

FINAL-YEAR PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION REFORM IN VIETNAM: THEIR AWARENESS, ATTITUDE AND READINESS

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Received: 05 May 2026/ Accepted: 20 July 2026/ Published: 30 July 2026

<https://doi.org/10.70117/hdujs.E11.7.2026.1343>

Abstract: *This study investigates pre-service EFL teachers' responses to the recent educational reform regarding the introduction of English as a second language in schools in Vietnam. A quantitative survey design was employed. Data were collected from 127 pre-service EFL teachers at Hong Duc University through a structured questionnaire. The findings show that the participants had a high level of awareness; however, their attitudes were somewhat mixed. Their professional readiness was only moderate. The open-ended responses further revealed that students were particularly concerned about the lack of practical teaching experience, unclear reform requirements, and the challenges of implementing English-rich classroom practices.*

Keywords: *Educational reform, English as a second language, pre-service English students, awareness, attitudes, professional readiness*

1. Introduction

In recent years, English has continued to achieve growing dominance in important fields including international communication, academic exchange, and access to global knowledge. In education, this growing importance has encouraged many stakeholders to reconsider the role of English not merely as a school subject, but as a broader resource for teaching, learning, and participation in other parts of our life. In Vietnam, this trend has become more noticeable in recent policy developments that attempt to strengthen the position of English in the national education system. A major milestone in this direction was the approval of Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg on October 27, 2025, which endorsed the project of introducing English as a second language in schools for the period 2025–2035, with a vision to 2045. The most significant emphasis of the project indicates that English is expected to be employed more widely and effectively in teaching, learning, communication, management, and other school-related activities, thereby creating an English-speaking ecosystem across the education system. This significant shift is aligned with the communicative orientation of Vietnam's 2018 General Education English Curriculum. H.V. Van (2022) points out that the curriculum places communicative competence at the centre of English language teaching and learning, moving beyond a narrow emphasis on grammatical

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knowledge alone. Such changes inevitably have direct impact on teachers, particularly pre-service EFL teachers who are expected not only to deliver language content but also to facilitate communicative purposes. This means that pre-service teachers, particularly pre-service EFL teachers, represent a highly relevant group for investigation since they are close to entering the educational system.

1.1. The implementation of English as second language

Traditionally, in many educational contexts, English has been taught as a foreign language (EFL), primarily as an academic subject focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and the four macro-skills. Within such models, emphasis is often placed on learning about the language rather than using it as a meaningful medium for communication, participation, and knowledge construction. In recent decades, educational reforms in many countries have reflected a broader conceptualisation of English, positioning it not only as a subject of study but also as a resource for interaction, learning, and wider educational engagement.

From a regional perspective, Singapore represents a prominent example of the successful implementation of English as a second language. Through its long-standing bilingual policy, English has been positioned as the country's working language and also as the principal medium of instruction across subjects. Dixon (2005) notes that English serves as the principal language of inter-ethnic communication, whereas other official languages are treated as mother tongues. This case illustrates how English can occupy a central role in schooling and public life while coexisting with other languages. Malaysia offers another relevant example. Its Dual Language Program (DLP) permits participating schools to teach Science and Mathematics in English. Although Malaysia's sociolinguistic context differs from that of Vietnam, the program demonstrates how English can be extended beyond the English language subject itself. Suliman et al. (2021) describe the DLP as a Ministry of Education initiative intended to strengthen English proficiency through subject-based instruction. This case suggests that expanding the role of English in schools often requires both strong policy support and adequate teacher capacity. The Philippines provides a further illustration of English functioning beyond the status of a foreign language subject. English has long been taught as a second language and used as a medium of instruction at specific educational levels and in selected subjects. Executive Order No. 210 states that English should be taught as a second language from Grade 1 and used as the primary medium of instruction at the secondary level in key curriculum areas.

These international examples should not be regarded as direct models for Vietnam. However, they illustrate a broader pattern when educational systems assign English a wider functional role in school life, such changes affect not only curriculum goals but also classroom practices, teacher expectations, and student participation. According to H.V. Van (2022), the curriculum places communicative competence at the centre of English language education and aims to move beyond purely form-focused instruction. Accordingly, the recent reform may be interpreted not as an isolated policy initiative, but as part of a broader reconceptualisation of English education in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, earlier studies indicate that policy aspirations do not automatically translate into successful implementation. L. X. Mai and L. T. Thao (2022) argue that

educational reforms in English language teaching in Vietnam have been shaped by multiple external and contextual factors. Although reform intentions have been strong, implementation has often been uneven and constrained by teacher-related, institutional, and contextual challenges. Similarly, Do et al. (2022) identify persistent gaps between policy goals and classroom realities, including limited teaching resources, uneven pedagogical practices, and insufficient teacher preparation in disadvantaged regions. These findings suggest that any change in the role of English must be examined not only at the policy level but also in relation to teacher education, institutional capacity, and teacher readiness.

