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Development orientation of English language centers in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

English is a global language and its role in the integration process of emerging economies is undeniable. Therefore, this article focuses on the development directions of English language centers in Ho Chi Minh City to meet the learners' needs. Through analysis of the Big4 English language the authors have proposed appropriate development directions for them to operate in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam because of their continual growth and great contribution to the cause of national industrialisation and modernisation.

Keywords: development orientation, English language center, Big4, language capacity, Ho Chi Minh City

1. Introduction

English is known as one of the means to accelerate the process of globalisation (Das, 2000; Marlina, 2013) ^[9, 20]. It is also a common language in developed countries and it is also the easiest one to learn compared to other languages in the world (Sinha, 2006) ^[25]. English is a commonly used language in commercial transactions and education systems as it is also, next to French, one of the two main languages of the United Nations. The current position of English is thanks to the development of science and technology, economic and trade, arts and culture, and the global leadership role of the United States throughout the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thanks to the fact that everyone can learn and communicate with each other in English in different situations, we do not have to waste time and money on hiring interpreters and quite often sensitive issues that need to be discussed directly cannot be assisted by them. Similarly, written communication is also drafted bilingually (English and local language) to facilitate transmission and dissemination to audiences and partners globally (Shin, 2013) ^[24].

Therefore, learning English is always promoted and invested appropriately by individuals and institutions in all countries where English is not the official language, especially in developing countries, including Vietnam, to further access foreign culture, world civilisation and shorten the development gap with developed countries (Nguyen, 2013) ^[21]. With that noble mission, English language centers have sprung up like mushrooms in biggest cities of Vietnam for almost 30 years of the process of innovation, openness, integration and development that has been taking place so far (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012) ^[39].

2. English as a leading language in modern business and society

In world history, which country's language becomes the most popular depends on that country's influence in the world. In the past, there were many languages competing with each other for the throne. In the 18th and 19th centuries, influential countries were often colonial ones such as England, France, Portugal, Spain or the Netherlands that owned colonies around the globe. There were wars between these countries to compete for colonies and global hegemony (Young, 2023) ^[40]. The 20th century with two world wars showed the struggle for influence between Germany and the Soviet Union (present-day Russia) in Europe. These are two countries that are not included in the group of colonial countries mentioned above mainly for geographical reasons. The German and Russian languages of these two countries once had the opportunity to become global languages. However, World Wars I and II devastated Europe, leaving an opportunity for development to the big brother on the other side of the Atlantic, the United States of America (USA), with English as the official language.

Following the rotation of the wheel of history, English has become a global language to this day (Ly, 2022; Crystal, 2003) ^[5].

The USA is the leading economic and trade powerhouse in the world. There was a time when the USA economy contributed over 40% to global GDP and trade. To this day, the majority of the world's leading corporations belong to the USA. The USA is also the country with the largest number of billionaires in the world. If most countries in the world, including Vietnam, want to develop their economic ties and become rich and prosperous, they must do business and trade with the USA (Bezdek, 2022) ^[2]. Therefore, all the transactions conducted in English and all the payments executed in USD are the two prerequisites in the process of doing successful business with American companies. Seeing the convenience of using one common language, English, the remaining countries also gradually trade with each other in English. Thus, English is becoming increasingly popular despite the USA's scale and participation in global economic growth is no longer the same, along with the development of emerging powers such as Russia, China or India.

The USA is not only an economic and commercial powerhouse, but also has a great influence on the world in terms of culture, art and education. American musical and cinematic works have the power to spread and are well received around the world, not only in Europe but also throughout the wider Asian region. In addition, American education, and especially university education, is highly liberal and is a model for other countries around the world to follow, even Europe, which is considered so far a cradle of human civilisation. Similar to the list of the world's leading corporations, the USA also holds key positions in university rankings published annually by many organisations (Iskanderova, 2023) ^[15]. To access and comprehend the quintessence of American culture and education mentioned above, learning English is a prerequisite, not only for development opportunities in the USA only but also around the globe, especially in the English-speaking countries, mostly countries with a highest level of development such as England, Australia, and Canada.

