



Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies

**The Validity of the Advanced Educational Program English Test at a
Public University in Vietnam**

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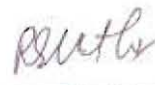
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The Validity of the Advanced Educational Program English Test at a Public University in Vietnam

Nong Thi Hien Huong

A thesis submitted

In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with introduction to the study and explains aims of the present study. Then, the background to the study, statement of the problem and research questions are presented. Finally, it outlines chapters in the thesis.

1.1 Introduction

In the globalized world, all employers on a national as well as on an international scale always pay much attention to the foreign language skills of their future employees, thus it can be noted that being able to speak one or more foreign languages is a prerequisite for each individual who expects to get a good job in the future. The most dominantly popular foreign language is English which is increasing gaining an important position in several countries all over the world. English is not only a means but also an important key to gain access to the latest scientific and technological achievements for developing countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia.

Furthermore, it can be observed that the number of native English speakers is from 400 million to 500 million; more than one billion people who have been using some forms of English. Many people have used English for different purposes, English has become the official or second language of a majority of the countries around the world including India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam (Kluitmann, 2008; Roengpitya & Saelim, 2015).

In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Government has identified the urgent social – political, commercial and educational need for Vietnamese people to be able to better communicate in English. In line with this aspiration, all Vietnamese tertiary institutions have accepted English as a compulsory subject as well as medium of instruction for academic purposes (Canh, 2009; Le, 2011; Nha, 2014; Tran, Griffia & Nguyen, 2010; Van, 2007). This development has given rise to the need to teach and measure students' command of English at institutional level. However, the issue that is often raised in relation to in-house language test is the validity of the test.

According to Bachman (1990), test validation is the process of producing validity and reliability evidence to support the well-foundedness of inferences concerning trait from test scores, i.e., principally, testing should be concerned with evidence-based validity. Test writers need to provide a clear argument for test validity in assessing specific traits with reliable evidence to support the plausibility of this interpretative argument (Kane, 1992). Therefore, test validation has been regarded as the most important role in test development and use and should always be examined at different educational levels (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Similarly, Cumming, Alister and Berwick (1998) also point out that validation in language testing and assessment plays a central role in academic decisions, pedagogical practices and educational policies. In a nutshell, validation is an effort to improve the quality of education, as it reveals strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum, appropriacy of the programme, students' promotion as well as teachers' evaluation.

Validity and reliability are the two most essential components of test validation as well as two most important characteristics of a good test. Test validity measures what is intended to

measure while reliability is an assessment tool which produces consistent results (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Although a reliable test may not be necessarily valid, a valid test is always reliable (Bachman, 1990; Henning 1989) because a test cannot be considered as valid unless its measurement is reliable. Therefore, a valid test encompasses reliability elements. Several previous test validation studies have investigated the validity of their in-house language tests and make valuable contributions to understand the concepts of test validation (Advi, 2003; Ayers, 1977; Cumming, 2004; Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Fulcher, 1997a; Sar, 2008; Huong, 2001 ; Lee & Green, 2007; Mojtaba, 2009; Moritoshi, 2001; Nakamura, 2006; O'Sullivan, Weir & Saville, 2002; Pishghadam & Khosropanah, 2011; Riari, 2013; Siddick, 2010; Wilson, 1999; Zubairi, 2001).

On the other hand, there often have been a lot of gathered concerns in relation to the validity of in-house language tests from the educators and administrators who always raise a question of whether the in-house test faithfully reflects the course objectives, expected linguistic knowledge, skills as well as measures the real linguistic competence of test-takers. Similar concerns also occur to the case of the AEPET, which is an important in-house language test of public universities in Vietnam. Bearing this in mind, the study aims to validate the validity of AEPET by focusing on three crucial validity components: concurrent, predictive and content validity. The study aims to examine the concurrent validity of the AEPET by looking at the relationship between the AEPET score and a standardized international language test score, which is International English Language Testing Services (IELTS). Furthermore, the study investigates the predictive validity of the AEPET by addressing the question to what extent the AEPET determines academic success of students. Last but not least, the study focuses on content validity of the AEPET by accessing English language lecturers' judgments about the

AEPET in order to see whether the AEPET content reflects the knowledge and skills mentioned in the Advanced Educational Program (AEP) syllabus, as well as to find out to what extent AEPET preparation adheres to crucial test preparation procedures before the examination is administrated.

