

VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR ONLINE ENGLISH COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study examines the expectations of Vietnamese university students for online English courses during the national digital transformation in higher education. Despite the accelerated adoption of Learning Management Systems (e.g., Moodle, Google Classroom) following the COVID-19 pandemic, research on student expectations in Vietnam remains scarce and geographically limited. A literature-informed questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to 1,171 undergraduates from diverse majors at a northern Vietnamese university. Results reveal a predominantly utilitarian motivation, with 80.9% studying English for graduation, over half of whom target communication and career skills, while only 0.1% study for enjoyment. Findings align with global emphasis on active, skill-focused learning but highlight context-specific preferences for test-oriented practice and receptive skills over interaction. The study informs curriculum design to enhance satisfaction, engagement, and outcomes in online English education in Vietnam.

Keywords: Online English Learning, Student Expectations, Vietnam, Higher Education, Digital Transformation, Language Skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed education, with online learning emerging as a flexible and accessible alternative to traditional classroom instruction. Defined as a student-centered approach leveraging internet-based platforms to deliver content and facilitate interaction despite physical and temporal separation (Firdousi et al., 2024), online education encompasses synchronous sessions, asynchronous self-paced materials, and hybrid formats (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021; Hamonic & Sharrock, 2026). In Vietnam, this shift accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, driving the adoption of Learning Management Systems, such as Moodle and Google Classroom. However, challenges remain, including infrastructure disparities and varying teacher preparedness.

A key factor in the success of online education is the alignment between student expectations and experiences, as outlined by Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (Firdousi et al., 2024). Students typically seek high-quality instruction, timely feedback, interactive opportunities, well-organized content, and user-friendly platforms (Lin et al., 2023; Paechter et al., 2010). In English courses, these expectations often focus on developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, supported by authentic materials and collaborative activities to enhance motivation and practical application (Kang, 2021; Lobos et al., 2022).

Despite global research on online learning expectations, studies in Vietnam remain limited and often urban-centric, overlooking diverse regional contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study surveyed university students in northern Vietnam to investigate their expectations for online English courses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Education

Online education is an innovative approach to teaching and learning that leverages various electronic media to facilitate instruction. In this mode, learners and instructors are separated by time and space; yet, modern technologies enable meaningful interaction between them (Firdousi et al., 2024). Online education activities are conducted via the Internet, removing traditional constraints of time and location, making it particularly suitable for students who need to balance study and work. This approach promotes a student-centered learning environment. Online learning is considered a form of distance education, where teachers and students do not meet physically in real-time classrooms. Distance education can take various forms, including electronic forms such as online or video-based learning, and non-electronic forms, such as print-based self-study (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Terms like e-learning and Online Distance Learning are often used interchangeably with online learning. Online Distance Learning encompasses a range of delivery methods, including web-based learning, open learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, and mobile learning, and involves interactive learning through devices such as mobile phones and tablets with internet access (Saidalvi & Wan Fakhruddin, 2021).

Online Learning Modes Based on Timing

Online learning can be categorized based on whether interaction between teachers and students occurs simultaneously or not. **Synchronous learning** occurs in real-time, with teachers and students engaging simultaneously through tools such as Zoom or Google Meet. For instance, fully synchronous online classes were implemented over 12 weeks in a study on peer feedback in online English courses (Waluyo & Panmei, 2024). In contrast, **asynchronous learning** occurs at different times, allowing learners to access materials and complete tasks at their convenience. Standard asynchronous components include pre-recorded video lectures, interactive quizzes, reading materials, and reflective assignments, which are often used in alignment with university guidelines (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Another approach is **scheduled asynchronous learning**, where specific time frames are set for learning activities on an online platform, but participants are not required to be online simultaneously. Finally, online learning can also be classified as **self-paced** or **teacher-paced**. In self-paced courses, learners control their own progress and timing, while teacher-paced courses follow a structured schedule. Massive Open Online Courses often combine asynchronous, self-paced video lectures with interactive learning elements to enhance flexibility and engagement (Hamonik & Sharrock, 2026).

