

Assessment of English proficiency certificate selection and preparation for graduation requirements among final-year medical students at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 2024 – 2025

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ABSTRACT

English proficiency certification has become an essential requirement for university graduation in Vietnam. This study investigates the selection and preparation of English proficiency certificates among final-year medical students at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy during the 2024–2025 academic year. This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design, using data from 512 valid certificates, including Cambridge Tests, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), TOEFL ITP, TOEIC, and IELTS. Microsoft Excel, Google Forms, and basic inferential statistical methods were used to assess associations between students' certificate choices and their preparation factors. The findings revealed considerable variation in examination preferences, with Cambridge Tests and VSTEP most frequently selected, while IELTS was least represented. Preparation periods ranged from less than one month to over six months, and a proportion of candidates attempted examinations without structured preparation. Reported difficulties encompassed listening comprehension, vocabulary and grammar retention, time constraints, and psychological stress. These results underscore pragmatic considerations and provide implications for policy, academic counseling, and student support services.

Keywords: *English proficiency, certificates, graduation requirement, medical students*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English serves as a vital key for students to integrate and thrive. Beyond being an international means of communication, it opens doors to vast academic resources, exchange programs, scholarships abroad, and greater competitiveness in the job market. Consequently, English proficiency has become a mandatory graduation requirement at universities to ensure that students are able to use the language effectively for study and work.

According to Circular 07/2015/TT-BGDĐT, graduates are expected to understand, communicate, and produce simple written content related to their field. In addition, the Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam (Circular 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT) provides the basis for universities to establish suitable English benchmarks for each discipline, thereby equipping students with solid language skills before entering the workforce.

Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy has issued regulations on foreign language graduation requirements for full-

time and transfer students under Decision No. 2191/QĐ-YDHP dated October 18, 2024. Accordingly: “To be eligible for graduation, students must either hold a bachelor’s degree in a foreign language or possess a language certificate (in English, French, Chinese, or Japanese) granted by the Ministry of Education and Training or by an authorized institution accredited to issue such certificates. Full-time students are required to obtain an English certificate at a minimum level equivalent to B1, or alternatively, a certificate/degree in French, Chinese, or Japanese at a minimum level equivalent to A2, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).” Thus, in order to be eligible for graduation, final-year students are required not only to complete all compulsory courses and examinations at the university but also to obtain a foreign language certificate as stipulated. Specifically, achieving a B1-level language certificate necessitates careful planning of study time and the adoption of effective learning strategies.

In 2024, the author published the article “Assessment of English Certificate Selection for Graduation Requirements among Medical Students at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 2022–2024.” The study analyzed 1,400 English certificates submitted by medical students during the first graduation review period from 2022 to 2024, with the aim of identifying the current situation and emerging trends in certificate selection. However, the 2024 article primarily described trends without exploring the underlying reasons behind students’ choices. This study seeks to address several key research questions:

1. What are the patterns of English proficiency certificate selection among final-year medical students?
2. What factors influence their choice of certificates and methods of preparation?
3. What difficulties do students encounter during preparation, and how are these related to demographic or academic variables?

The author aims to describe the distribution and types of English proficiency certificates submitted for graduation in the 2024–2025 academic year, as well as to identify and analyze the factors influencing students’ choices of certificates and their preparation methods. In addition, the study seeks to evaluate the associations between preparation approaches and test outcomes using basic inferential statistical analyses. Based on these findings, the author proposes recommendations to enhance institutional guidance and strengthen English language support for future cohorts of medical students. This study was designed using a cross-sectional descriptive data collection method. The data were obtained from post-audit summary reports and analyzed using statistical methods.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Subjects

Selection Criteria

The study was conducted on 512 medical students of Cohort 41, Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy, who graduated in the academic year 2024–2025 and submitted English proficiency certificates.

Exclusion Criteria

Among the 542 foreign language certificates submitted by final-year medical students for graduation consideration, one Chinese HSK certificate, twenty-seven French DELF certificates, and two English certificates not recognized by the Ministry of Education and

Training were excluded. In addition, Laotian students, who are exempted from submitting foreign language certificates, were not included in the study. Consequently, this research focuses exclusively on 512 medical students who submitted recognized English language certificates.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy during the graduation assessment period of the 2024–2025 academic year, from May 2025 to July 2025.