1.2 Background to the Study

The background of this research covers three areas related to context where the data for this study were collected. The first area focuses on the status of teaching and learning of English language in Vietnam. The second section introduces the Advanced Educational Program (AEP) conducted at the research site, which is a public university in Vietnam. The last area presents information about the English course in the AEP.

1.2.1 English Language Teaching and Learning in Vietnam

Vietnamese Government considers education and training its top driver of socio-economic development. Thus, in recent years the Government has proposed and implemented many new policies to promote education and training and to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, and international integration (Van, 2007).

The former Vice Chairman of the National Assembly's Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, and Children said that "in order to fundamentally and drastically reform the educational system, it is important to teach English as a second language at schools. We have to encourage innovative ideas in the content and teaching English method. If we are afraid of doing something wrong, we cannot reform" (as cited in Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 22). He stated that English plays an important role as an international language because it is the key to

open a brilliant future for each country in general and for Vietnam in particular. Crystal (2000) also stated that English language is used in a number of countries, serves sometimes as the first language, sometimes as the second language or official language and sometimes as a foreign language. Sharing the same view, Hung (2013) and Van (2007) indicate that English ranks first with a much greater influence than other foreign languages such as French, Chinese and Russian in Vietnamese educational system. English has become an international language and is the key for success in business, commerce and technological science.

Bearing this in mind, Vietnamese Government introduced English nationally as a compulsory subject both at upper-high schools and secondary schools and as an elective subject at primary schools in Vietnamese general educational system. Vietnamese educational system consists of three levels with 12 grades: primary level (from grade 1 to 5 for children aged 6-11); upper-secondary level (from grade 6 to 9 for children aged 11-15); and upper- high school (from grade 10 to 12 for children aged 16-18).

At all Government schools and universities, English classes are divided into two semesters within 35 weeks per year. At the primary level, English is taught for 2 periods a week from Grade 3 to Grade 5 (age 8-10), making a total of 70 periods per year for each grade. Each period consists of 40 minutes. At the upper-secondary level, English is taught 3 periods per week from Grade 6 to Grade 8 (age 11-13), totaling to 105 periods per year for each grade. In contrast, it is taught 2 periods per week in Grade 9 (age 14), making the total 70 periods per year. At the upper-secondary level (age 15-17), English is taught 3 periods a week, making the total of 105 period per year for each grade. For both secondary upper-secondary levels, time for each period is 45 minutes.

At higher education level (age 18-22), students who study a normal class in which Vietnamese is the medium of instructions, English is taught with 5 periods a week, making the total of 175 periods. In contrast, students who study in advanced educational class in which English is the medium of instructions, English is taught for 15 periods a week making the total of 525 periods. Each period consists of 50 minutes. Table 1.1 presents the number of English periods which is taught at each level of education in Vietnam (Van, 2007).

Table 1.1: Number of English Periods in Vietnamese Educational System

Level of education (Grades)	Period duration	Periods per week	Weeks per year	Periods per academic year
Primary (G3- G4-G5)	40	2	35	70
Secondary (G6-G9) G6- G7 -G8		3	35	105
G9	45	2	35	70
Upper-secondary (G10- G11-12)		3	35	105
University Normal class	50	5	35	175
Advanced class		15	35	525

For schools, the English materials, textbooks designed by Vietnamese Minister of Education Training (MOET) are applied and taught in class in order to facilitate students to use English as a means of communication at certain level of proficiency in four skills: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. This series of textbooks was designed and produced by a group of Vietnamese textbook writers in MOET from 1989 to 1992 and was introduced into Vietnamese secondary schools stage by stage during those four years (Nguyen & Crabbe, 2007). They are being used across the country until now. MOET emphasizes that, by the end of upper-high schools, students are expected to obtain a standard level of understanding English and other multi- cultures in the world in order to become aware of cross-cultural differences, to be better overall communicators, to introduce about Vietnam people, histories, cultures and customs to the world (Cahn et al., 2009; Huong & Pham, 2010; Van, 2007; Neha & Burns, 2014). For universities, the selection, evaluation and use of suitable English

materials, textbooks are decided and approved by *the* university administrators in order to better adapt the students' specific needs to an increasingly globalized environment.

