1.50 respectively) showed that some students strongly disagreed with these skills presented in the course book. For Listening skill, the statistics indicate that 6% the participants showed strong disagreement with the compatible level of Listening (6%), the authenticity to real language situations of listening tasks (7%), the level move from easy to difficult (2%), natural and clear voice from tapes (8%), and the focus on students' language competence such as stress, intonation, pronunciation (2%). For Reading skill, the statistics results showed that participants show strong disagrees with the compatible level of Reading skill (2%), vocabulary used in the reading selections was at student's level. (1%), and the length of each reading selection is acceptable (1%). In conclusion, the results indicated that students show stronger agreement on the evaluation of the language skills and use of knowledge. For Listening and Reading skill, the statistics were not much different. The results of these clusters would be a sample for teachers and school advisors to take into consideration for the use and application of teaching method in the future.

STUDENTS' USE OF THE COURSE BOOK LIFE A2- B1

Students' use of the course book LIFE A2- B1

In order to collect information about students' use of the course book, an interview with 7 participants of different majors was conducted (5 females and 2 males). The interview question was designed with 5 items about the ways non-English majored students used the course book LIFE A2 - B1 (by *John Hughes, et al.*), including their feeling about the books, the benefits and challenges they encountered methods for developing their weaker skills, and strategies for better learning in the future. The interview was recorded in order to assure the reliability of the data collection.

Students' overview of the course book LIFE A2 – B1

This interview question aims at participants' positive and negative views about the course book LIFE in GEC before dealing with their use of this course book. Through the interview question, the researcher tries to calculate the co- relationship between participants' evaluation and use of the course book for its better adaption in the future. There were 7/7 students satisfied with the pictures, diagrams, and topics presented in the course book. Additionally, participants 5 and 6 liked the paper quality and the course book design, the other one agrees that it compatible to students' level as well. They said that the course book provided learners with beautiful and eye- catching pictures, diversified topics. Participant 6 added that the course book helped learners improve their communication with the others. Comparing to the results of cluster "Overall evaluation" in the previous part, it can be concluded that participants' overall evaluation of the course book is more positive.

Students' overview of skills presented in the course book LIFE A2 – B1

For Listening skill, 4/7 participants found it unhelpful for their study. All of these interviewees said that the Listening level was so high, and the speed was fast and hard to listen to. They explained that the voice they heard from the tape is different from the foreigners' voice in real life since the foreigners speak a bit slower and easier to understand. Speaking skill was the most appreciated one by all of the participants (5/7). They claimed that the activity designed in the course book helped them enhance their communication with classmates and foreigners. Participant 7 added "*Speaking skill presented in the course book is diverse, relevant to daily life and helps students enhance their pronunciation*". In brief, speaking skill presented in this course book was highly evaluated from most of the interviewees. There were 3/7 participants show disapproval about Writing skill in the course book. They explained that they had no chances to practice writing at home, and it needed a variety of structure and vocabulary supported for writing skill. Furthermore, there were not many activities for writing in the course book, and they had not much time for writing and revision. In summary, most of non-English majored students has limited vocabulary and structure for their writing skill since they are not good at studying English, and pay more



attention to their majors at home. It might take them longer time to improve their writing skill for GEC as well as for VSTEP examination.

Students' benefits and challenges from the course book LIFE A2 – B1

Four interviewed participants from different majors provide different views on the benefits and challenges they encounter when using the course book LIFE for their GEC. Participant 1 claimed that the course book helped enhance her Reading skill through vocabulary and structure. Moreover, she gained knowledge and skills from different fields in life. Participant 3 proposed similar views with participant 1, conveying that it was helpful in learning vocabulary in this course book with diverse and close topics to daily life. Nevertheless, she got difficulties in listening from tapes and recording because of the speed. She stated that the voice was hard to listen and understand, and it was not compatible with learners' level. Participant 4 asserted "*The course book provides learners with illustrations and pictures that enable them to study better. In addition, vocabulary is a bit easier to learn and understand its meaning.*" For the difficulties with the course book use, she mentioned the way to log in and use the online account. Another problem she got relates to the videos in listening stage in each unit. It is difficult for her to listen to the videos and finish the activity provided below it.