Specific Online Course Formats

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) represent a global educational movement that is transforming higher education by providing open access to quality learning at scale and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. MOOCs deliver content through web browsers or mobile devices, offering flexibility in terms of time and place, and typically include video lectures, readings, quizzes, and assessments. Learner participation in MOOCs varies, with categories such as "Explorers," "Watchers," "Desisters," and "Completers," while learning behavior can also

distinguish comprehensive learners, who follow all course components sequentially, from strategic learners, who focus mainly on completing evaluations. In contrast, Small Private Online Courses target specific, smaller student groups, such as teacher trainees or new university students taking required courses on topics like sustainability. Micro-credentials or micro-degree programs provide recognized, career-oriented learning outcomes, often delivered entirely online and incorporating project-based learning. Another distinct format is Emergency Remote Teaching, characterized by its rapid and temporary shift to online delivery during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, without necessarily meeting the standards of well-designed online education. Lastly, the flipped classroom model reverses the traditional learning structure by having students engage with instructional materials, such as videos, before attending in-person or virtual sessions, thereby supporting active and flexible blended learning (Firdousi et al., 2024; Hamonic & Sharrock, 2026).

Student expectations in education

Student expectations are a critical factor in education, generally defined as the extent to which student predictions are met, based on their educational experience. These expectations are closely linked to student satisfaction and perceived academic outcomes. Student expectations serve as one of the three determinants (alongside student learning and quality of instruction) used to study perceived satisfaction and academic performance across traditional, online, and hybrid teaching modes (Firdousi et al., 2024). Firstly, Student expectations have a significant positive impact on student perceived satisfaction across online, hybrid, and traditional education systems. This relationship is supported by the Expectation Disconfirmation Theory, which posits that satisfaction increases when the educational experience aligns with or surpasses initial expectations. Secondly, students set specific achievement goals (in terms of learning) and hold expectations related to their educational experience. High achievement goals (mastery goals and wishes to become proficient) were found to be the best predictors for academic success, ranking higher than expectations related to course characteristics (Paechter et al., 2010). Thirdly, the Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that positive expectations about a subject or learning material can motivate and drive students to perform well, which may transform into perceived satisfaction and improved academic performance (Firdousi et al., 2024).

Students' expectations for online learning environments

Student expectations for online learning environments typically center on the quality of instruction, course design, effective interaction opportunities, and the usability of the learning platform. Among these, the instructor and the quality of instruction play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Students expect instructors to clearly explain concepts, demonstrate proficiency in online teaching, and possess expertise in implementing e-learning courses. They value teachers who are “exceptionally good at giving explanations” (Firdousi et al., 2024). Moreover, students anticipate continuous support and guidance throughout their learning process. They expect instructors to be accessible and responsive when questions arise, ensuring a supportive learning environment (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). In addition, students expect relevant instruction accompanied by constructive and timely feedback. For assignments, they prefer instructors to provide grading rubrics and a “due date checklist” at the end of each instructional unit, as well as feedback delivered through various modalities such as text, audio, or video (Lin et al., 2023). Beyond instructional roles, students also view instructors as motivators who display enthusiasm, encourage active learning, and make online courses engaging and

enjoyable. They appreciate teachers who care about their learning pace, foster a friendly atmosphere, and model interaction and critical thinking to promote meaningful discussions. Furthermore, students expect instructors to offer clear examples that communicate expectations for group work and to provide a well-structured course orientation to help them navigate the learning process effectively.