In brief, Vietnamese educational reform in this time is totally suitable for catching up with the development taking place in the world. Command of English is crucial to meet the urgent socio-political, commercial, educational needs of Vietnamese people and enable them to have a better communication and interactions at global level.

1.2.2 The Advanced Educational Program (AEP)

The study is conducted at a public university in Vietnam. The university which is the leading core university in the north of Vietnam follows the Government decision to offer the Advanced Educational Program in collaboration with different educational institutions in the United States since the year 2000. The Advanced Educational Program is an educational program which is the cooperation between public universities in Vietnam and several educational institutions in the United States since the year 2000. The programme has been endorsed by Vietnamese Government under Decision No. 14/2000/ QD-MOET entitled "Developing the Advanced Educational Program in the National Education System in Vietnam" with a common target of building, developing different educational areas and renouncing the universities in Vietnam to the world ranking (Government Decisions, 2001.)

The first specific goal of the AEP is to build up international undergraduate programmes that can attract students to study in the programme and compete with current abroad study movement both in Vietnam and overseas. Secondly, this programme provides for students with knowledge, self-study and research capacity and technical skills to meet with the

requirements of their future career or higher education related to different aspects serving for different purposes in all the country. Last but not least, this program also helps students to improve their awareness and moral attitude to ensure the loyalty with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, being healthy and responsible for the industrialization and modernization of Vietnam.

This programme is built according to the United States standards and directly taught in English by Vietnam and overseas lecturers and professors to ensure students gain high quality learning outcomes. The AEP offers a four-year programme in which students are required to attend one-year English course before they are qualified for a 3 year of degree programme. All subjects are taught in English. For the first academic year, students are required to complete a one – year English course which prepares students English language skills and knowledge before they start their major coursework. This English course is run over two semesters. After the one - year English course, qualified students, who obtain IELTS overall band 6.5 and above and a minimum CGPA of 7.0, will be selected to continue their degree programme in the United States. Their bachelor degrees will be offered by the university in the United States. Other students will continue their degree at the home university and after the three years of degree programme, will achieve bachelor degree offered by Vietnamese universities. The structure of the AEP is summarized in Figure 1.1

