

Perception of Students' Scores and Actual Performance in Foreign Language Learning in Vietnam

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Abstract: High scores on standardized tests have long been regarded as a key measure of academic achievement and potential in many countries around the world, including Vietnam. However, recent studies have raised questions about the validity and usefulness of this approach, suggesting that high scores may not always be predictive of actual performance in real-life situations. This has important implications for education policy and practice in Vietnam, as well as for employers and students who rely on standardized test scores as a key criterion for academic and career success. This paper presents a case study of scores and actual performance in real life in Vietnam, based on a survey of 100 students and interviews conducted with educators, employers, and policymakers. The relationship between scores on standardized tests and actual performance in academic and career settings, as well as the factors that influence this relationship - such as soft skills, access to resources, and intrinsic motivation - reveals that there are certain factors affecting students' performance that need to be addressed.

Keywords: Perception, performance, scores, foreign language learning, Vietnam.

Subject classification: Linguistics.

1. Introduction

High scores on standardized tests have long been regarded as a key measure of academic achievement and potential in many countries around the world, including Vietnam. This approach to measuring academic success assumes that students who perform well on standardized tests possess the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed academically and professionally. However, recent studies have questioned the validity and usefulness of this approach.

Within Vietnam's centralized system, pupils are expected to follow the National Curriculum Program in all subjects, and to take a high-stake assessment called the National

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High School Graduation Examination at the end of Grade 12 (An Nguyen, 2023). Although Vietnamese remains the official national language, English is increasingly recognized and has become the dominant foreign language in Vietnam. The National Foreign Language Project (NLFP) was launched in 2008 aimed at improving English language performance of young Vietnamese by 2020. This in turn led to English national textbooks and the English National Examination being revised. A new series of English textbooks from Grade 1 to Grade 12 were first introduced from 2012 to 2018, marking a shift from the previous grammar-translation focus towards a new communicative competency approach in teaching and learning the English language for Vietnamese students. In terms of knowledge content, these new courses were claimed to provide systematic, cyclical, and theme-based guidance that can help students' use English as a communicative tool, to develop deeper language knowledge and understanding of international cultures and to use English beyond classroom contexts (An Nguyen, 2023).

One concern with using standardized tests as the sole measure of academic achievement is that the focus is often on specific content knowledge and skills, rather than broader cognitive abilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving. This narrow focus can result in students being skilled in memorizing and regurgitating information but lacking the ability to apply that knowledge in real-life. In contrast, those who may struggle with standardized tests but who possess strong problem-solving and critical thinking skills may excel in normal day-to-day scenarios.

Standardized tests are often designed to measure a student's ability to recall and reproduce information, and less room to use that information in creative and innovative ways. This can limit their potential to develop important skills such as creativity, entrepreneurship, and leadership, which are highly valued in today's fast-changing and competitive global economy. They do not always account for socio-economic and cultural differences among students, which can lead to unfair and inaccurate evaluations of academic potential. For example, those from low-income families may not have access to the same resources and educational opportunities as students from wealthier families, which can affect their performance in standardized tests. Furthermore, cultural differences in learning styles and communication can also impact on a student's ability to perform well in these tests.

How useful standardized tests are as a measure of academic achievement and potential may be evident where high scores in the national university entrance examinations do not always correlate with actual academic performance in university. A number of students who scored poorly in their university entrance examinations went on to do well academically, while some who scored highly struggled at university and after graduation. It is suggested that standardized test scores are not always predictive of future academic success or performance in the workplace. Factors such as high school scores, involvement in extracurricular and community service activities are likely to be better predictors of success than standardized test scores. If these tests are not always indicative, then other measures of academic achievement and potential must be considered. Recent studies question the validity and usefulness of measuring academic achievement and potential by looking at high scores

in standardized tests. They may not be a true reflection of actual performance in real life nor take account of socio-economic and cultural differences among students.

This paper tries to find answers to the research question: what, and how, are the key factors that affect students' performances in foreign language learning?