Regarding interaction and community, fostering meaningful interaction is considered essential for promoting engagement, a sense of belonging, and motivation in online learning environments. Students hold strong expectations for opportunities to interact not only with their instructors but also with peers and the learning content. The quality of relationships with both peers and professors is consistently a key concern, reflecting the high value students place on strong and effective communication channels (Lobos et al., 2022). They expect instructors to facilitate cooperative learning and group work, emphasizing the importance of peer mentoring through activities such as discussion boards and group projects. Students also appreciate collaborative work on case studies and peer reviewing classmates' work, as these tasks foster engagement and a more profound understanding (Lin et al., 2023). Moreover, students expect instructors to create an open discussion atmosphere where they can freely share ideas and receive feedback. In the context of English-speaking courses, they particularly value opportunities to discuss their learning challenges. For students who feel hesitant to speak, text-based communication formats are preferred because they allow them to feel "braver to ask questions and share thoughts." To further support participation, students in language courses suggest that pair work or small-group discussions be arranged before whole-class interactions, which helps them feel less anxious and more confident in speaking (Kang, 2021). Additionally, students appreciate social learning opportunities and seek platforms that facilitate knowledge sharing and community building. They also recommend having dedicated group communication spaces for informal peer interaction to strengthen the sense of community within the learning environment (Hamonik & Sharrock, 2026).

About course content and design, students expect course materials to be well-organized, relevant, and conducive to active learning. They prefer courses that move beyond passive lectures and incorporate engaging activities such as case studies, group projects, student presentations, discussion forums, and peer-reviewed assignments (Lin et al., 2023). Learners also expect content to be interactive and enriched with multimedia elements. They value access to external online resources that are clear, practical, diverse, and visually supported with graphics. For language learners, the inclusion of supplementary video or audio materials, such as those from YouTube, helps capture interest and foster idea sharing (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Students sometimes perceive tests as mere formalities; therefore, they expect assessments to serve as authentic learning tools by providing formative feedback and pedagogical explanations. They also appreciate frequent, short practice quizzes with immediate feedback. Ultimately, students expect courses not only to provide them with knowledge of the subject matter but also to develop their ability to apply that knowledge effectively (Paechter et al., 2010).

Technical functionality and ease of use are crucial factors that influence student satisfaction. Learners expect e-learning platforms to be simple, accessible, and user-friendly. The technology should be familiar and easy to navigate (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Because technical difficulties can cause frustration, students also value an initial orientation session that helps them become familiar with the online learning environment (Pham, 2018).

Students expect the platform to offer flexibility in terms of time, location, and control over their learning process. They look for improved mobile accessibility that matches the functionality of the

desktop version (Hamonik & Sharrock, 2026). Additionally, they appreciate the integration of supplementary platforms or social media tools, such as YouTube and Instagram, to increase engagement, attract interest, and encourage speaking practice (Gustriani & Hamzah, 2021). Students also expect online classes to enhance their written and communication skills, as well as refine their analytical skills (Firdousi et al., 2024).

In essence, students expect online learning to function like a personalized, interactive learning ecosystem. In this finely tuned instrument, the instructor is a highly accessible expert coach, the technology provides seamless access and flexible control, and the content actively encourages collaboration and deep engagement. When the system fails to deliver on these complex needs, the resulting disappointment negatively impacts their overall satisfaction.

Previous studies

The studies about the students' expectations about the online courses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The studies about the students' expectations about the online courses

Authors and Year	Type of Course	Research Methodology	Students' Expectations
Paechter et al. (2010)	E-learning (General university courses)	- Quantitative Survey - Sample: 2,196 students from 29 Austrian universities	- Instructor: Fast feedback, counseling, support, and easy/fast accessibility. - Learning Process: Flexibility (time, place, pace), opportunities for self-paced exercises, and mechanisms for controlling one's learning outcomes. - Course Design: Clear and organized structure, usability of the platform, and favorable cost-benefit ratio.
Wei & Chou (2020)	Online Course (Asynchronous, general education, Taiwan)	- Quantitative - Sample: 356 undergraduate students from three Taiwanese universities	- Readiness: High Computer/Internet Self-Efficacy, self-directed learning, and motivation for learning. - Perceptions: Flexibility, adaptability, interactivity, and knowledge acquisition. - Satisfaction: Satisfaction with instructional style, content/structure, instructors, discussion forums, and exams.
Kang (2021)	Online English-Medium Instruction Course	- Mixed Methods - Sample: 17 EFL college learners	- Interaction/Participation: Sufficient opportunities to speak/participate, and instructor encouragement. - Peer Interaction: Participation to be facilitated via pair-discussion or group-discussion.