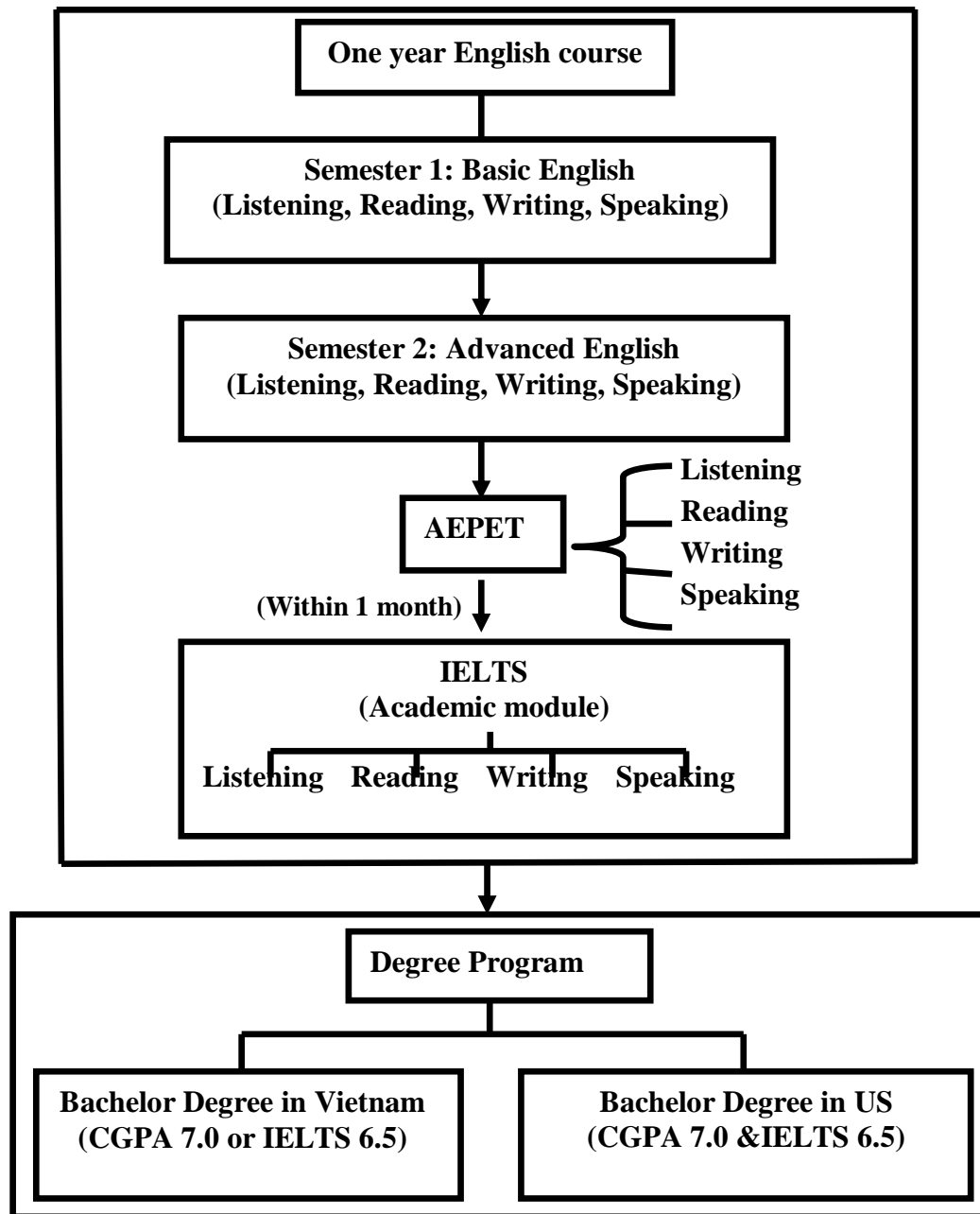


Figure 1.1: Structure of Advanced Educational Program (AEP)

In short, the AEP is the educational cooperative programme between universities in Vietnam and the United States. This programme is aimed to provide students sufficient level of English language proficiency, advanced knowledge in the educational aspects. The success of the programme helps students get more technical and advanced skills to meet the requirements of their career in the future.

1.2.3 English Course in the Advanced Educational Program

As mentioned earlier, the objectives of the AEP are to provide students not only high quality learning outcomes but also an international studying environment in which English is used as the medium of instruction. In order to meet the requirements of these objectives, the AEP requires students to attend one-year English course before they qualify for a 3 year degree programme. The one-year English course is divided into two levels: Basic English and Advanced English taught over two semesters.

In the first semester, students do four Basic English subjects: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking and Lang master which is an online practical English subject. Each Basic English subject takes 4 credit points. In other words, the total credit point for the first semester is 16. At the end of the first semester, students are required to take four English subtests-Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. In the second semester, five advanced English subjects: Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking and Skills of IELTS are integrated in the classroom with the total credit points of 18.

At the end of the first academic year, students take the AEPET which comprises of four components: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. This test is designed based on the whole content of the English course that students are taught in both semester one and semester two. Students have to sit for IELTS within one month after taking the AEPET. Students, who obtain at least 6.5 IELTS overall band scores and 7.0 CGPA and above, will have a chance to apply a full scholarship to do their degree programme at a university in the United States and their bachelor degrees will be offered by the university in the United States. On the other hand, the rest of them, who do not meet the criteria, will do their degree programme at the

home university and accordingly their bachelor degrees will be offered by the university.

