

# Assessing The Needs Of Learning English Of Middle Managers At Businesses In Ho Chi Minh City – Viet Nam

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## **Abstract**

*Analyzing current situation and learners' needs in learning a foreign language is a requisite for making decisions related to the determination of program objectives, curriculum design and materials as well as the selection of appropriate teaching methodology and evaluation. This article presents results of the survey on the current situation and needs of learning English of middle managers at businesses in HCMC with the aims of providing necessary information for predicting possible trends of foreign language learning in HCMC in the era of integration in the region and in the world.*

**Keywords:** communication skills, English, middle managers

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## **I. Introduction**

Today, along with the continuous development of science and technology and the strong globalization process, the traditional competitive factors of businesses such as capital, raw materials, technology, etc. have gradually increased. becomes saturated. Instead, a new resource, a new competitive factor that is decisive for the existence and development of businesses is people - human resources.

Human resources clearly play a very important role in connecting and seizing opportunities and challenges in international economic integration and thereby helping businesses have the right and proactive strategies in the future international economic integration as well as in operating activities, production, business and export. Investing in the management team is also one of the top concerns of business leaders to create competitive advantage. Therefore, training English communication skills for this team is also one of the very important activities.

First of all, training communication skills in English will help enhance the communication role of managers, especially in multinational working environments where the common language of work communication is English or in the workplace. environments that regularly exchange business activities with international partners. Communication skills include reporting, speaking, listening and writing skills. Sending and receiving information clearly, accurately, completely and effectively is an essential requirement of this skill. Managers must be able to inform associates of events, decisions, and changes effectively. Speaking, persuasion and presentation skills are now considered the most important communication skills of a manager. Having an idea but not convincing others to believe and follow it will certainly fail.

In addition, managers working in today's international and globalized communication environment must be proficient in English in communication. A weakness that many managers often have is not knowing how to listen. Hearing and accepting differences are important elements of development. Speaking and listening are difficult, but writing is even more challenging. Writing correctly, clearly and expressing ideas convincingly are skills that needs to be practiced regularly. In addition to internal business communication, managers also need to practice public communication skills such as giving speeches, giving interviews, writing articles, etc.

Middle managers play a very important role in capturing information and implementing business strategies. They are the people who directly organize the implementation of work in accordance with company policies and the goals of the board of directors, describe and discuss information and policies from the board of directors to low-level managers. More importantly, middle managers are the ones who inspire and guide lower-level managers to help them improve performance and accomplish business goals. In addition, middle managers can also communicate with superiors by providing suggestions and feedback to the board of directors, helping to improve the company's performance with a broader vision and strategy. With such an important role, improving the capacity of the middle managers is inevitable. Only by improving the capacity and fostering the capacity of the middle management team, especially the ability to communicate, capture and convey information according

to language standards consistent with the globalization trend, can we stimulate and promote the proposal and management abilities of middle-level human resources.

## **II. Theoretical Background**

To be able to provide another perspective, another piece of the puzzle to complete the overall picture of the need for English communication skills training for managers, specifically middle managers at businesses in Ho Chi Minh city, the author used the foreign language needs analysis framework of Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) to build a survey questionnaire. More specifically, this analytical framework provides information including:

- + Information about the learner's foreign language learning environment.
- + Personal information about foreign language learners: factors that can impact their learning such as foreign language learning experience and other cultural information such as wishes, learning means, subjective needs.
- + Information about the learner's current foreign language abilities (what are their current foreign language skills like...)
- + Learners' desires (short-term needs)
- + Learning needs: information about how to learn a foreign language effectively
- + Learner's career information: objective needs, what foreign language will be used for work activities.
- + Information notified to employees by employers.
- + The effectiveness of English communication skills training for middle managers

### **Participants**

A total of 144 participants responded to the survey questions. All of the people surveyed are middle-level managers working in different professional fields such as import-export, tourism, restaurants - hotels, logistics, accounting, finance - banking, Construction services, education, legal services, wholesale...