			- Language Improvement: Strengthen second language skills by taking academic courses in English. - Content Clarity: Organizing the content carefully and highlight the core parts of the video lectures.
Waluyo & Panmei (2024)	Online English writing course	- Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods - Sample: 30 second-year EFL students	- Feedback: Enhanced quality and quantity of feedback. - Flexibility: Appreciate online accessibility and temporal independence in providing peer feedback.
Lin et al. (2023)	Online Course (China)	- Mixed Methods - Sample: 175 undergraduate STEM students	- Content/Active Learning: strategies to encourage interaction with content. - Instructor: clear instruction, grading rubrics/due date checklists, timely feedback, and instructor enthusiasm/digital competence. - Peer: Expect collaboration tools, team projects, and peer-reviewed assignments.
Stancin et al. (2026)	Hybrid (Blended) Courses (Computer Science)	- Empirical Survey - Sample: 49 Computer Science university students	- Communication: Regular and timely communication with teachers. - Activities: Online tests and quizzes were considered the most useful activity. - Platform/Interaction: Technical simplicity and user-friendliness. Desire for LMS optimization to include real-time communication and informal social interaction features. - Flexibility: Valued ability to manage time and revisit lectures.
Lobos et al. (2022)	Online Education	- Longitudinal Simple Prospective Design - Sample: 1,904 university students	- Highest Expectation: High self-efficacy for online learning. - Lowest Expectations: Low expectation regarding peer relationships and the effectiveness compared to face-to-face education. Expect adequate online teaching (planned delivery, tool use) and online assessment.

Saidalvi & Fakhruddin (2021)	Online Distance Learning (Diploma engineering courses, Malaysia)	- Quantitative Survey with open-ended questions - Sample: 486 Diploma students	- Instructional Improvement: Lecturers to be more innovative and flexible. - Workload: minimization of assignments and a preference for hands-on activities over video presentations. - Format Preference: Highest expectation was to discontinue online distance learning and return to face-to-face instruction. - Academic Outcomes: High expectation for achieving excellent results/high grades during online distance learning.
Haugsbakken, Hagelia, & Nagel (2025)	Small Private Online Courses	- Preliminary Quantitative Survey - Sample: N=22 students	- Resource Quality (AI-Generated): Valuable textual resources. Expect usability and quality in digital tests. Need for improved formative feedback mechanisms in digital tests. Preference for text-based content utilization over visual resources (images/videos).
Thach (2018)	Online English Language Learning Course (Vietnamese University)	- Survey - Sample: One cohort of learners.	- Interaction Quality: Expect learners' meaningful interaction with course materials, prioritizing quality over quantity of interaction. - Technical Support: Expect continuous technical support to promote autonomous learning.

It can be seen from previous studies that research on students' expectations of online courses in Vietnam is limited, with participants primarily drawn from major cities, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other contexts within the country. The Vietnamese educational landscape is powerfully shaped by a national drive toward digital transformation. This process was significantly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting a rapid shift to online delivery across all educational levels, including higher education. Despite government initiatives to promote technology adoption and the widespread implementation of Learning Management Systems, such as Moodle and Google Classroom, in higher education institutions, digital disparities persist, particularly in terms of infrastructure, access to devices, and teacher preparedness. Investigating students' expectations for online English courses is therefore crucial, as it provides insights that can guide educational strategies and curriculum development, enabling institutions to design courses that fully leverage the potential of technology-enhanced learning environments.