Figure 1.2 presents a detailed explanation of phases that students go through in the English course

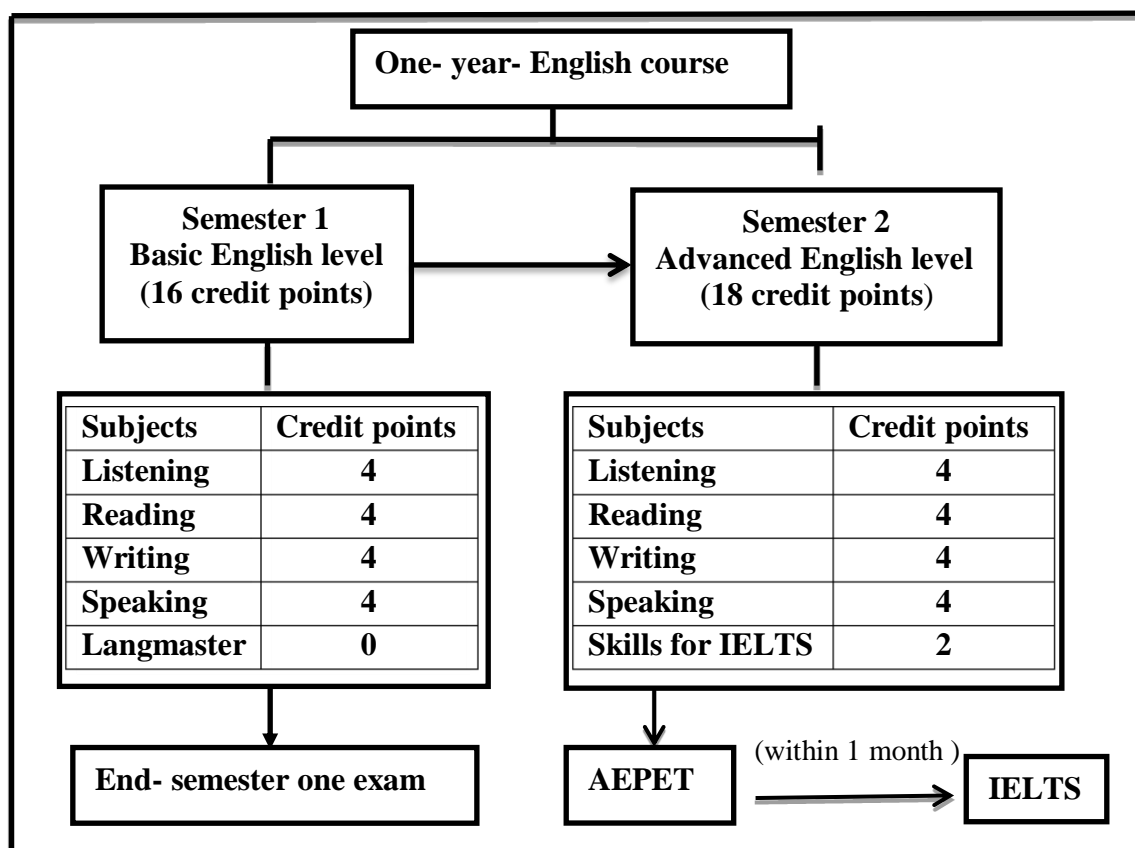


Figure 1.2: Overview of AEP English Course

In brief, the English course at the AEP is designed to provide specific and appropriate language instruction for AEP students who intend to undertake their advanced studies at the university. Successful completion of the course means that the students have a sufficient level of English language proficiency to do their degree in English as well as to provide them opportunities to undertake their studies at another university in the United States

1.3 Statement of the Problem

English has become a global language of technological, business and academic endeavors. The world-wide globalization process has confirmed English as the most widely-used means of international communications and an empowering tool which assists learners to achieve specialized knowledge, which helps them to be prepared primarily for entering the working world. More precisely, English is taught at global level as the second language in India, Indonesia, Korean, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and so on. The educators use standardized international language tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, KET, PET, FCE as a global language testing standards. Although these standardized international language tests are always available, they are rather costly and may not always be appropriate for the specific needs. Therefore, at present, many public universities all over the world have taken English language proficiency seriously into consideration when making decisions on different academic purposes by designing their own language tests which are cheaper to the administers and appropriate to address their specific needs . Various in-house language tests are designed and used by several institutions such as Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in Malaysia; Qualifying English Test (QET) in Singapore; College English Test (CET) in China; General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) in Taiwan, Iran, Ethiopia, Nigeria. However, the main issue that is often raised in relation to the validity of in-house language test is validation.