Research shows that the role of English is increasingly important in Southeast Asian countries (Kurniarini, 2023) ^[18]. In most countries in ASEAN, due to geopolitical and historical factors, English has almost become the official language alongside indigenous languages, not to mention island countries such as Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. In those island countries, speaking English is so natural that few people still consider it a foreign language, especially in the capitals and biggest cities. In mainland ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia or Myanmar, due to historical and geopolitical factors, English is less emphasised, but there have been significant changes since the beginning of the 21st century onwards with the process of globalisation and international integration taking place very actively on a large scale and at many different levels.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Qualitative analysis for Big 4 branded English language centers in Vietnam

Criteria of research objects selection

This article applies qualitative research methods to analyse some of the largest English language centers nationwide. The

following are four criteria with equal weight proposed as a basis for selecting the four most suitable English language centers (the Big 4) to become our research objects:

- The number of students attending;
- The number of branches nationwide;
- The total revenue of all branches nationwide;
- The satisfaction level of students (and their parents).

First of all, to be included in the group of English language centers that are the input research objects of the shortlisting process, these English language centers must satisfy the condition of continuously operating in Vietnam market since 2000 (having a history of operation of almost a quarter of a century), which means the brand and name must be significantly known to the community and society, a condition that not all the current English language centers can satisfy. Based on the four criteria with equal weight mentioned above, the authors were able to arrange the order of the English language centers from high to low and selected four research objects with the highest scores as follows: ILA Vietnam, British Council Vietnam, VUS English Center, Wall Street English.

Data collection

After selecting a group of four qualitative research objects (called the Big4), the authors will collect information based on direct interviews with directors of a certain number of branches operating in Ho Chi Minh City which is the main market of all the four English language centers, regarding constructing SWOT matrix for analysis and forecasting the future development orientation in terms of services, customers and markets.

Methods of analysis

Regarding research and analysis methods, in addition to direct interviews with directors at a certain number of branches in the Ho Chi Minh City market, the authors will compare potentially contradictory statements of directors at those branches within the same research object, such as ILA Vietnam, and then compare general statements of branch directors of all four research objects (ILA Vietnam, British Council Vietnam, VUS English Center, Wall Street English) in order to obtain the most objective views and conclusions.

4. Business performance of big4 English language centers

4.1. SWOT analysis for branded Big4 English language centers in Ho Chi Minh City

Each English language center has its own strengths and weaknesses and faces different opportunities and challenges. Below, for each English language center, specifically, ILA Vietnam (ILA), British Council Vietnam (BCV), VUS English Center (VUS), Wall Street English (WSE), to avoid overspreading, the authors will focus on their single but most important strength, weakness, opportunity and threat based on the research results obtained from the interviews and surveys conducted.

Case of ILA Vietnam

- a) Strengths – students and learners of different ages can study and communicate in English only with native speakers/teachers, while local teachers are not recommended to participate or only participate as teaching assistants.
- b) Weaknesses – due to only recruiting native

speakers/teachers who rarely stick with and live long term in Vietnam, students and learners have difficulty having the opportunity to study and communicate with permanent native speakers/teachers to be able to study with professional and favourite ones.

c) Opportunities – because studying at ILA follows a philosophy of liberal education, it takes place in a comfortable, friendly and open environment. The learning process is natural and based on practice, communication and experience. So, it is popular with many students and parents and they are used to it and are willing to stick to that kind of education philosophy.

d) Threats – the English language teaching model at ILA is a popular trend in the open and innovative society. So, it is being investigated by many competitors to copy and put into use to enhance their advantages and compete against ILA and also against others.

Case of British Council Vietnam

a) Strengths – high academic reputation, British English standards.

b) Weaknesses – the operational scale is still limited, not yet spreading widely enough in every corner of the biggest cities in Vietnam such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, not to mention the other tier 2 cities in Vietnam.

c) Opportunities – it is attracting people with a specific purpose to come to the UK to live, reunite with family, study, work and start a career.

d) Threats – few people know clearly and think that English can be learned at BCV because the name of this organisation has little or nothing to do with the teaching and learning of English.