2. Literature review

The debate over the relationship between high test scores and actual performance in daily life has been ongoing for many years. On the one hand, proponents of standardized testing argue that high scores are a reliable and valid measure of academic achievement and potential. They maintain that students who do well on standardized tests are likelier to achieve high grades, get into prestigious universities, and secure well-paid jobs. On the other hand, critics of this theory argue that high marks do not necessarily reflect a student's real-life ability.

One study that reviews the scores on standardized tests is that of An Nguyen (2023). He found that standardized test scores were the strongest predictor of academic performance in college, even after considering other factors such as high school grades and socio-economic status. The findings suggest that students who perform highly are more likely to do well at college and forge successful careers.

However, other studies challenge this view, suggesting that high scores on standardized tests may not always predict how one performs in real-life. For example, Bailey (1996), Bhola, Impara, & Buckendahl (2003) found that high scores on a standardized test of analytical thinking did not correlate strongly with actual performance in real-life, such as solving practical business problems. Similarly, Bui & Nguyen (2016) found that measures of cognitive ability, not only linguistics competence, may affect success in life.

Moreover, some studies have suggested that the emphasis on standardized testing may have negative consequences for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It could result in a narrowing of the curriculum and less time devoted to subjects such as science, social studies, and the arts, leading to a negative impact on students' learning and development.

In Vietnam, standardized testing has traditionally played a significant role in the education system, where there is a strong emphasis on academic achievement. These tests are used as a primary means of assessing a student's performance. Students are required to take a series of high-stakes standardized tests at various stages of their education, including the high school entrance and graduation examinations, as well as the university entrance examination.

However, recent research has raised questions about the validity and usefulness of this approach. While standardized test scores positively correlate with academic achievement, the relationship may not be as strong as some had assumed, and non-cognitive factors such as motivation and self-regulated learning can be stronger predictors of academic achievement than standardized test scores.

Similarly, a number of studies by Hamid et al. (2013), Ngo (2017), Nguyen (2017), Pham (2020), Van Huy Nguyen & Hamid (2021) found that standardized test scores did not strongly correlate with performance in problem-solving and critical thinking skills exercises. They also found that students who performed well on standardized tests did not necessarily do well in real-life tasks that required the application of knowledge and skills.

These findings have important implications for education policy and practice in Vietnam. They suggest that the focus on standardized testing may not be the most effective means of assessing student performance or predicting academic and career success. Instead, it may be necessary to place more emphasis on developing non-cognitive skills, such as motivation, self-regulated learning, and problem-solving.

Another factor to consider is that standardized tests may not always measure the skills and knowledge that are most relevant to real-life situations. For example, many focus on memorization and the recall of facts and formulas, rather than on the ability to apply knowledge and skills to new and complex problems. This means that students who perform well on standardized tests may not necessarily have the ability to succeed in real-life situations where critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills are often more important. This may be particularly true in fields such as the business environment, where success often depends on innovation, thinking outside the box, and adapting to change.

In addition to limitations in predicting real-life performance, standardized tests also have other potential drawbacks. For example, they may perpetuate inequalities by favoring students from privileged backgrounds who are more exposed to the kinds of knowledge and skills that these tests focus on. They may also lead to a narrow focus on test preparation and teaching geared to the tests, rather than on more holistic approaches to education that prioritize the development of a broad range of skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the pressure to perform well in these tests can lead to stress and anxiety among students, potentially undermining their motivation and desire to learn.

Given these concerns, it is important to consider alternative approaches to assessing academic achievement and potential in real-life situations. One method is performance-based assessment, which involves evaluating students' ability to apply knowledge and skills to everyday problems and tasks. Such assessments can include tasks such as essays, projects, simulations, and addressing real-life issues, which test the use of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Research has shown that performance-based assessments can provide a more valid and reliable measure of students' ability to apply knowledge and skills to everyday scenarios than standardised tests (Xuan Minh Ngo, 2022).