Research Design

This research employed a cross-sectional descriptive design.

Data Collection

In accordance with the annual procedure, prior to each graduation review, final-year students are required to submit their language certificates to the Academic Affairs Office and complete an online form with certificate details. The Academic Affairs Office compiles these records and forwards them to the Verification Committee. In 2025, the verification process is carried out jointly by the Department of Foreign Languages and the Center for Foreign Languages and Informatics. Certificates were categorized by faculty and

type to ensure appropriate verification. Upon completion, the committee consolidates the data and submits a report to the Academic Affairs Office, which serves as the basis for graduation approval.

The number of recognized certificates, reasons for students' choices, and preparation details were compiled and compared with data extracted from student information submitted via Google Forms during the verification process and with the figures reported in the final summary.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the dataset was processed using the built-in analytical tools of Microsoft Excel, Google Forms, and basic inferential statistical methods to compare the distribution of certificate types and to analyze the reasons underlying students' selection of English language certificates.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with the approval of the administration of Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy. The research author adhered to established ethical standards, ensuring data integrity and confidentiality. The findings are solely intended for research purposes and will not be used for any other objectives.

RESULTS

Figure 1 provides an overview of the portions of English language certificates submitted by medical students of Cohort 41 at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy that were recognized as meeting graduation requirements. The certificates include IELTS, TOEIC, TOEFL ITP, Cambridge Tests, and VSTEP.

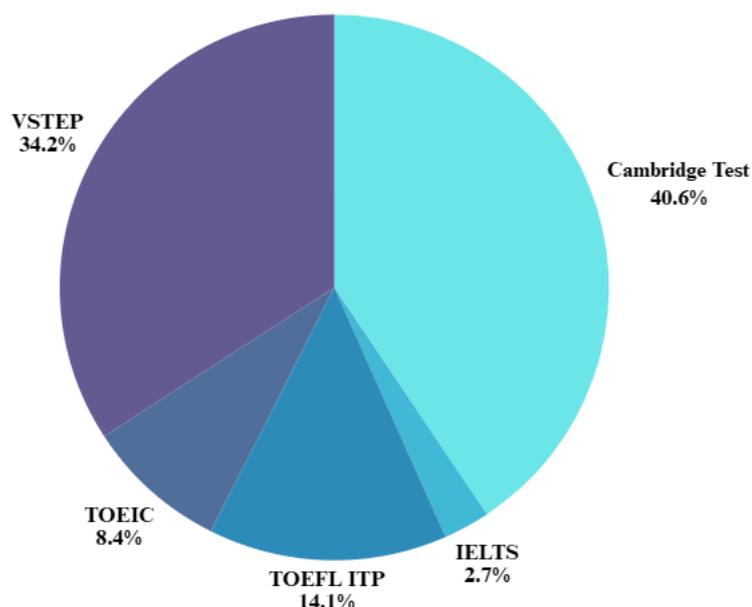


Figure 1. The number of submitted English proficiency certificates, 2024-2025

The majority of students opted for the Cambridge Test (40.6%), followed by the Vietnamese Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (VSTEP) at 34.2%. Certificates issued by ETS, including TOEIC and TOEFL ITP, were also selected by a considerable proportion of students, accounting for 14.1% and 8.4%, respectively. By contrast, IELTS was the least chosen certificate, representing only 2.7%. Notably, no medical student selected the Aptis ESOL certificate for graduation purposes in the current year.

When compared with the graduation data from the 2023–2024 academic year, as reported in the author’s article “Assessment of English Certificate Selection for Graduation Requirements among Medical Students at Hai Phong University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 2022–2024”. IELTS, TOEIC, and TOEFL ITP have consistently remained the least preferred options. However, a substantial shift was observed in the proportions of Cambridge and VSTEP candidates: the number of Cambridge test-takers decreased by approximately one-third (64% in 2024), whereas the number of VSTEP candidates nearly quadrupled (9% in 2024).