To fill this gap, this study aims to investigate Vietnamese students' expectations of English online courses. To achieve this aim, the study seeks to answer the research question, "What are the Vietnamese students' expectations of English online courses?"

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was a quantitative approach to investigate Vietnamese students' expectations of English online courses.

This study employed a questionnaire to collect data on students' expectations. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature regarding students' expectations of online courses. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions that allowed for multiple answers to be selected in a single question. The questionnaire includes two sections. The first section was used to collect demographic information about the participants, while the second section was designed to collect students' expectations. The questionnaire was sent to two experts experienced in English teaching and research to solicit feedback. After incorporating the feedback, the questionnaire was ready for use.

The questionnaire was imported to Google Form and sent to students through the researchers' personal contacts. The students were invited to complete the questionnaire voluntarily without any pressure. The questionnaire was open for two weeks to collect data.

Participants

The questionnaire was sent to all students from various majors at a university in northern Vietnam. The students have 4 years of training with 10 English credits, which are divided into three courses. Students must pass all courses with suitable grades to be eligible for graduation. They had diverse family backgrounds and came from different areas of Vietnam.

4. FINDINGS

A total of 1,171 students participated in the study. The results indicated that a majority of them (80.9%) studied English for graduation, while more than half of them (52.1%) studied English for communication and future career preparation. Additionally, 50.4% of them studied English for these purposes. Interestingly, only 0.1% of students studied for the enjoyment of it. In addition, students found that speaking was the most difficult skill (63%), followed by listening (62%) and writing (53%). Reading was ranked as the least difficult skill, with 24.5%.

Regarding the expectations about the online courses. Figure 1 illustrates the skills that students expected to improve with the course. Specifically, listening emerges as the skill students are most eager to develop, with an expected improvement score of approximately 63.3%, suggesting a strong focus on enhancing comprehension abilities. Reading follows, with an anticipated improvement score of approximately 56.4%, indicating a moderate interest in strengthening one's understanding of written texts. Writing is next, scoring about 55.3%, showing that students recognize the need to refine their ability to express ideas in writing. Speaking receives the lowest expected improvement score, approximately 53.2%, reflecting that students consider it the most challenging area and are keen to gain confidence in verbal communication. Overall, the chart indicates that while students aim to improve both receptive and productive skills, there is a particular emphasis on enhancing Listening, with Speaking being the skill where they most desire support.

