

Strategies for Attracting International Students to Universities in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Vietnamese language proficiency has emerged as a critical need for the international community, particularly for students from neighboring countries like Laos and Cambodia. Communicative competence in Vietnamese not only fosters cultural exchange but serves as a fundamental prerequisite for pursuing higher education in Vietnam. In the context of globalization, mastery of Vietnamese offers learners significant academic and professional opportunities. However, empirical evidence suggests that Laotian and Cambodian learners face substantial hurdles in acquiring the language. Primary constraints include a scarcity of specialized teaching materials, limitations in lecturers' pedagogical expertise in cross-cultural contexts, and shortcomings within existing curricula. To address these challenges, this study proposes strategic solutions to attract international students to universities in the Mekong Delta, including developing specialized curricula, enhancing faculty professional development, and constructing a supportive learning environment. These recommendations underscore the importance of a modern, learner-centered educational approach, thereby facilitating students' integration and success in a new academic setting.

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Introduction

In recent years, the number of international students pursuing Vietnamese language studies, both in their home countries and within Vietnam, has steadily increased. This trend has become a strategic priority for many universities, not only contributing to revenue generation for educational institutions but also fostering academic and cultural exchange. In Vietnam, the demand for learning Vietnamese is particularly high among students from neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia. This growing interest underscores the necessity for more effective strategies to attract and retain these learners.

Existing research on teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language has primarily focused on pedagogical methods, curriculum design, and support policies for international students. Globally, scholars have emphasized the critical role of proficiency in the "host language" as a key factor enabling international students to integrate and thrive in the host country [1]. However, there remains a notable gap in the scientific literature regarding specific, localized strategies aimed at attracting international students to study Vietnamese, particularly in regions like the Mekong Delta.

This article addresses that gap by analyzing the current state of teaching and learning Vietnamese for international students, specifically those from Laos and Cambodia. The study identifies key challenges and opportunities for universities in the Mekong Delta region to expand international enrollment. The primary objective is to propose a set of feasible and effective strategies

to attract and support these students, thereby enhancing the quality of international education and promoting regional cultural understanding.

Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, a comprehensive methodology was adopted, structured into the following sequential steps.

Step 1

Needs Analysis and Research

The initial phase involved a thorough analysis of the needs of both students and lecturers. This included.

Survey of Laotian and Cambodian Students

A survey was conducted featuring key questions regarding satisfaction with the current program, difficulties encountered during study, and skills desired for improvement. This data provided a foundational overview of student needs and challenges.

Table 1: Student Survey Components

Question	Response
Are you satisfied with the current curriculum?	Yes / No
What difficulties do you encounter?	...
Which skills do you wish to improve?	Listening / Speaking / Reading / Writing
Do you want more extracurricular activities?	Yes / No

Lecturer Interviews

Interviews were organized with Vietnamese language lecturers to gather feedback on teaching challenges and identify areas requiring curriculum adjustment.

Step 2

Curriculum Development

Based on findings from the needs analysis, a specialized Vietnamese language curriculum was developed. This phase included.

Curriculum Design

The program was designed in a modular and practical format, combining grammar, vocabulary, and real-life communication skills.

Proposed Modules

Module	Objectives	Contents
Module 1: Basic Communication	Develop common communication skills	Greetings, inquiries, self-introduction
Module 2: Listening and Comprehension	Enhance listening and understanding skills.	Listening and understanding in real-life situations.
Module 3: Reading Comprehension	Strengthen ability to read simple texts.	Reading texts, newspapers, short stories.
Module 4: Basic Writing	Improve writing skills for students.	Writing emails, letters, short essays.
Module 5: Vietnamese Culture	Explore culture and customs.	Holidays, customs, legends.

Online Support Materials

Online learning resources, such as video lectures, interactive exercises, and discussion forums, were developed to provide flexible learning opportunities.

Step 3

Faculty Training and Development

To improve teaching quality, training programs were organized for lecturers. These included.

Pedagogical Skills Training

A five-day training course focused on intercultural teaching methods. Topics included understanding the cultures of Laos and Cambodia, active language teaching methods, and cross-cultural communication skills.

Experience Sharing:

Education experts and experienced lecturers were invited to share their valuable insights on teaching international students.