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), test validation plays the most important role in test development and use because test validation helps to produce validity evidence for a test, show how much the educators and administrators know how much knowledge their student achieved during a course or which subjects the student are not good at, and then make

immediate chances in syllabus. Several researchers highlight that a valid test helps to reach the desired objectives of teaching, improve the quality of education by reflecting strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum, program appropriations, students' true language abilities (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cumming & Berwick, 1998, Huong, 2001; D'Este, 2012; Wilson, 2016).

In Vietnam, the AEP has been introduced in the national educational system since the year 2000 (Hung, 2013; Minh, 2008) and the AEPET which is an in-house language test is approved as an English language proficiency indicator for the students who expect to enroll the advanced programs at university. However, the validity of the AEPET has been an open question due to the fact that no empirical test validation studies have been published, thus the validity evidence of the AEPET is not available. The main concern is that if the AEPET is not valid or in other words AEPET components : Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking cannot measure students' English skills appropriately, then how could students' true English abilities be improved?. Will students think that they are wasting time and money to study the AEP at university?. Another concern is that university language lectures seem to assume that testing and assessment is not their concern, that their job is to teach well, and that testing and assessment is something to be taken care of by a special person within their university who is responsible for testing or by external, invisible means. It should be noted that if the test is designed by the educators who do not participate in teaching and are not be familiar with the test content, test techniques as well as students' individual influences such as race, gender, ethnicity, culture, language background, level of education in the first and the second languages, stage of cognitive development, learning style, the designed test will not measure what it is intended to measure. Consequently, students' true abilities are not always reflected

in the test scores that they obtain. These problems might lead to the lack of validity of the AEPET. Last but not least, several researchers highlight that a less valid test cannot reach the course objectives, and as a result, will spoil the whole process of educational system (Lee & Greene, 2007; Messick, 1996; Siddiek, 2010), thus it is suggested that the validity of the in-house language test should always be examined (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Henning, 1998; Messick, 1996; Siddiek, 2010). The more evidence about the validity of the in-house language test in use, the better and the more reliable the test becomes.

In the light of these considerations above, the researcher has been inspired and motivated to investigate the validity of the AEPET at a public university in Vietnam with the belief to gather more validity evidence of the in-house language test, provide students with true English abilities and put the forms of teaching and learning English in the right track of the educational process.

1.4 Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the validity of the AEPET at a public university in Vietnam by using Weir's (2005) test validation framework as a guideline. The study focuses on two crucial validity components: criterion-related validity (concurrent validity and predictive validity) and content validity. Further discussion on Weir's (2005) framework is presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. The specific aims of this research are

- 1) To examine the extent to which the AEPET correlates with a standardized international language test (IELTS)

- 2) To investigate to what extent the AEPET score determines the academic success of AEP students
- 3) To determine lecturers' judgments about the AEPET in order to see whether the AEPET content reflects the knowledge and skills mentioned in the AEP syllabus as well as to find out to what extent AEPET preparation adheres to crucial test preparation procedures before the examination is administrated.

1.5 Research Questions

The study aims to determine the validity of the AEPET at a public university in Vietnam in terms of the concurrent validity, predictive validity and content validity. The study intends to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between the students' AEPET score and IELTS score?
(Concurrent Validity)
- 2) What is the relationship between the students' AEPET score and academic achievement (CGPA), in comparison with the relationship between IELTS score and CGPA? (Predictive Validity)
- 3) What is the Content Validity of the AEPET?

1.6 Significance of the Study

With the constant use of a locally designed language test for its different purposes, it is emphasized that validity becomes a property of the in-house language tests (Bachman, 1990;

Davies, 1989; Henning, 1998; McNarama, 2000; Messick, 1990, Cope, 2011; Siddick, 2010).

Therefore, this study can be valuable in a number of ways

For academic context, this study contributes useful insights to English language teaching and learning, especially in-house English test validation. Similarly, the present study sheds light on the review of literature on language testing practices, provide educators with more information related to test validation to make sure the process of test construction and test use reflects teaching methods among the teachers and true learning abilities among students. Another significance is that the present study is valuable for other educational institutions in their endeavor to validate in-house language tests, to justify the correctness of their interpretations, help test designers and educational decision makers to check to what extent the course content can be adequately represented in the test content by observing the distribution of the frequencies among the content areas for future exam construction. Therefore, the educators may take this study as a guideline to examine the quality of their locally-designed assessment tools.