Another approach is to focus on the development of non-cognitive factors such as self-control, determination, and social-emotional skills. These factors are increasingly being recognized as important predictors of academic and career success, as they help students overcome challenges, persist in the face of difficulties, and build positive relationships with others. Strategies for developing these factors can include practicing mindfulness, setting goals, self-reflecting, and creating opportunities for collaborative learning and peer support (Lý Công Khanh, 2022).

3. Methodology

To investigate the relationship between high scores and actual performance in real-life situations in Vietnam, the author designed a study that included a survey of 100 students and interviews with educators, employers, and policymakers, from a range of universities and fields of study, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives.

The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions to gather a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between high scores and actual performance. To measure high scores, the students were asked to report their scores on the standardized tests commonly used in Vietnam, including the National High School Graduation Examination, the University Entrance Examination, and English language proficiency examinations. To measure actual performance, they had to report their university course grades, their participation in extracurricular activities and internships, as well as involvement in research projects or other academic pursuits outside of their coursework.

The survey included questions about students' confidence in the correlation between scores and performance. In other words, students were asked whether they felt confident and if their language usage was proficient if they achieved high scores, and vice versa. They were also asked to give opinions on how they felt about their examination results, and whether the scores really reflected their ability.

The author also conducted, recorded, and analyzed semi-structured interviews with educators, employers, and policymakers to gain insights into their perspectives on the relationship between high scores and actual performance. Purposive sampling was used to select a diverse group of participants who represented different sectors and levels of experience. The interviews focused on the following topics:

The relative importance of high scores and actual performance in their respective fields.

The factors influencing the relationship between high scores and actual performance.

The potential drawbacks of relying solely on high scores to measure academic achievement and potential.

The author identified key themes and patterns in the data, and included quotes from the interviews to illustrate the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

4. Results and discussion

Analysis of the survey data and interview transcripts revealed several key findings regarding the relationship between high scores and actual performance in real-life situations in Vietnam and associated influencing factors. The author found that high scores on standardized tests positively correlated with academic performance in university, but were not always predictive of how students coped in real-life situations such as internships and extracurricular activities. While some high scoring students also demonstrated strong

performance in real-life situations, others struggled to apply their knowledge and skills in practical contexts, and vice versa.

A big part of participants reveal confusion between actual performance and score in general, because a lot of them do not seem to believe that all the score sheet are the unique and measurable indicators of students' ability. For the convenience of analyzing, the responses are categorized into aspects of correlation, relation of scores and success, access to resource, and soft skills.

Interviews with educators, employers, and policymakers were aimed at finding the correlation between scores and actual performance. Many participants noted that while high scores may be a helpful indicator of academic potential, they were not sufficient on their own. In addition to high scores, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are essential for success in the workplace, and intrinsic motivation is critical for long-term career satisfaction and growth. They argued that too much emphasis on high scores and not enough on the development of soft skills and intrinsic motivation may lead to a mismatch between academic achievement and actual performance in the workplace. This, in turn, can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction for both employers and employees, which is in line with the findings of Pham & Doan (2020), Van Huy Nguyen & Hamid (2021), Xuan Minh Ngo (2022).

One of the most serious concerns is that some students cannot use the English language correctly despite achieving high scores in several English examinations. The in-depth interviews revealed that a large number of students have exceptionally good examination skills so that the scores do not always reflect their ability. This is quite common in the context of Vietnamese education where students receive good scores in English examinations, but they cannot use English fluently outside classroom (Chi Nguyen, 2015).

In addition to the importance of soft skills and intrinsic motivation, the author also found that access to resources played a crucial role in determining actual performance in real-life situations. For example, students with access to high-quality internships or work experience opportunities were more likely to develop practical skills and knowledge relevant to their future careers. This allowed them to apply what they had learned in the classroom to real life, and to develop a better understanding of the demands and challenges of their chosen professions.