### **Some information about the middle managers**

**Table 1. Personal Information**

| Fields                        | Items                             | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <b>1. Gender</b>              | a. Male                           | 87            | 60.4            |
|                               | b. Female                         | 57            | 39.6            |
| <b>2. Professional fields</b> | a. Import-Export                  | 8             | 5.6             |
|                               | b. Tourism                        | 18            | 12.5            |
|                               | c. Hospitality                    | 6             | 4.2             |
|                               | d. Logistics                      | 10            | 6.9             |
|                               | e. Accounting – Finance - Banking | 10            | 6.9             |
|                               | f. Construction services          | 12            | 8.3             |
|                               | g. Education                      | 14            | 9.7             |
|                               | h. Legal services                 | 36            | 25.0            |
|                               | i. Wholesale                      | 30            | 20.8            |
| <b>3. Business size</b>       | a. under 10 persons               | 38            | 26.4            |
|                               | b. from 11-50 persons             | 66            | 45.8            |
|                               | c. from 50-100 persons            | 16            | 11.1            |
|                               | d. Over 100 persons               | 24            | 16.7            |

Regarding gender, the number of male and female managers is relatively different, with 60.0% for men and 39.6% for women. The results show that the number of women participating in management work is quite high. This also more or less affects the need for businesses to study and practice English skills to meet the needs of exchanging and communicating with foreign partners.

Regarding expertise, the number of managers working in the field of legal services accounts for the highest proportion among all professional field groups, with the number of 36/144 (25.0%). The next position (30/144, accounting for 20.8%) belongs to managers operating in the fields of wholesale, specializing in providing equipment, whose work requires frequent transactions and exchanges with customers. Tourism ranked third in number: 18/144 (12.5%), followed closely by the Education sector (14 people, accounting for 9.7%). Construction services, including 12/144 (accounting for 8.3%), Logistics and Accounting - Finance - Banking with 10 managers for each industry responding to the survey (6.9%). Next on the list is the group of managers operating in the field of Import-Export (8/144, accounting for 5.6%). The lowest number in this question is the number of people specializing in the Hospitality, only 6/144 (4.2%)

Regarding business size, companies with employees from 11-50 people account for the highest proportion, including 66/144 samples, accounting for 45.8%. Although ranked second in the survey results, the number of companies with less than 10 employees is only 38/144 (26.4%) businesses. The company has a

workforce of 51-100 people, accounting for 24/144 responses, accounting for 16.7%. The lowest on the list in the enterprise size criterion belongs to companies with the number of employees over 100 people, with only 16/144 enterprises, accounting for 11.1%.

### III. Findings And Discussions

Regarding the importance of English for work: more than 84% of managers think English is of significant importance in their work. Specifically, 56.9% of people rated English as very important, more than double the number of people who rated English as important in their work (27.8%). Only 15.3% rated English as normal in their work. None of the responses from those surveyed indicated that English was not important. Although the results are not surprising, they also contribute to continuing to affirm the value and indispensable role of English in work.

**Table 2: Level of meeting job requirements (in terms of English ability)**

| Level of meeting job requirements (in terms of English ability) | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|---|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Meeting job requirements very well                           | 8             | 6.5             |
| b. Meeting job requirements well                                | 44            | 30.6            |
| c. Meeting job requirements at average rate                     | 78            | 54.2            |
| d. Do not meet job requirements                                 | 14            | 9.7             |

Regarding the level of meeting job requirements (English ability): more than 50% of respondents rated their ability as average. This result shows that although they have not reached the expected capacity, managers can partly use foreign languages to meet some requirements in their work. This result is also a reason for managers to continue training to be able to better serve their work. Furthermore, the number of people who rated their English ability as not good was up to 14/144 people, accounting for 9.7%. The assessment results of these managers also show that the potential for English learning demand is still very large.

When asked about having participated in English courses when taking on a management role in a business, 45.4% of middle-level managers responded being facilitated to participate in English classes or actively participated in some English classes, while 54.6% chose the answer of never participating in any English courses. This is a compelling reason for companies to target and organize appropriate courses to meet the needs and long-term development goals of workers in general, and managers at businesses in particular.

Regarding English learning time: English learning time of over 1 year has the highest rate among the 3 choices (accounting for 83.3%). This is a strong affirmation of the need for long-term learning for managers in their role as guides, executives and orientators for long-term development of businesses. Meanwhile, the smallest number falls into the group of managers participating in English courses for a period of 6 months to 1 year, accounting for 6.9%.