The last participant (number 5) claimed "*Many exercises in the course book were compatible to learners' level. Additionally, the number of new words in each unit was acceptable, which helped me improve vocabulary and knowledge in daily life*". He then showed similar views with other participants about the listening level for learners. It was really difficult for non-English majored students to listen to the tapes because of their lack of vocabulary and low level.

In summary, most of the participants have similar views on the benefits and challenges of the course book. They all found it helpful to gain more knowledge of different fields in life, learn more about vocabulary, and the diversity in topics and activities in the course book. On the other hand, all of the participants meet difficulties in listening skills due to their limit of vocabulary and level.

Students' learning methods for skills in the course book LIFE A2 – B1

After finishing GEC 1, most of the participants found it challenging to use the new course book LIFE. Consequently, they primarily targeted their weaker skills in order to propose solutions and methods for better learning in the next semester. Specifically, all of the interviewees shared the same view point that listening skills in the course book was much more difficult than the other ones. Therefore, apart from the course book, they tried to listen to other sources. Participant 4 added "*Listening is undoubtedly a hard skill, so I need to practice listening to the tapes and speaking with my friends. Besides, in order to feel less bored, I listen to English music to relax and to improve my listening skill as well.*" Participant 5 said he usually listened to the radio, watched videos on the Internet or English films with Viet subtitles to improve his listening skills, whereas participant 7 suggested learning more vocabulary to listen to and understand better. For speaking skills, all of the participants said that they had not much time practicing speaking in English in class as they felt shy and lacked vocabulary and structure. In BLU, there is English-speaking club held once a month, yet they never participate because they are afraid of speaking in public. Most of the interviewees thought that the speaking skills presented in the course book were enough though they had no time for practice. On being asked about the solutions, they said they would try to practice speaking more with friends or in groups to develop this skill in the future.

On the other hand, four of seven participants got stuck with writing skill, so they thought it a bit difficult skill to improve. Participants 1, 2, 4 and 5 showed similar views on their learning methods of writing "*we need to learn more vocabulary and structure to write better because writing requires words and grammar to express our languages and emotions*". Furthermore, they said their peer correction played a significant role in their writing due to the fact that they might remember their mistake more easily. In conclusion, GEC is definitely a difficult course for non-English majored students since they lack background knowledge from lower grades. Furthermore, the teachers have no time focusing on each skill in 4 periods a week, thus they need to self-study and practice more at home along with teacher's assistance.

Students' strategies for future use of the course book LIFE A2 – B1



Facing with many obstacles when studying GEC with the new course book, every participant has their own plan to deal with. The result of the interview showed that in order to study GEC with the course book LIFE better in the future, as well as to be well prepared for the VSTEP examination, most of the participants thought they needed to learn harder.

All of the participants showed similar points of view in their strategies, like practicing listening and speaking more, reading books and references to get more knowledge. Participant 1 and 2 said they needed to review lessons before going to school, and practiced all of the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing in order to improve learning outcomes and to pass the examination. Participant 3, 4 and 5 shared similar view “*we need to do more exercises, practice listening, reading and writing by reading references, learning structure and vocabulary, and listening to the tapes and English music more*”. Participant 6 and 7 focused on listening and speaking skill more and thought that they should finish all homework and review lessons carefully before going to class to make sure that they would not forget what she had learnt the previous week. In summary, for non – English majored students, learning English takes longer time, effort, and practice. All of the participants encounter lots of challenges when studying GEC with the new course book LIFE, thus having appropriate strategies is essential for them to get determined in their goals for the upcoming examination.

5. Conclusion

Conclusion

The study also presented findings about the difficulties that non-English majored students encountered when learning GEC with new course book LIFE. The findings presented non-English majored students’ evaluation of specific skills in the course book. Nevertheless, these most important parts such as tasks, exercises, skills and use of knowledge, seemed not to satisfy their learners much ($M=3.65$). Specifically, grammar was undoubtedly the least difficult skill in the course book ($M= 3.81$), and it was easier to learn whereas Listening skill was the most challenging one to learners ($M= 3.37$). It meant that students got more difficulties and they needed being provided more knowledge on skills, especially in listening, from the teachers in order to learn better since GEC is a foundation to help them pass the upcoming final test and CEFR examination. Finally, the study showed that there was a close relationship between learners’ evaluation and their use of the course book in studying English. When learners faced difficulties in their study with the course book, they tried to find out the strategies for using it better in the next semester in order to pass the examination.