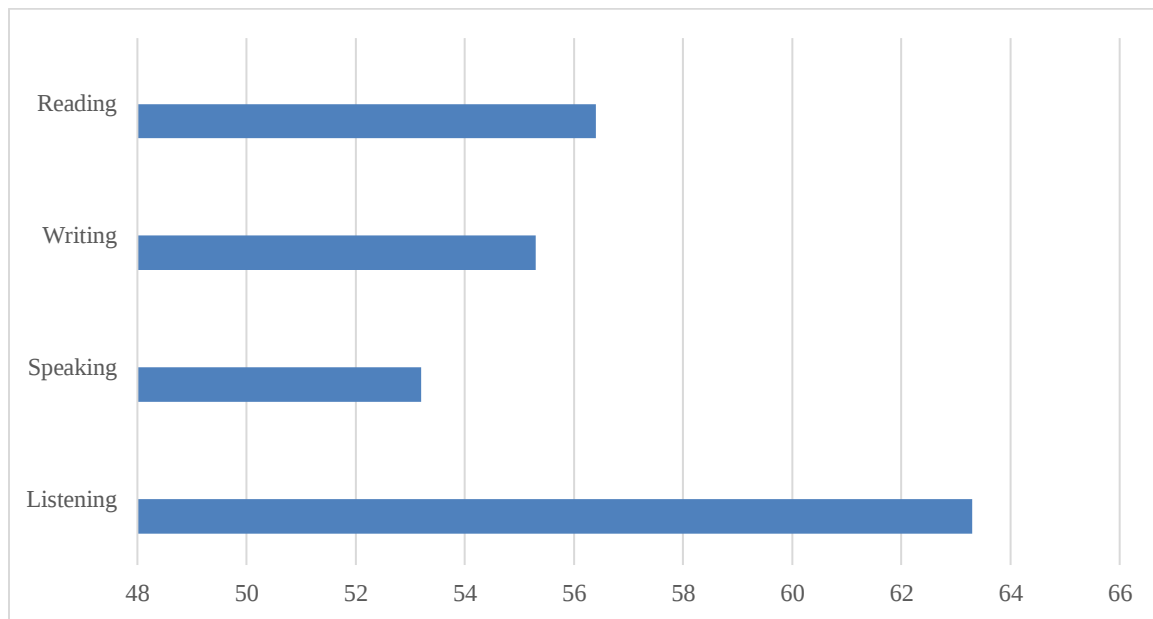


Figure 1. Skills of expectations to be improved

Figure 2 shows the materials that students expected to be exposed to in the English online courses. To be concise, The bar chart illustrates the types of materials that students expect to engage with in an online English course. Among these, authentic listening audios are the most desired, with a score of approximately 69.8%, indicating a strong interest in developing listening comprehension through real-life content. Writing practice tests (about 56.2%) and vocabulary and grammar exercises (around 57.3%) follow closely, suggesting that students value structured practice to enhance their language accuracy and application. Writing samples, with a score of roughly 49.2%, demonstrate a moderate interest in studying examples of written texts. In contrast, pronunciation practice with feedback, scoring about 50.1%, indicates that students also recognize the need for improvement in oral skills. Overall, the chart highlights a preference for materials that provide both authentic exposure and practical exercises, with a particular emphasis on listening and structured skill development.