Case of VUS English Center

a) Strengths – VUS has been existing for quite a long time. In addition to teaching English to a large number of different Vietnamese people, VUS also has many other special missions and tasks to carry out.

b) Weaknesses – VUS has not extended its arms to smaller cities and towns but only focuses its scope of activities in larger cities directly under the central government of Vietnam, including of course Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

c) Opportunities – English learners in Vietnam, especially the segment of high school students, highly appreciate academics, seriousness and discipline, which is always the strength of the educational environment of Vietnam in detail and of Asia in general.

d) Threats – The academic requirements and inherent qualifications of the starting learners are a bit high and a bit rigid, causing VUS to lose some of potential customer groups.

Case of Wall Street English (WSE)

a) Strengths – WSE's strength is training and enhancing proficiency of English in business and commerce for managers or people working in international organisations and corporations at home and abroad.

b) Weaknesses – WSE is not yet offering service packages for ordinary people with basic learning and communication needs and minimal ability to pay.

c) Opportunities – The global business environment and job opportunities in Vietnam are increasingly expanding, so the need for English for business and social communication in

the office environment increasingly needs to be met to create competitive advantage for Vietnamese compared to foreigners living and working here.

d) Threats – WSE is not in a monopolistic position, as more and more current and potential English language centers have discovered and determined to take advantage of this niche market.

4.2. Preliminary conclusions

The four English language centers mentioned above are usually perceived by the Vietnam market under a common acronym “the Big4”. These are well-known English language centers with well recognised brands, with long-standing markets and many loyal customer segments which are important advantages built up over many years. These advantages have helped them maintain the scope and scale of operations continuously through many difficult times of the economy such as the housing crisis, the global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic (Dana & Salamzadeh, 2021) [8].

In addition to the above advantages, which are very specific to each of the Big4 English language centers, it is a big mistake not to look into the unfinished and incomplete aspects of their sustainable development up to now in order to make right decisions regarding development orientation for the future. All the four English language centers above should re-analyse and re-examine themselves benchmarking at the same time with the remaining competitors within the Big 4. It is necessary to consider whether one's own weaknesses can be overcome through improving one's own scope and methods of operation based on imitating the scope and methods of competitors to partly imitate, learn and homogenise with them in a bid to pose a real threat to their market position and share.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Conclusive remarks

This article has researched the English language as a driving force in the globalisation process of the world economy and modern human society (Ahmad, 2019) [1]. Compared to the global hegemonic position of the US Dollar, which may be shaken due to economic and geopolitical fluctuations, the role of the English language is becoming increasingly important and in the future it will be difficult for other languages in the world that may usurp its throne. The article has also researched the history of the process full of ups and downs that brought English into the position of global language as it is today.

The main research part of the article includes qualitative analysis. The authors conducted a qualitative analysis based on direct interviews with the research objects group of four leading English language centers in the Vietnam market: ILA, VUS, BCV, WSE. These are rather four chains of English language centers with a scale of operations spread across the country, with very different development orientations and philosophies related to their offered services, markets and customers. More importantly, these development orientations have almost not gone through significant changes over the course of operations since its initial establishment.

5.2. Limitations and further research suggestions

In addition to the above achievements, the article cannot

avoid certain limitations due to the lack of finance, the lack of time and insufficiency of other resources in the process of surveying and interviewing the research objects group. The authors themselves feel that the selected group of research objects is not really complete. The authors are temporarily satisfied with the qualitative analysis subsection in which the authors have focused deeply on the group of the four main research objects familiarly called Big4. The development orientations of these four English language centers are representative of the major English language centers in the market of this industry. Hopefully, the future studies, with greater resources and more allotted research time, will continue to overcome the weaknesses of this study. Furthermore, future research needs to add to the group of research objects some English language centers run by Vietnamese entrepreneurs and teaching Vietnamese people studying and working abroad, not necessarily in English speaking countries like US, UK etc., to see how they orient themselves in each of the countries being not their motherland.

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