Building a Supportive Learning Environment

To assist students in integrating and learning effectively, a positive and friendly learning environment was established. Key activities included:

Cultural Integration Activities

Organizing meet-ups and group activities to facilitate interaction and mutual understanding between international and domestic students.

Vietnamese Language Club

Establishing a club for international students to practice Vietnamese and interact with peers and lecturers.

Results and Discussion

Practical Significance of the Strategy

The specialized Vietnamese language curriculum strategy yielded several positive results, benefiting both students and lecturers.

Enhanced Learning Quality

The adjusted curriculum helped students easily understand and apply Vietnamese in practical contexts, significantly improving

their communication skills.

Improved Cultural Integration

Through structured learning and extracurricular activities, international students developed a stronger sense of connection with Vietnamese culture, reducing anxiety and feelings of isolation [2].

Enhanced Teaching Skills for Lecturers

Participation in training and development courses equipped lecturers with modern pedagogical skills and a deeper understanding of multicultural education, helping them become more effective educators [3].

Implementation Time and Location

This strategy is proposed for implementation at universities in the Mekong Delta region during the 2024-2025 academic year. The specialized Vietnamese language curriculum will be piloted with a select group of students from Laos and Cambodia enrolled in the Vietnamese language program.

Specific Results from Implementation

A pre- and post-implementation evaluation revealed significant improvements in student performance and confidence.

Pre-Implementation

The average score of international students in Vietnamese courses was only 3.5 - 5.5 out of 10. Only 30% of students felt confident communicating in Vietnamese. Students struggled to grasp key cultural concepts in the Vietnamese context.

Post-Implementation

The average score of Laotian students in Vietnamese courses increased to 6.5 - 8.0 out of 10, indicating a marked improvement in learning quality. 90% of students reported feeling more confident in their Vietnamese communication skills, showing significant improvement in language use in daily life. Students demonstrated better expression capabilities in self-introductions, group discussions, and short essays.

Case Study

A specific example highlights this success. A Laotian student named

“A” (name changed for confidentiality), who previously felt “too shy to speak Vietnamese,” became more confident thanks to the interactive activities of the new curriculum. A’s interview score increased from 5 to 8 after just one semester. This case demonstrates the tangible benefits of the adjusted, communication-based approach.

Impact on the Educational Context

The success of the strategy is not limited to individual students but has a broader impact on the educational and cultural landscape

Improved Cultural Exchange

This initiative not only helps Laotian students learn Vietnamese but also creates opportunities to enhance understanding and cultural exchange between Vietnam and Laos [4].

Strengthened Student-Lecturer Relationships

The program fostered closer relationships between students and lecturers, creating a more cohesive and supportive learning environment.

Scalable Model

The success and lessons learned from this initiative can be applied to other groups of international students learning Vietnamese, and this model can be replicated at other universities and educational centers throughout Vietnam [5-7].

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The specialized Vietnamese language curriculum strategy, piloted with students from Laos and Cambodia, has achieved encouraging results in improving education quality and supporting international students. By addressing key issues related to teaching and learning, the program has delivered tangible benefits to students, lecturers, and educational institutions. This initiative not only improved academic outcomes but also contributed to cultural exchange and strengthened regional educational cooperation.

Recommendations

To ensure continued success and effective implementation of this strategy, the following recommendations are proposed.

Financial Support

Secure funding from educational institutions, scholarship funds, and sponsors to develop the program, fund lecturer training, and support student extracurricular activities.

Collaborative Research

Establish an interdisciplinary research group comprising lecturers, education experts, and international students to continuously develop and refine the program. This group should actively collect feedback to ensure content remains relevant to student needs.

Continuous Professional Development

Regularly organize training workshops on pedagogy, teaching skills, and multicultural understanding for Vietnamese language lecturers.

Comprehensive Student Support

Build a clear and effective support system for international students, including psychological counseling, accommodation support, and cultural exchange activities.

International Cooperation

Promote partnerships and student exchange programs with

universities in Laos and Cambodia to create more opportunities for learning and cultural exchange.

Strategic Communication

Launch communication campaigns to promote the specialized Vietnamese language program to attract more students.

Periodic Evaluation

Establish a system for periodic evaluation and monitoring of the curriculum to ensure it remains aligned with student needs and practical requirements.

By implementing these recommendations, universities in the Mekong Delta can create an optimal learning environment for international students, thereby strengthening educational ties and promoting sustainable cultural cooperation between Vietnam and international partners.

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