1.2. Pre-service English teachers in the context of educational change

In traditional EFL contexts, teachers often focus on explaining language forms, controlling classroom practice, and preparing learners for examinations. In contrast, within a second-language-oriented school environment, teachers are increasingly expected to facilitate authentic communication, design interactive learning experiences, create opportunities for meaningful language use, and support students' active participation through English. This shift does not diminish the importance of linguistic knowledge; rather, it broadens the teacher's role from transmitter of content to facilitator of communicative learning. Therefore, pre-service English teachers are required more than general language teaching competence.

They need a range of competencies to respond effectively to educational reform. First, they need a clear awareness of policy, including knowledge of reform objectives, differences from traditional EFL approaches, and the new expectations such reforms create for classroom practice (Yüceer-Öztürk & Tan-Şişman, 2025). In addition, future teachers need pedagogical adaptability to modify teaching methods, design activities that promote greater use of English, and move beyond narrow emphases on language form and textbook completion. According to Vo et al. (2020) Vietnam's pre-service English teacher education programs were insufficiently effective in preparing student teachers to equip future teachers with the practical skills required to respond to changing professional demands. Furthermore, pre-service teachers need the capacity to establish and manage English-rich classroom environments. Tutyandari (2022) emphasises that preparedness for teaching is crucial in pre-service teacher development, while also showing that their perceived readiness varies across tasks. Finally, they require continuous professional development to update their professional knowledge and respond to changing societal needs. Hoang and Wyatt (2021) found that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy is shaped by language proficiency, practicum experiences, and contextual influences. Successful reform implementation depends not only on what student teachers already know, but also on their preparedness for sustained professional growth. The following figure demonstrates the conceptual framework that guides the study.

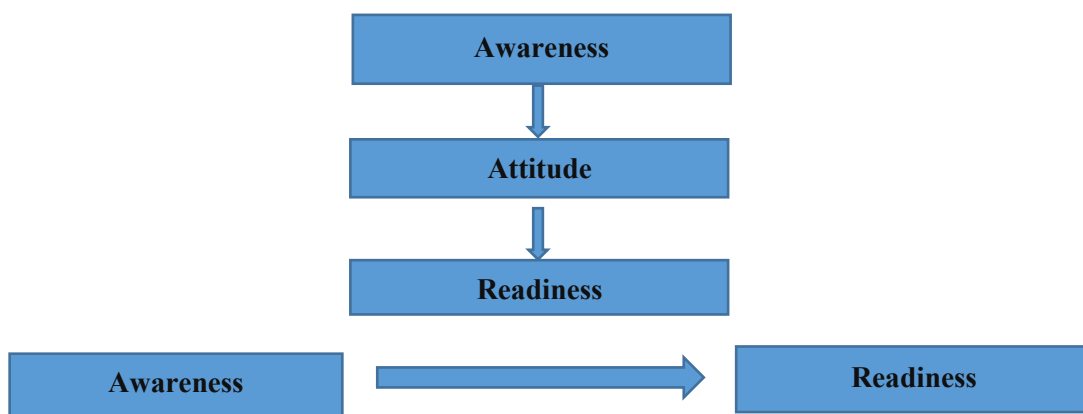


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

As can be seen from Figure 1, pre-service teachers' responses to educational reform can be demonstrated through three interrelated dimensions: awareness, attitudes, and professional readiness. Their awareness may shape how they perceive the reform, while positive attitudes may contribute to better readiness for their career. Professional readiness, in turn, reflects the extent to which pre-service teachers feel prepared to respond to the demands in practice.

The above discussion suggests that several relevant areas have been examined in the literature; however, limited research has integrated them in relation to Vietnam's recent. More specifically, little is known about how pre-service EFL teachers in Vietnam understand the reform, how they perceive it, and how ready they feel to respond professionally. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by investigating pre-service EFL teachers' responses to the recent educational reform, with particular attention to awareness, attitudes, and professional readiness.