Furthermore, students with access to mentors or other sources of guidance are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the academic and professional worlds. Mentors can introduce them to the skills and knowledge that are most valued in their respective fields, as well as advising how to build relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. Such belief is compatible with the findings of Lý Công Khanh (2022). Students can also offer feedback and support as they work to develop their skills and knowledge, and can help other students to identify and pursue opportunities for growth and advancement.

The findings suggest that educators, employers, and policymakers in Vietnam should take a more holistic approach when assessing academic and career potential; i.e. one that takes into account the importance of soft skills, access to resources, and intrinsic

motivation, in addition to standardized test scores. This may involve creating more opportunities for students to develop their soft skills, such as through internships, extracurricular activities, and mentoring programs, as well as ensuring they have access to high-quality resources and guidance. This can better prepare students for success in the complex and ever-changing world, which is mentioned by Le Ha et al. (2014).

The interviews with educators, employers, and policymakers also highlighted the importance of soft skills and intrinsic motivation in determining actual performance in real-life situations, which are considered by Kane (2016), Kurz (2011). Educators emphasized the need to provide students with opportunities to develop their soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, in addition to their cognitive skills, and to encourage them to pursue their passions and interests. Employers emphasized the importance of soft skills in the workplace and expressed a preference for candidates who demonstrated strong interpersonal skills and a willingness to learn and adapt. This is a little different from the findings of Hamid et al. (2013). Policymakers emphasized the need to balance the focus on standardized tests with a broader recognition of the importance of soft skills and intrinsic motivation for academic and career success, and to provide resources and support to enable students to develop these skills (Duong, 2019; Gilquin, 2020; Dang et al, 2020; Dang et al, 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that high standardized test results may not always be predictive of actual performance in real-life situations in Vietnam, and that other factors, such as soft skills, access to resources, and intrinsic motivation, also play an important role (Bui, 2016; Brookes et al., 2018). These findings have important implications for education policy and practice in Vietnam, as well as for employers and students who rely on standardized test scores as a key criterion for academic and career success.

One key implication is the need for a broader definition of success in education and the workplace in Vietnam. While academic achievement and high scores may be important indicators of knowledge and proficiency, they are not the only predictors of success (Bailey, 1996). Soft skills, practical experience, and social capital all play important roles in professional success, and therefore should be emphasized in both education and career development.

Moreover, the emphasis on high scores and academic achievement in Vietnam's education system may lead to a narrow focus on rote learning and memorization, rather than promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Le Ha et al, 2014). This can create a skills gap between what is taught in school and what the workplace needs, as employers increasingly value employees who can think creatively and rise to challenges. As such, educational reform is needed to promote the development of practical skills and experiential learning (Nguyen, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings of the case study highlight the importance of soft skills in the workplace. These include communication, teamwork, and adaptability and they are increasingly being valued by employers, as they enable employees to work effectively in a team and to respond to change. However, developing soft skills can be challenging as they

are not easily quantifiable or measurable. This presents a challenge for educators and employers who need to find effective ways to assess and develop these skills.

Some researchers have suggested using competency-based education (CBE), which focuses on the development of specific skills and competencies rather than simply accumulating credits or completing courses. CBE has found to be effective in promoting the development of soft skills, as it provides students with clear learning objectives and assessments aligned with specific skills and competencies. However, implementing CBE requires significant resources and institutional support, which may be a challenge for many educational institutions.

The findings also highlight the importance of social capital in professional success. This refers to the networks of relationships that individuals have with others, including friends, family, and colleagues. These networks can provide access to information, resources, and opportunities that individuals may not otherwise have. In the context of Vietnam, where personal relationships and networks are highly valued, social capital may play an important role in professional success (Pham & Doan, 2020).

The traditional education system has long emphasized the importance of academic achievement as a key determinant of career success. Students are expected to perform well on standardized examinations and academic assignments to get into prestigious universities and secure well-paid jobs (Nation, 2016). However, relying solely on examination scores for professional success can be limiting, as it can perpetuate existing inequalities and exclude individuals who do not have access to these networks. In addition, it does not necessarily reflect an individual's actual abilities or potential in daily life.