To investigate the considerable variation in students’ choices of English language certificates, the author conducted a survey question; each student was allowed to select more than one factor. The survey results are presented as follows:

Table 1. The reasons of choosing English proficiency certificates

Reasons of choices by certificates	Cambridge Test (n=208)	VSTEP (n=175)	TOEFL ITP (n=72)	TOEIC (n=43)	IELTS (n=14)
Reasonable examination fee	15.6%	41.6%	41.6%	43.7%	7%
Affordable preparation cost	18.6%	34.5%	20.8%	33.3%	7%
Recommendations from peers or instructors	41%	43.7%	12.5%	33.3%	0%
Test format and level of difficulty appropriate to individual ability	29%	59.4%	47.2%	56.2%	28%

Widespread recognition and popularity of the certificate	60%	44.9%	8%	33.3%	57%
Other reasons (specified by the respondents)	1%	0.5%	0%	8.3%	14%

The distribution of reasons for certificate selection demonstrates distinct priorities among candidates. Cambridge Test takers emphasized widespread recognition, recommendations from peers or instructors, and reasonable difficulty, reflecting its established credibility, while the fee for Cambridge PET (B1) and KET (B2) remains relatively moderate at under 2,000,000 VND. VSTEP participants, by contrast, were primarily influenced by affordability, suitability of test format, and peer advice, as its fee is approximately 1,800,000 VND, suggesting pragmatic considerations in a local context. TOEFL ITP candidates highlighted examination fees (around 1,600,000 VND) and test design as decisive, while recognition remained marginal. TOEIC respondents valued cost-effectiveness, with a fee of about 1,200,000 VND, and balanced format, yet a considerable share cited other reasons. IELTS candidates prioritized international recognition despite smaller numbers, even though the fee is substantially higher, approximately 4,900,000–5,000,000 VND, indicating its appeal for global opportunities rather than domestic requirements. Other reasons mainly concerned exam location, particularly the inconvenience of traveling to Hanoi, which posed additional financial and logistical burdens for many students.

Table 2 below presents the distribution of preparation time reported by students for each English proficiency certificate, with one option selected per respondent.

Table 2. *The preparation time for each certificate*

Preparation time by certificates	Cambridge Test (n=208)	VSTEP (n=175)	TOEFL ITP (n=72)	TOEIC (n=43)	IELTS (n=14)
No preparation, took the test directly	3.9%	12%	7%	16.9%	14.3%
Less than 1 month	10%	33%	8.4%	27%	0%
1–<3 months	24.3%	34%	37.5%	18.7%	14.3%
3–6 months	34.6%	13.5%	30.5%	29.1%	21.4%
More than 6 months	27.2%	7.5%	16.6%	8.3%	50%

The data illustrate diverse preparation patterns among medical students across English proficiency tests. Cambridge Test and TOEFL ITP candidates typically invested three months or more in preparation, reflecting structured study habits. In contrast, VSTEP and TOEIC examinees more often relied on shorter study periods or no preparation at all, with TOEIC showing the second-highest rate of unprepared attempts (16.9%). IELTS candidates, although fewer, exhibited the strongest commitment to extended preparation, with half preparing for over six months. These variations likely mirror differences in perceived exam difficulty, financial considerations, recognition value, and individual strategies for meeting graduation requirements.

To investigate the preparation methods among candidates undertaking different English certificates, the author conducted a survey question focusing on the different methods. Each student was allowed to select more than one factor. The survey results are presented as follows:

Table 3. *The preparation methods by certificates*

Preparation methods by certificates	Cambridge Test (n=208)	VSTEP (n=175)	TOEFL ITP (n=72)	TOEIC (n=43)	IELTS (n=14)
Self-study	37.2%	70.3%	64%	69.8%	43%
Study at a language center	78.8%	14.9%	25%	37.2%	78.5%
Online learning through courses or websites	8.6%	55.4%	34.7%	37.2%	35.7%
Tutoring-based preparation	5.2%	4.5%	7%	0%	14.3%
Group study with peers	19.5%	27.4%	20.8%	9.3%	0%
Other responses	0.9%	1.1%	1.4%	2.3%	0%