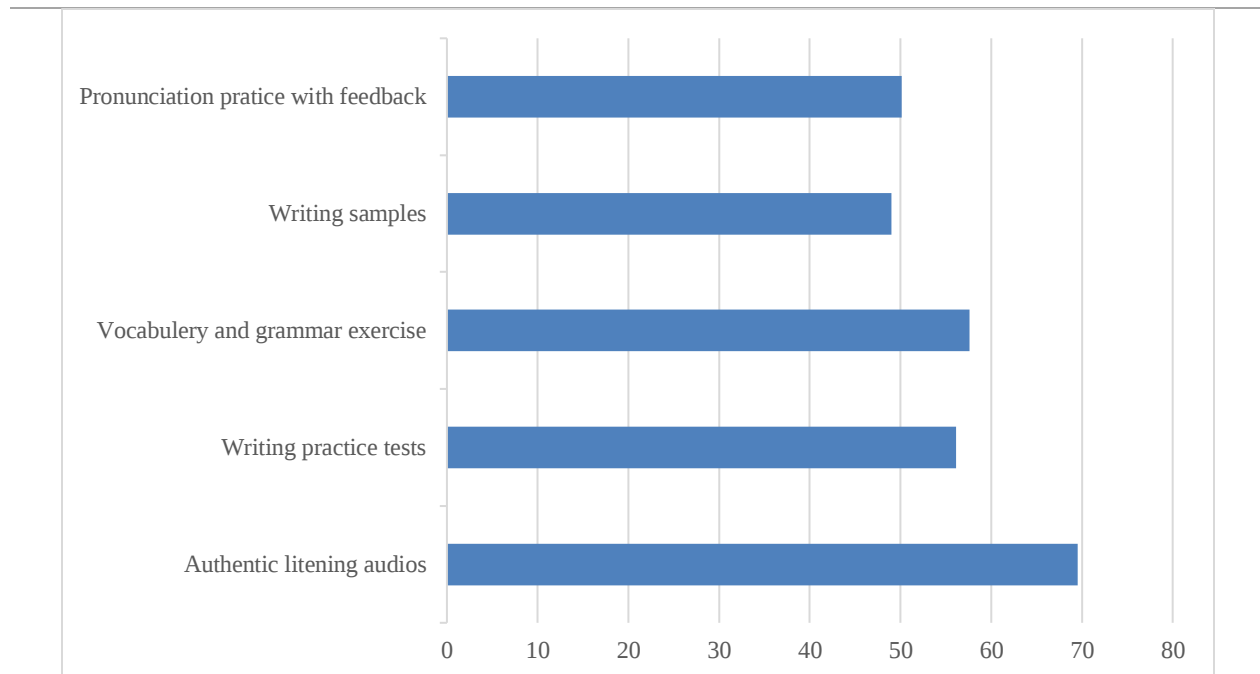


Figure 2. Materials expected to be exposed to

Figure 3 demonstrates the features that the students expected to experience in the English online courses. The most preferred feature is **simulated English proficiency tests**, with a score of approximately 61.2%, indicating that students highly value opportunities to practice in test-like environments that mirror real assessment conditions. **Useful exercises** follow closely with about 57.4%, reflecting students' desire for practical and relevant activities that can effectively support skill development. **User-friendly design** ranks next at around 54.8%, showing that ease of navigation and accessibility are also important factors influencing learners' satisfaction. Lastly, **fast and correct feedback** received a score of approximately 49.6%, suggesting that while timely and accurate responses are appreciated, they are viewed as less critical compared to other features. Overall, the chart indicates that students prioritize authentic test practice and meaningful exercises, supported by an intuitive platform and a responsive feedback system, to enhance their online learning experience.