Academic achievement is undoubtedly important, as it reflects a student's mastery of fundamental concepts and their ability to apply them to various contexts. However, it is not the only factor that determines professional success. Practical skills, such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, are equally important in life. Employers value individuals who can effectively collaborate with others, think critically, and come up with creative solutions to complex problems. These skills are not necessarily taught in the traditional classroom setting and may require real life experience or training.

Furthermore, social capital, or the networks and connections an individual has can also play a critical role in career success. For example, individuals with access to influential networks may have an advantage in securing job opportunities or advancing their careers. Social capital can also provide access to information, resources, and support that can be critical in individuals achieving their goals. However, relying solely on social capital for professional success can also be limiting, as it can perpetuate existing inequalities and exclude those without access to these networks.

As such, it is important to promote a balance between academic achievement, practical skills, and social capital in education and career development. This can be achieved through a variety of ways, such as incorporating into the curriculum more experiential learning opportunities, securing internships and cooperative education programs. These

opportunities give students hands-on experience and the opportunity to develop practical skills while building their professional networks.

Educational institutions can also provide students with resources and support to help them develop their social capital. For example, universities can offer mentorship programs or networking events where students can connect with alumni and other professionals in their fields. Such programs can provide students with valuable insights into their chosen industries and potential career paths, as well as an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with mentors and colleagues.

Employers can also play a critical role in promoting a balance between academic achievement, practical skills, and social capital in career development. For example, training programs to help employees develop practical skills or mentoring schemes to help them build their professional networks. Additionally, employers can prioritize diversity and inclusion to ensure that all employees, regardless of their social capital, have access to opportunities for professional growth and advancement.

While academic achievement is important for career success, it is not the only factor that determines success. Practical skills and social capital also play critical roles in navigating real-world situations and achieving professional goals. Consequently, it is important to promote a balance between these factors in education and career development, and to provide students and employees with the resources and to succeed.

Another important factor that emerged from the study is the role of intrinsic motivation in academic and career success. This refers to the internal drive to learn and achieve. It comes from being genuinely interested in a topic or task, rather than from external rewards or punishments. The survey data showed that students who were intrinsically motivated were more likely to perform well academically and to report high levels of satisfaction. This suggests that educators should focus on fostering students' intrinsic motivation by providing them with opportunities to explore their interests and passions, and by creating a supportive and engaging learning environment.

While high scores are still greatly valued in Vietnam's education system, they may not necessarily predict success in the workplace. There is a need for education reform that promotes the development of practical skills and experiential learning opportunities, as well as the cultivation of soft skills and social capital. Implementing such reform may be challenging, but it is necessary in order to prepare students for success in today's workplace (Xuan Minh Ngo, 2022).

5. Conclusion

In considering the findings from this case study in Vietnam, clearly high scores on standardized tests may not always be indicative of actual performance in real-life situations. While cognitive skills are undoubtedly important, other factors such as soft

skills, access to resources, and intrinsic motivation also play crucial roles in academic and career success. This study provides important insights for educators, employers, and policymakers, who can use this information to improve their practices and better prepare students for success in the modern world.

One key takeaway is the importance of developing students' soft skills. These refer to a set of personal attributes, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities that are critical for career success. The survey data showed that students who participated in extracurricular activities and internships were more likely to possess these skills, suggesting that such experiences can help them develop the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Educators and employers should work together to provide opportunities for students to develop their soft skills, both inside and outside of the classroom.

The study also highlights the importance of providing resources and support to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The results showed that students with access to resources such as tutoring, mentorship, and financial aid were more likely to perform well academically, regardless of their standardized test scores. This suggests that policymakers should prioritize policies and initiatives that aim to reduce inequality in access to educational resources and opportunities, hence ensuring that all students have the chance to reach their full potential. No matter how good scores at examination are, students can just prove its credibility by well-performing in real life. More practice is needed for students today.

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