The table presents the distribution of preparation methods among candidates undertaking different English proficiency examinations. Overall, the findings highlight considerable variation in study preferences across test types. Candidates for the Cambridge Test and IELTS predominantly relied on study at a language center (78.8% and 78.5%, respectively). In contrast, VSTEP examinees demonstrated a strong preference for self-study (70.3%) and online learning (55.4%). TOEFL ITP participants also favored self-study (64%) and online preparation (34.7%), while TOEIC candidates relied heavily on self-study (69.8%). Group study was most common among VSTEP (27.4%) and Cambridge (19.5%) candidates, whereas tutoring-based preparation remained relatively low across all categories. Other responses including students reported that they took the examination without preparation, as they already possessed a solid foundational knowledge.

Table 4 illustrates preparation difficulties reported by students for each English proficiency certificate, where multiple options could be selected by each respondent.

Table 4. *The preparation difficulties by certificates*

Preparation difficulties by certificates	Cambridge Test (n=208)	VSTEP (n=175)	TOEFL ITP (n=72)	TOEIC (n=43)	IELTS (n=14)
Lack of appropriate study materials	26%	13%	22%	6%	1%
Inability to develop an effective study plan	57%	27%	29%	18%	4%
Insufficient time for exam preparation	66%	33%	25%	15%	8%
Difficulty in memorizing vocabulary and grammar	76%	39%	53%	13%	6%
Weak listening skills	22.7%	10.2%	55%	30%	9%

Weak speaking skills	76%	47%	20%	9%	8%
Weak reading comprehension skills	46%	21%	11%	11%	1%
Weak writing skills	22%	26%	9%	5%	4%
Psychological stress in the examination room	79%	52%	38%	15%	7%
The test was more difficult than expected	41%	33%	29%	20%	4%
Time pressure during the exam	55%	27%	15%	16%	5%

The analysis of preparation difficulties across English proficiency certificates reveals notable variations. Cambridge Test candidates, who are assessed in four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), predominantly reported weak listening skills, difficulties in vocabulary and grammar retention, and psychological stress, suggesting the exam’s comprehensive demand. VSTEP participants, likewise evaluated across four skills, highlighted challenges in listening and speaking, though a significant proportion claimed no particular difficulty, reflecting a more balanced perception of the test. TOEFL ITP test-takers, assessed in three skills (listening, structure and written expression, and reading), most frequently encountered issues with vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension. TOEIC candidates, primarily examined in two skills (listening and reading), emphasized test difficulty and time pressure. IELTS respondents, who were assessed in four skills, reported stress, limited preparation time, and writing weaknesses. These findings underscore distinct preparation profiles aligned with the structural characteristics and skill coverage of each examination.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings in light of national and international literature. The preference for locally administered certificates such as Cambridge and VSTEP aligns with trends observed in Southeast Asian contexts (Tran & Le, 2023; Chou, 2020). International studies (e.g., Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2021; Rahman, 2018) also emphasize affordability and accessibility as primary determinants of students’ language test choices. The inferential analysis revealed a significant association ($p < 0.05$) between certificate type and preparation duration, suggesting that high-stakes international tests such as IELTS

encourage longer preparation periods. These findings support the importance of contextualized institutional support to ensure equitable language development opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the results presented, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of English certificate selection and preparation among final-year medical students. The findings reveal that certificate preferences were not only shaped by recognition value and institutional requirements but also by pragmatic considerations such as affordability, exam format, and accessibility.

Patterns of preparation time and methods demonstrated substantial variation, with Cambridge and IELTS candidates showing stronger commitment to long-term and structured study, while VSTEP and TOEIC examinees frequently opted for shorter or self-directed approaches. Difficulties reported by students further reflected the inherent characteristics of each test, ranging from listening comprehension to psychological stress. Overall, the results underscore the need for targeted academic advising, diversified learning support, and institutional guidance to ensure that students make informed decisions and adopt effective preparation strategies. These insights provide valuable implications for enhancing English training policies and supporting students' readiness for both graduation and professional development.

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