1.3. Objectives and Questions of the Research

The study seeks to examine the extent to which pre-service EFL teachers understand the reform; explore their attitudes toward the reform; investigate their perceived professional readiness to respond to the reform; identify the main challenges they perceive and types of support they expect from teacher education programs. Therefore, the researcher attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do final-year pre-service English students understand the recent educational reform?
2. What attitudes do they hold toward the reform?
3. To what extent do they perceive themselves as professionally ready to respond to the reform?
4. What challenges do they perceive and what forms of preparation do they believe are needed?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate pre-service EFL teachers' responses to the recent educational reform in relation to the introduction of English as a second language in schools. It aimed to gain initial insights into students' awareness of the reform, their attitudes toward it, and their perceived professional readiness to respond to its demands. A survey design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to collect data from a group of participants within a relatively short period of time and to identify general patterns in their responses across the three selected dimensions.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study were 127 final-year students majoring in English Pedagogy at Hong Duc University. They were selected because they represent a group of pre-service English teachers who are about to enter the teaching profession and are therefore directly relevant to the study of the educational reform. The following table presents demographic characteristics of the participants.

Among them, the vast majority were female (98.4%), which reflects the gender distribution commonly found in English pedagogy cohorts. Most participants are doing their teaching practicum (94.5%), and a considerable number also reported having tutoring or English teaching experience (46.5%). Such characteristics made the sample appropriate for the purposes of the study, as the participants had already gained at least some exposure to teaching-related contexts.

In terms of self-rated English proficiency, nearly half of the participants rated themselves as good (48.03%), followed by fairly good with just under 30%. The results indicate that the participants generally perceived themselves as having a relatively positive level of English proficiency. Regarding the first source of information about the reform, the largest proportion of students reported lecturers/university (29.92%), followed by self-study (26.77%) and social media/news accounted for 24.41%. Fewer students selected friends/classmates (13.39%) or other sources (5.51%). This suggests that both institutional channels and students' own efforts played important roles in introducing them to the reform.

2.3. Data collection procedure, data analysis and reliability

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of five sections. The first section used to collect participants' background information. The other four sections focus on exploring the students' opinions on their awareness of the education change, their attitude toward it, their readiness for new education era.

The questionnaire was created online through Google Forms. Then, the link was shared with pre-service EFL teachers through Zalo groups. The voluntary participants were notified that their responses were collected for research purpose only. In addition, the information provided was kept confidential.

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively. First, participants' responses were downloaded from Google Form. Then, they are coded and entered into SPSS, a statistical software package for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize students' responses in relation to awareness, attitudes,

and professional readiness. A one - sample t- test was also employed with a test value of 3.41, which represents the starting point of high level for the awareness and readiness scales and the positive level for the attitude scale.

The questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .949 (> 0.7) for 15 items. This result suggests that the instrument had a high level of internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019).

3. Major Findings and Discussion

3.1. Final-Year English Pedagogy Students' Awareness of the Change in Education Policy

Table 1. Students' Awareness of the Change in Education Policy

Statement	Test value = 3.41					
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	T	Sig.(2 tailed)
8. Understanding the introduction of English as a second language.	1	5	3.76	.861	4.527	.000
9. Understanding the basic goals of this reform.	1	5	3.83	.846	5.551	.000
10. Understanding differences from teaching English only as a school subject.	1	5	3.80	.829	5.235	.000
11. Understanding changes of roles of English teachers.	1	5	3.73	.868	4.185	.000
12. Understanding the professional expectations of future English teachers.	1	5	3.80	.800	5.426	.000
N = 127						

(Note: 1.00-1.80: Very low; 1.81-2.60: Low; 2.61-3.40: Moderate; 3.41-4.20: High; 4.21-5.00: Very high)

Overall, the table shows that the students generally demonstrated a high level of awareness. All five items recorded mean scores above the benchmark value of 3.41, indicating students' responses fall within the "high" category.

Among the five statements, the highest mean score was observed for the statement of students' understanding the basic goals of this reform ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .846$). This was followed by the statement 10 and statement 12, $M = 3.80$, $SD = .829$ and $M = 3.80$, $SD = .800$ respectively. These results suggest that students had a relatively clear grasp not only of the overall goals of the reform but also of its key distinctions from traditional approaches to English teaching, as well as the professional demands associated with it. The lowest mean score was found for the statement 11 ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .868$). Although this item received the lowest rating among five statements, it still remained within the high level and above the test value, suggesting that students were generally aware of potential role changes, albeit to a slightly lesser extent.

In addition, the results of the one-sample t-test indicated that all five items were significantly higher than the test value of 3.41. This confirms that students' awareness was not only descriptively high but also statistically significant when compared to the threshold for the high level.