**Table 3: English courses have been trained**

| English courses have been trained | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Translation                    | 28            | 19.4            |
| b. Interpretation                 | 24            | 16.7            |
| c. Conversation/communication     | 124           | <b>86.1</b>     |
| d. English for Specific Purposes  | 80            | 55.6            |
| e. Others .....                   | 2             | 1.4             |

Regarding English courses that have been trained: Of all the fields surveyed, conversation/communication accounts for the highest proportion, with 86.1%. In addition, improving specialized knowledge in English is also focused on by managers (55.6%). This result is also a suggestion for training program content designers and also presents a difficult challenge for training organizations when having to choose a suitable teaching team: both specialized knowledge and proficiency in using English is needed to convey professional knowledge to learners.

**Table 4: English skills have been improved**

| English skills have been improved      | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Listening – speaking / conversation | 130           | 90.3            |
| b. Reading                             | 46            | 31.9            |
| c. Writing                             | 80            | 55.6            |
| d. Grammar                             | 72            | 50.0            |
| e. Other .....                         | 2             | 1.4             |

Regarding improved English skills: the number of people participating in courses to develop listening - speaking / conversational skills is the highest, 130/144 people, accounting for 90.3%. At least 50% selected Writing and Grammar as skills that need to be developed for managers, including 55.6% and 50% respectively. Reading was also a skill of interest to some groups of surveyed participants, including 31.9% overall.

**Table 5: Appropriate forms of learning**

| Appropriate forms of learning                            | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Self-study at home                                    | 60            | 41.7            |
| b. Online learning                                       | 86            | 59.7            |
| c. Attend company English club                           | 52            | 36.1            |
| d. Attend courses/learning programs organized by company | 84            | 58.3            |
| e. Others: .....   | 2             | 1.4             |

Regarding the form of training: online learning and learning programs coordinated by the company account for the highest proportion of training forms that managers have participated in (accounting for 59.7% and 58.3% respectively). Managers choose this form of learning because of its convenience and to solve difficulties related to time factors when participating in the course. Moreover, the choices of managers also clearly demonstrate the strong motivation of workers in general when they are willing to learn content organized by the company to better meet the requirements of their work.

**Table 6: suitable learning location**

| Suitable learning location              | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|---|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Learning at foreign language centers | 56            | 38.9            |
| b. Learning at home                     | 76            | 52.8            |
| c. Learning at corporate facilities     | 94            | 65.3            |
| d. Others: .....                        |               |                 |

Regarding learning location: Survey data shows that the most chosen learning location is at the corporate facilities, accounting for 65.3%. This result shows the consistency in the survey participants' assessments when in the question about suitable form of learning, 58.1% chose to study according to the program coordinated by the company. The second place among the locations chosen by managers is home learning, accounting for 52.8%. This is also one of the valuable suggestions for course designers.

**Table 7: Reasons for choosing training facilities**

| Reasons for choosing training facilities         | No of persons | Percentages (%) |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Brand and reputation of the training facility | 76            | 54.3            |
| b. Recommendation from friends                   | 38            | 27.1            |
| c. Suitable tuition fees                         | 84            | 60.0            |
| d. Famous teacher                                | 54            | 38.6            |
| e. Modern facilities                             | 36            | 25.7            |
| f. Convenience to accommodation                  | 80            | 57.1            |
| g. Others: .....                                 | 4             | 2.8             |

When researching the reasons for choosing a training facility, the research received the highest results for appropriate tuition fees, accounting for 60.0%, and convenience of where managers live, accounting for 57.1%. Meanwhile, the brand and reputation of the teaching facilities only ranked third when considering the reasons for choosing the course of managers. With the choice "others", the authors obtained respondents' suggestions related to the reasons for choosing the training facility, including a feasible training plan and commitment to achieving results. This suggestion may be one of the factors that program planners need to build or establish in a rigorous and convincing way to increase the attractiveness of the curriculum.