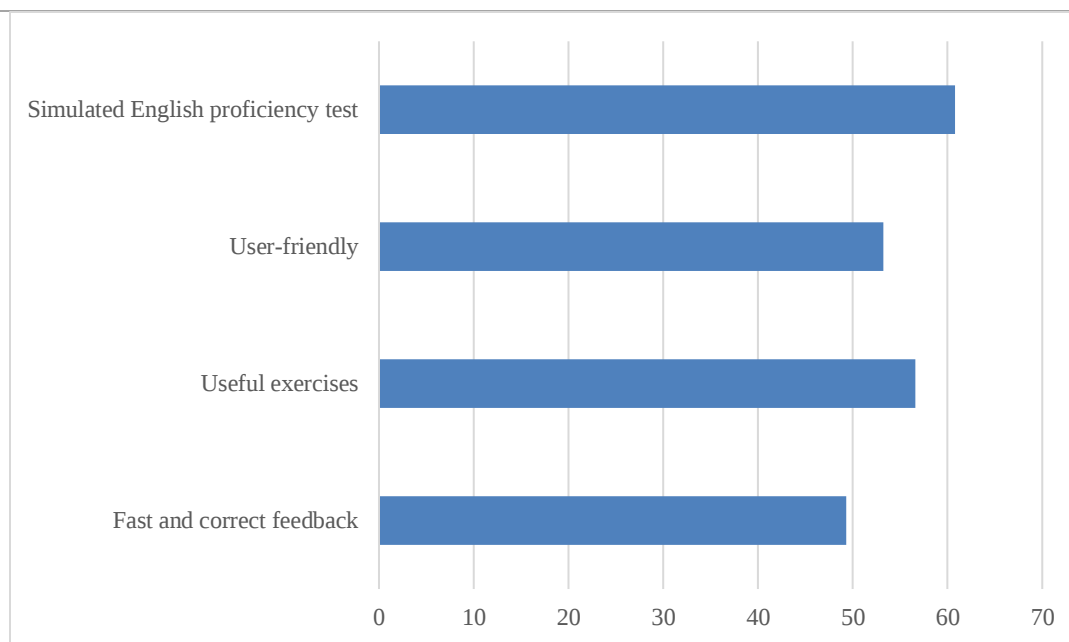


Figure 3. Expected system features

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study align with and extend previous research on students' expectations in online courses, particularly in the context of English language learning. Consistent with Thach (2018) and Kang (2021), students in this study prioritized skill improvement, with a strong focus on receptive skills such as listening, reflecting a desire to strengthen comprehension abilities, a need also highlighted in Paechter et al.(2010), who reported that learners value opportunities for self-paced exercises and mechanisms to control their learning outcomes. The preference for authentic listening materials, writing practice, and structured exercises mirrors the emphasis on active learning and meaningful content found by Lin et al. (2023), as well as the desire for hands-on activities noted by Saidalvi and Fakhruddin (2021). In terms of course features, the high importance placed on simulated English proficiency tests and practical exercises echoes findings from Stancin et al. (2026) and Wei and Chou (2020), who emphasized the value of interactive, test-oriented, and flexible learning experiences. Notably, while students in previous studies (e.g., Haugsbakken et al., 2025; Waluyo & Panmei, 2024) highlighted the need for timely and high-quality feedback, this study found that feedback was appreciated, but it was slightly less critical than structured test practice and practical exercises. Overall, the results underscore that Vietnamese students' expectations combine a desire for authentic, skill-focused materials and supportive course features, highlighting both global consistencies and context-specific preferences in online English learning.

Despite these similarities, the present study reveals several distinctive patterns in the Vietnamese context. Unlike studies in Austria (Paechter et al., 2010) and Taiwan (Wei & Chou, 2020), where flexibility, platform usability, and self-directed learning were dominant expectations, Vietnamese students showed a pronounced emphasis on improving listening skills and exposure to authentic materials, such as real-life audio recordings. Additionally, while speaking was identified as the

most challenging skill by the majority of students, it received a relatively lower expected improvement score, suggesting that learners may perceive it as a long-term challenge requiring sustained support rather than immediate gains, an aspect less reported in studies by Kang (2021) or Lin et al., (2023), who emphasized active interaction and speaking opportunities. Furthermore, students' slight deprioritization of feedback contrasts with the strong feedback expectations observed in Waluyo and Panmei (2024) and Haugsbakken et al.(2025), indicating that Vietnamese learners may value structured practice and test-like experiences more than immediate instructor responses. Lastly, the extremely low interest in studying English for enjoyment (0.1%) highlights a utilitarian approach to language learning in Vietnam, mainly driven by academic and career goals, which differs from the motivational patterns reported in contexts such as Malaysia (Saidalvi & Fakhrudin, 2021) or Austria (Paechter et al., 2010). These findings suggest that English online courses in Vietnam should prioritize authentic listening materials, structured skill development, and test-oriented practice to align with learners' pragmatic and goal-focused expectations.

6. CONCLUSION

The study's findings diverge from global patterns that emphasize immediate instructor feedback and speaking interaction, reflecting a Vietnamese learner profile shaped by exam pressures, limited oral exposure, and gaps in digital infrastructure. Practical recommendations include integrating authentic listening tasks with shadow-speaking exercises, weekly mini-mock tests with instant scoring, scaffolded peer interaction tools, and clear orientation materials for platform navigation. A key limitation of this study lies in its exclusive reliance on a quantitative survey, which may not capture learners' nuanced experiences or affective, motivational, and behavioral dimensions of online learning. Moreover, the study focuses solely on asynchronous online English courses, thereby omitting other important aspects of learner expectations identified in prior literature, such as real-time interaction, instructor immediacy, peer collaboration, and multimodal feedback mechanisms that characterize synchronous or blended formats. Future research should therefore adopt mixed-methods approaches to triangulate survey data with interviews, focus groups, or learning analytics, providing a more comprehensive understanding of learners' engagement and interaction quality. Longitudinal investigations are also recommended to examine how aligning course design with learners' expectations influences their satisfaction, persistence, and measurable gains in English proficiency over time, thereby informing more sustainable models of online English education in the Vietnamese higher education context.

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