3.2. Final-year English Pedagogy Students' Attitudes toward the Reform

Table 2. Students' Attitudes toward the Reform

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Test Value = 3.41	
					t	Sig. (2 tailed)
13. The belief in the necessity of the reform.	1	5	3.82	.868	5.312	.000
14. Strengthening the role of English.	1	5	3.44	.870	.401	.689
15. Benefits to school students.	1	5	3.57	.793	2.231	.027
16. The Confidence about working in the context of this reform.	1	5	3.33	.836	-1.069	.287
17. The concern about the abilities of newly graduated teachers.	1	5	3.50	.853	1.241	.217
N = 127						

(Note: 1.00-1.80: Very negative; 1.81-2.60: Negative; 2.61-3.40: Neutral; 3.41-4.20: Positive; 4.21-5.00: Very positive)

The results indicate that pre-service EFL teachers generally held positive attitudes toward the educational reform, although their responses were not entirely consistent across all items.

The highest mean score was recorded for the belief that this reform is a necessary direction in education ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .868$). This suggests that students clearly recognized the importance and necessity of the reform. The result was also significantly higher than the test value of 3.41, $t(126) = 5.312$, $p < .001$, confirming a strong level of agreement. A similarly positive trend was observed for the opinion about its benefits to school students ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .793$), which was also significantly higher than the test value, $t(126) = 2.231$, $p = .027$. This indicates that students generally acknowledged the potential benefits of the reform for learners.

In contrast, the remaining statements did not receive as strong agreements as mentioned ones. For the statement about role of English in the school environment, a mean score of 3.44 ($SD = .870$) did not differ significantly from the test value, $t(126) = .401$, $p = .689$, even though this value falls within the positive range. Students presented their moderate confidence in terms of working in the context of this reform as shown with $M = 3.33$, $SD = .836$. Moreover, the result was also not significantly different from the test value, $t(126) = -1.069$, $p = .287$. The final statement, asking about the concern of newly graduated teachers' abilities, yielded a mean score of 3.50 ($SD = .853$). While this value numerically falls within the positive range, it should be interpreted carefully, as the statement reflects concern rather than support. The t-test result ($t(126) = 1.241$, $p = .217$) indicates that this concern, although noticeable, was not significantly above the threshold.

These findings suggest that students' attitudes toward the reform were generally positive but somewhat mixed.

3.3. Final-year English Pedagogy Students' Professional Readiness

Table 3. Students' professional readiness

Statement	Test Value = 3.41					
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2 tailed)
18. Readiness to improve my professional knowledge.	1	5	3.51	.933	1.229	.221
19. Readiness to design teaching activities.	1	5	3.56	.870	1.931	.056
20. Readiness to adjust my teaching methods.	1	5	3.57	.931	1.900	.060
21. Readiness to create a classroom environment to promotes greater use of English.	1	5	3.35	.939	-.668	.505
22. Readiness to respond effectively to the practical demands.	1	5	3.50	.899	1.079	.283

N=127

(Note: 1.00-1.80: Very low; 1.81-2.60: Low; 2.61-3.40: Moderate; 3.41-4.20: High; 4.21-5.00: Very high)

Overall, the results show that students' professional readiness was generally at a moderate to high level, although none of the items exceeded the test value of 3.41 to a statistically significant extent.

Among the items, the highest mean score was reported for their readiness to adjust their teaching methods to align with this reform. A similar pattern was observed for their readiness to design teaching activities that encourage students to use English more frequently, $M = 3.57$, $SD = .931$ and $M = 3.56$, $SD = .870$ respectively. These findings suggest that students felt relatively confident in adapting their teaching approaches and planning communicative activities. However, the one-sample t-test indicated that these scores were not significantly higher than the test value, $t(126) = 1.900$, $p = .060$ and $t(126) = 1.931$, $p = .056$, respectively. The lowest mean score ($M = 3.35$, $SD = .939$) for the students' readiness to create a classroom environment that promotes greater use of English among students revealed the moderate range. The t-test result ($t(126) = -.668$, $p = .505$) also confirmed that this score did not differ significantly from the test value.

The findings indicate that their readiness is present but still developing, particularly in the more practical, classroom-based dimensions of implementation.

3.4. Students' perceptions of challenges and preparation needs

The participants reported that the greatest challenge in responding to the reform, the most frequently mentioned issue was lack of practical teaching experience, with 34 responses. Other common themes included unclear awareness of reform requirements and difficulty creating an English-rich classroom environment, 30 and 32 responses respectively. The pressure on newly graduated teachers accounted for 31 responses. These findings suggest that students' concerns extended beyond general awareness of the reform to practical classroom and professional issues.

Regarding what teacher education programs should do to better prepare students for the reform, the most common suggestion was more practice-oriented training and workshops, making up 43 responses. This was followed by clearer policy-related orientation and explanation with 42 responses and more opportunities for practicum and classroom simulation (42 responses). These responses indicate that students expected stronger practical and reform-related support from teacher education programs.