**Table 8: Frequency of using English areas**

| Stt | English areas                               | Frequency of use |      |    |      |           |             |           |             |           |             |
|-----|---|------------------|------|----|------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
|     |   | 1                |      | 2  |      | 3         |             | 4         |             | 5         |             |
|     |   | No               | %    | No | %    | No        | %           | No        | %           | No        | %           |
| 1   | Verbal communications with foreign partners | 14               | 9,7  | 26 | 18,1 | <b>40</b> | <b>27,8</b> | <b>40</b> | <b>27,8</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>16,7</b> |
| 2   | Present reports at meetings or conferences  | 54               | 37,5 | 32 | 22,2 | 30        | 20,8        | 16        | 11,1        | 12        | 8,3         |
| 3   | Discuss at meetings or conferences          | 54               | 37,5 | 38 | 26,4 | <u>26</u> | <u>18,1</u> | 14        | <u>9,7</u>  | <u>12</u> | <u>8,3</u>  |

| Stt | English areas                              | Frequency of use |      |    |      |    |      |    |      |    |      |
|-----|--|------------------|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
|     |  | 1                |      | 2  |      | 3  |      | 4  |      | 5  |      |
|     |  | No               | %    | No | %    | No | %    | No | %    | No | %    |
| 4   | Write documents and transactional letters  | 28               | 19,4 | 28 | 19,4 | 24 | 16,7 | 28 | 19,4 | 36 | 25   |
| 5   | Write reports                              | 54               | 37,5 | 24 | 16,7 | 24 | 19,4 | 20 | 13,9 | 18 | 12,5 |
| 6   | Write research papers                      | 84               | 58,3 | 24 | 16,7 | 16 | 11,1 | 10 | 6,9  | 10 | 6,9  |
| 7   | Read documents and transactional letters   | 30               | 20,8 | 24 | 16,7 | 30 | 20,8 | 22 | 15,3 | 38 | 26,4 |
| 8   | Read professional reports and documents    | 30               | 20,8 | 10 | 6,9  | 30 | 20,8 | 40 | 27,8 | 34 | 23,6 |
| 9   | Translate documents, transactional letters | 54               | 37,5 | 14 | 9,7  | 26 | 18,1 | 14 | 9,7  | 36 | 25   |
| 10  | Use English for other purposes: .....      | 28               | 19,4 | 18 | 12,5 | 42 | 29,2 | 32 | 22,2 | 24 | 16,7 |

Regarding areas of English use and frequency of use: spoken language communication activities with foreign partners are used the most in terms of level of use from average (level 3) to often (level 4) or very often (level 5), accounting for 72.3%. Meanwhile, writing research papers in English has the lowest level of popularity, 24.9% in areas where English is commonly used by managers.

#### IV. Conclusion And Recommendations

##### Conclusion

According to the survey results, it can be seen that the desire to improve English skills to better serve the work of middle-level management teams at businesses in Ho Chi Minh City is still very large, and the need to learn English is still very high. Long-term training is very promising for designing and building training courses. In addition, the number of middle-level managers trained in English is still very low, combined with the low level of meeting job requirements in terms of English communication ability of the middle-level management team according to the above survey results. It is clear that organizing training and teaching courses is extremely necessary and urgent.

The survey also showed that the requirements for training forms, training methods and training locations of the middle management team are also very specific, suitable and convenient for the managers in each group with different job characteristics, especially in solving difficulties related to arranging time to participate, improving the effectiveness of English training courses. Information related to English skills that have been and need to be trained, areas of English use and frequency of use such as verbal communication activities with foreign partners and diversity in the areas also clearly demonstrate the training trends and needs of this management team. Options related to the reasons for prioritizing training facilities, especially tuition factors and the brand and reputation of the teaching facilities are also a suggestion for those providing teaching and training English services for businesses to consider when designing training programs.

##### Recommendation

From the survey results, the research proposed a number of solutions to improve the quality of English communication skills training for middle management teams at businesses in Ho Chi Minh City, specifically as follows:

##### *Applying social network and information technology tools to support teaching*

Originating from the fact that the English ability of middle-level managers at businesses is still limited with the majority meeting the average rate (54.2%), and managers with English proficiency meeting job requirements well accounts for a significant proportion (30.6%). The appropriate form of learning that most managers choose is online learning on the Internet (59.7%) and learning programs coordinated by the company. Communication skills are considered the most important skill by middle managers (90.3%). Dogoriti and Pange (2015), Bremner (2010) and Evans (2012) concluded some of the general benefits of using technology in language teaching include: being able to use authentic materials and authentic contexts in teaching. Butler Pascoe (2009) believes that social networking sites in an ESP classroom will help learners interact and communicate with each other, learn collaboratively, focus on the cultural and social aspects of the language, the learner plays a central role and enhances learning motivation and self-study.