Through the data analysis from the interviews with 7 students of different classes, the result showed that most of the participants had strategies for better use of the course book, especially on their weak skills. The key findings were summarized that most of the participants showed satisfaction with reading skills, so they said that they did not spend much time on this skill. Sometimes they learned more vocabulary or looked up the dictionary on new words to improve Reading and Vocabulary. For writing, they expressed that they needed to learn more vocabulary and structure to write better because writing requires words and grammar to express their languages and emotions. Along with reading, grammar was considered the most favorite skill for non-English students because they learnt it since the first time they studied English. Therefore, they needed to revise structure in order to learn grammar better. In brief, most of the participants were satisfied with the features of the course book, except skills and use of knowledge; therefore, they centered on strategies to improve their weaker skills in order to study better in GEC and pass the coming examination.

Pedagogical implications

From the research findings based on both qualitative and quantitative data about non-English majored students’ evaluation and use of the course book LIFE A2- B1, some pedagogical implications would be inferred in order that they may be helpful in improving the quality of teaching and learning of this course book in the future in BLU in particular and in the context of EFL in general. These implications have been drawn to students, teachers, and school administrators. Students know that General English courses play an important role in the improvement of synthetic skills. It helps them not only achieve English



knowledge and intercultural knowledge for the integration into international community but also equip them with foundation knowledge for future examinations to get better certificates in their job support. Therefore, through the evaluation and use of this course book in particular, students know what they are good at or not, so they should pay much attention to their learning process in order to improve English knowledge and skills. Furthermore, with the strategies proposed, they help students in making plans for their effective learning. Besides, in order to improve their English effectively, students should be responsible for their learning by paying attention to teachers' lectures, finishing home assignments, looking for learning materials from different sources to gain knowledge and making progress in the future.

Teachers of English

Students' evaluation and use of the course book LIFE can bring some insights for teachers to take into consideration for further effective teaching of GEC with this new course book. Specifically, through students' evaluation, teachers gain deeper understanding about which skills their students are good or weak, in order to have flexible teaching methods. Furthermore, most students' background knowledge is not really high, so it is essential to choose appropriate activities and tasks compatible to students' level to make them get involved in the lessons. From students' use of the course book, teachers may suggest better strategies for effective learning of skills in order to help them improve their learning process. Besides, it is essential to create open and pleasant learning environment for students to pay attention to the lessons through pair work and group work with various activities. It provides students with opportunities to express their own ideas with their friends and teachers. Finally, teachers should combine various teaching methods in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the limitations of particular method. It helps students. In addition, with regard to material development, teachers should use teaching module more comprehensive and communicative through paying attention to all four skills so that they fit well to learners' language proficiency.

Educational administrators

Educational administrators play an essential role in the success of English teaching and the learning process in a school. First of all, the administrators should help students have an overview of the learning process and get students' awareness of the important role of GEC through the orientation programs. Therefore, students will get involved in their study at school and at home, try harder to improve their skills and knowledge, and are prepared for the examinations. Secondly, there should be more conferences and training programs for teachers to improve their teaching experiences and methods. Additionally, modern material and teaching facilities should be provided more such as, video tapes, exercise books and laboratories to help both teachers and students are able to improve their teaching and learning. Finally, the administrators should create good conditions for students to have more extracurricular activities, revision courses and English speaking clubs so that students will have more chances for practicing English. Additionally, teachers should be offered with seminars and conferences with native speakers for training teaching methods and pronunciation.

Limitations

When carrying out the current study, along with some challenges, the researcher recognizes the following limitations. The first limitation is concerned with the scale and context of the study. Indeed, the study was just carried out with a small number of non-English majored students from questionnaires (100 participants) and from interviews (7 participants) in Bac Lieu University on their evaluation and the use of the course book LIFE A2- B1 (*by John Hughes, Helen Stephenson, and Paul Dummet*). Therefore, the findings discussed in this study cannot be generalized for all non-English majored students at universities in the Mekong Delta. The second limitation comes from research time and duration. The scope of the thesis was carried out within six months, and the data from students' evaluation and use of the course book was collected after they finished GEC 1.



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