In terms of the knowledge or skills students still need to improve, the most frequently mentioned area was classroom management and activity design (43 responses). Other commonly reported themes were confidence in implementing English-rich teaching environment and practical adaptation to real school settings, 41 responses and 43 responses respectively. This suggests that students perceived their main weaknesses as lying in the practical dimensions of teaching rather than in general awareness of the reform.

The open-ended responses support the quantitative findings by showing that although students were generally aware of the reform and moderately positive toward it, they still felt the need for clearer reform-related awareness, stronger practical preparation, and greater classroom-based confidence.

3.5. Discussion

The present study reveals that pre-service EFL teachers exhibited a generally positive response to the recent educational reform, though their perspectives varied across different categories.

Regarding the awareness of the reform, the participants displayed a commendable overarching comprehension of the reform. This high level of awareness can likely be attributed to the reform's alignment with the communicative orientation embedded in Vietnam's 2018 General Education English Curriculum, which advocates shifting English from a mere academic subject to a functional tool for broader school life (Van, 2022). Despite this conceptual clarity, the students scored relatively lower when it came to awareness the specific professional expectations placed upon them. This discrepancy indicates a critical gap between policy awareness and practical role comprehension. Such a finding corroborates the research of Yüceer-Öztürk and Tan-Şişman (2025), which highlighted that while pre-service English teachers may be cognizant of curriculum changes, they frequently lack a profound grasp of the ensuing practical and professional demands.

In terms of attitudes, the students' perspectives were largely affirmative yet characterized by mixed underlying sentiments. While participants widely acknowledged the necessity of the reform and its potential educational benefits, their confidence in implementing it was more limited. Many expressed concern that the reform's demands could exceed the capabilities of novice teachers in real classroom settings. Consequently, while there is robust ideological support, personal efficacy remains a point of apprehension. This idea is shown in the study of Tutyandari (2022), who noted that pre-service English teachers often exhibit positive attitudes toward new pedagogical requirements while simultaneously grappling with low confidence regarding their actual classroom enactment.

Furthermore, the study indicates that the students possessed only a moderate degree of professional readiness. These results align with previous literature demonstrating that teacher preparedness is frequently inconsistent across various pedagogical tasks and is primarily cultivated through experiential learning rather than mere academic coursework (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Tutyandari, 2022). Within the specific context of Vietnam, Hoang and Wyatt (2021) underscore that the self-efficacy of pre-service teachers is intricately linked to their language proficiency, practicum exposure, and contextual realities. This framework effectively elucidates why the participants in this study felt more proficient in the theoretical planning phases than in the dynamic execution of English-rich classroom instruction.

Qualitative insights gleaned from the open-ended responses further substantiate these quantitative trends. The most pervasive challenges identified by the students included a deficit in practical teaching experience, ambiguity surrounding the specific operational requirements of the reform, and the logistical difficulties of establishing an immersive English-speaking classroom ecosystem. These pressing needs resonate with the findings of Vo et al. (2020), who concluded that current teacher education frameworks frequently fall short in adequately preparing candidates for evolving professional paradigms. Furthermore, the students' concerns reflect the broader systemic issues identified by Do et al. (2022), which emphasize the persistent disconnect between ambitious language policy objectives and the stark realities of classroom implementation, particularly concerning practical barriers.

It becomes evident that while pre-service EFL teachers genuinely appreciate the intrinsic value and necessity of the educational reform, their practical confidence and professional readiness are currently insufficient to seamlessly execute its more rigorous demands. This highlights a critical imperative for teacher education programs to recalibrate their curricula. By prioritizing experiential learning and targeted pedagogical training, these programs can effectively scaffold students' transition from possessing merely a theoretical awareness of the reform to demonstrating robust, classroom-ready implementation capabilities (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Vo et al., 2020).

4. Conclusion

This study examined pre-service EFL teachers' responses to the recent educational reform related to the introduction of English as a second language in schools in Vietnam, focusing on three dimensions: awareness, attitudes, and professional readiness. The findings showed that the participants generally had a fairly good awareness of the reform and viewed it as a necessary educational direction. However, their attitudes were not entirely uniform, as their support was accompanied by concern about its practical demands. Their professional readiness was also only moderate, particularly in relation to creating classroom environments that promote greater use of English.

This study is limited by its focus on one group of students at a single university and by its reliance on self-reported data. Future research could expand the sample, include students from other institutions, and combine surveys with interviews or classroom-based data in order to gain a deeper awareness of how pre-service English teachers are prepared to respond to educational reform.

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