##### *Collaboration between language teachers and specialized teachers*

Teaching ESP is considered an inseparable part of English teaching in general, but the difference is in the communication orientation to serve a certain profession or industry. Therefore, teaching ESP is not outside the goal of developing the four skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing for learners, but depending on each field of study, the skills have different levels of focus.

Reality shows that the main goal of teaching ESP today at training facilities in Vietnam is mainly to provide learners with some common grammatical structures and equip them with a large amount of specialized vocabulary to serve the purpose of reading and understanding specialized documents. It can be seen that teaching goals and methods do not really originate from analyzing learners' needs to adjust accordingly and help respond to learners' work practices. According to Barron (1992), the combination of professional knowledge and linguistic knowledge in a classroom will create a real language environment where learners can develop their ability to use language in specialized contexts.

In addition, the goal of teaching ESP requires a number of other important skills to support and supplement specialized foreign language learning, of which at least 3 additional skills must be: learning study skills (learning how to learn a foreign language effectively); learn how to present and express English in a correct technical style; and learn the skill of finding information related to the major under study. With these skills, learning English becomes not only more effective, but also more attractive and interesting, enhancing learning motivation, making learning results and teaching effectiveness even higher. Basically, it can be said that the main goal of teaching ESP needs to be a combination of three elements: target groups of (1) language knowledge, (2) specialized knowledge, plus training practice (3) the supporting learning skills mentioned above.

#### *Applying "Jobs-to-be-done" (JTBD) in building content and teaching methods.*

Jobs-to-be-done (JTBD) is a revolutionary concept in modern marketing (Silverstein, Samuel, & DeCarlo, 2012), which can be understood as "things that need to be done". When a product or service is sold, the consumer essentially "rents" that product or service to help them perform a specific task. For example, when buying a ¼ inch drill bit, this does not mean that the customer wants to buy a drill bit, but they actually need to rent a product, in this case a drill bit, that can help them create a hole of that size. ¼ inch size (Christensen, Cook, & Hall, 2006). Based on that, businesses need to design their products and services to achieve the customer's ultimate wish: to help them make that hole in the wall in the most perfect way, not just simply how beautiful and ugly that drill bit is. Thus, JTBD is not a specific product, service, or solution but rather an orientation that helps determine business goals towards what customers need to buy. Similarly, JTBD in teaching is a method of determining exactly what learners want to do or will be able to do in order to design the content of knowledge, skills and teaching methods so that learners can "use" it to do what they want to do. JTBD helps change the mindset of entrepreneurs and educators by looking at the world from the perspective of the customer or learner.

#### *Building a training model in coordination with businesses*

There are many forms of English training for middle managers at businesses. If divided by location, there are 3 forms: Training at corporate facilities (in-house), training at foreign language centers (out of house), and online training. If divided by training content, it can be divided into two main groups: general English training to obtain international certificates such as TOEIC, TOEFL or IELTS, etc. and specialized English training for occupations (ESP\_English for Specific Purpose). Each form of training mentioned above has its own advantages and disadvantages, as well as its own challenges.

Based on the survey results, it can be seen that the majority of middle-level managers show the greatest interest in training at corporate facilities (with 62.9%), followed by learning at home online or self-study (53.2%) and finally at foreign language centers (40.3%). This is completely consistent with the time-limited characteristics of the target group. Of the three options mentioned above, organizing online learning requires a lot of technology and learning software to enhance interaction and attract learners to be effective. This means having to invest heavily in information technology, content creation and software. Despite having such a large investment, the results are not certain because Vietnamese people still have the habit of going to class and interacting with teachers. Besides, we have not seen any successful cases when applying completely online teaching methods. Not to mention the online fees are not high, the possibility of illegally sharing academic content, sharing accounts, etc., affecting the company's revenue is very high. So, the online channel should only be a support channel in giving assignments and monitoring students' practice progress. Therefore, the most feasible choice for a training facility is to focus on in-house and out-of-house training.

#### *Investing in facilities & developing a team of teaching assistants*

According to survey results, 54% of participants chose a training facility based on the brand and reputation of the training facility. Brand reputation can be considered part of the results of operations, and can only be achieved in the long term. Therefore, to lay the foundation for building brand reputation, in the short term, the first step is to demonstrate a modern, professional image through facilities and quality of support services. This creates expectations for learners about the quality of training, encourages learners to decide to choose a training facility, and lays the foundation for meeting learners' needs through teaching quality and, over the time, to create the reputation of the training facility.

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