In Vietnamese context, this study is undertaken with the hope to be the representative that provides information to Vietnam policymakers for future planning and innovation with regard to the advanced education at university level, especially helps foreign language policymakers, administrators, and test writers gain a better understanding of the development and challenges for the advanced educational program which has been introduced in the national educational system since the year 2000.

As mentioned earlier, the AEP is built according to United States standards, thus the study expects to provide some information about the appropriateness of applying and adapting the curriculum theories of American educators to the Vietnamese context through research evidence of the importance of the test validation implementation on local English language tests in order to strengthen the international relationship between two educational systems in the two countries. In case of public universities in Vietnam, this study may be providing the validity evidence for the AEPET at university level. If the AEPET is found to be valid, this could be the potential for the university to venture into the test validation, encourage students to improve their English skills and competencies which are required to succeed in the respective program and more importantly this could save the university's and students' time and budget.

1.7 Outlines of the thesis

The thesis is organized into five major chapters. Each chapter begins with an overview of what is included in that particular chapter.

Chapter 1 presents some basic information about introduction, background to the study, and then explains the purpose and the significance of the present study.

Chapter 2 consists of some theory evidence providing an overview of language testing. Then, it narrows to the qualities of good tests, there view of related previous studies and ends with research gaps.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study. This chapter indicates the general direction of the methodology and then provides detailed information related to the stage methodology of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the Main Study. Chapter 4 describes three main parts of the results section of the thesis: Concurrent, Predictive and Content Validity of the AEPET.

Chapter 5 presents a general discussion on the results of the study, answers the research questions. It also highlights some significant implications of the findings of the study on language testing, followed by a section which addresses some recognized limitations in this study, and also some suggestions for future research. The chapter ends with a concluding remark of the study.

1.8 Chapter Review

This chapter presented the background, research objectives and addressed the research questions of the study. It also elaborated the significance of the study. The next chapter, i.e. Chapter 2 presents the review of literature to this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a broad perspective of language testing definition; then continues with the relationship between teaching, learning and testing. The chapter presents the definition of test and then focuses on the qualities of good tests, concepts related to validity, theoretical framework for gathering evidence for validity and some previous test validation studies. The chapter ends with the rationale for investigating the validity of the AEPET

2.1 Language Testing

In the field of education, testing which is one form of measurements that plays crucial role in educational system because it is the final step in educational progress which helps the educators to measure the educational qualities. Language testing plays very important role in teaching and learning process because it helps the learners to grasp the knowledge that they have missed previously and the teachers to understand what can be done in subsequent lessons to improve their teaching methods. Well-designed in- house language tests can help the students learn the language by asking them to study hard, emphasizing learning outcomes, and showing them what levels and what knowledge they need to improve.

In the same vein, Huong (2001) and McNamara (2000) highlight some more important roles of language testing which have been applied popularly in educational system and in other related fields are to assist in revealing the strength and weakness in academic development,

creating positive washback for learning through providing the learners the feeling of competition as well as a sense that the teachers' assessment coincides with what has been taught to them, reflecting the students' true abilities, classifying student's language proficiency from other students as well as placing them in a suitable course. Therefore, several researchers suggest that the administrators and educators should build important and qualified testing strategies which assist in evaluating learners' performance, teaching methods, materials and other conditions in order to set up educational training objectives (Bachman, 1990; Davies, 1984; Fulcher, 1997a; Giri, 2011; Hancock, 2006; Hughes, 1989; Parhizgar, 2012)

In the light of literature review above, there are several number of overview texts on language testing providing a more comprehensive overview of the theory and practice of language testing. It can be said that language testing has assumed a prominent measurement in efforts to improve the quality of education because testing sets meaningful standards to educational systems, teachers, students, administrators and researchers with different purposes. In particular, this is an important part of every teaching and learning experience which helps to reflect overall teaching process and learning objectives. Furthermore, language testing has enriched the learning and teaching process by revealing strengths and weaknesses of the educational program, curriculum, teacher's teaching methods and evaluation as well as students' students' learning motivations. Through testing, when the administrators use language testing appropriately, they successfully measure the quality of education and then can make important decisions about the course, syllabus, course book, teachers, learners and administration