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**Research Article**

# DIGITAL COMPETENCE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH: A STUDY AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN CAU KIEU WARD, HO CHI MINH CITY

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**ABSTRACT**

*In the context of educational digital transformation, assessing students' digital competence has become essential to meet the requirements of the 2018 General Education Curriculum (2018 GEC) and the Digital Competence Framework for Learners (Circular 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT). This study investigates students' digital competence while learning English at a junior high school in Cau Kieu Ward, Ho Chi Minh City. Data were collected with 324 students, using a questionnaire covering six competence domains, including information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, problem solving, and artificial intelligence application. The results indicated that students self-assessed their digital competence at an intermediate level, demonstrating stronger skills in information retrieval and digital safety, while showing limitations in digital content creation and the flexible application of Artificial Intelligence. The study recommends integrating AI-based learning projects and enhancing education on how to use digital tools ethically to foster comprehensive digital competence among lower secondary students.*

***Keywords:*** digital competency; digital competency framework; English subject; junior high school students

## 1. Introduction

In the context of digital transformation, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has promulgated a framework for learners' Digital Competence (DC), comprising six core competency domains: (1) information and data literacy; (2) communication and collaboration; (3) digital content creation; (4) digital safety; (5) problem-solving; and (6) AI application (MOET, 2025). Assessing the digital competence of junior high school students,

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particularly in learning English, is crucial to meet the requirements of the 2018 GEC and enhance students' competence for self-directed learning, creative problem-solving, and adaptability in modern online learning environments. In the context of the proliferation of AI tools, any integration of such tools into foreign language teaching and learning brings forth opportunities for developing students' DC in a more personalized and effective manner, thereby enhancing interactivity. Ericsson and Johansson (2023) found that conversational AI significantly supports English-speaking practice, with positive experiences reported more strongly among lower-proficiency and female students. Similarly, Alghasab (2025) observed that AI writing tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT serve as effective scaffolds within the Zone of Proximal Development, facilitating the writing process. Students acknowledged the positive impacts of AI tools on immediate text quality; however, they also reported concerns about over-reliance, underscoring the need for a hybrid methodology with teacher guidance. Globally, numerous studies have also demonstrated a positive correlation between DC and foreign language learning outcomes. Competency frameworks such as the EU's Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) and UNESCO's Digital Literacy Global Framework emphasize the role of data exploitation, digital content creation, and ensuring safety in digital environments. Research by Kopinska (2020) and Degirmenci (2024) has highlighted the importance of integrating digital skills into English language teaching activities and the growing needs of language learners in the digital era. Their findings show that the application of information technology in teaching positively impacts both language learning effectiveness and learner psychology, helping reduce anxiety and enhance autonomy in the online English learning process. In Vietnam, Le et al. (2019) revealed that there is a pronounced disparity between student groups in major cities and those in rural areas, while most students have regular access to the Internet and digital tools (Le et al., 2019). From the teachers' perspective, Dang et al. (2025) indicated that developing DC for junior high school students in Vietnam faces multiple challenges, including limitations in infrastructure, technology-adaptive teaching methods, and teacher readiness (Dang et al., 2025). Consequently, although research on DC in education exists, a distinct gap remains in the assessment of DC among junior high school students in learning English, analyzed based on specific competency domains, within Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

This study, conducted at Cau Kieu Junior High School in HCMC, aimed to assess students' DC across six domains in English learning while identifying underdeveloped areas. A key innovation lies in the use of a 5-point Likert self-assessment scale based on the DC framework for learners in Circular No. 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2025), specifically adapted for English teaching and learning. Unlike prior studies that relied on DigComp or focused on university contexts, this research targets junior high school students and incorporates the AI application domain, providing a contextually relevant reflection of Vietnam's digital education transformation.

## 2. Research Contents

### *2.1. The rationale for this research*

Digital competence is defined as the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for purposes of employment and entrepreneurship. This competence encompasses what are collectively referred to as computer literacy, information and communication technology literacy, information literacy, and media literacy (Law et al., 2018). According to Ferrari (2013), DC entails the confident, critical, and creative use of information and communications technology (ICT) to achieve goals related to work, learning, leisure, inclusion, and participation in society. Similarly, Vuorikari et al. (2022) conceptualize DC as involving confidence, critical, and responsible engagement with digital technologies, including skills in information and data literacy, communication, digital content creation, safety, problem-solving, and critical thinking. In the Vietnamese context, DC is understood as the ability to employ digital technologies to solve problems and perform specific learning or daily life tasks. It represents a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to effectively harness technological tools to enhance learning and work productivity, while contributing positively to society in the context of digital transformation (MOET, 2025).

A Digital Competence Framework (DCF) can be understood as a structured representation that concretizes and describes the constituent competences of DC, such as computer competence, ICT competence, information competence, and media competence. The construction of a DCF depends on its intended purposes and may integrate technical, social, or combined dimensions (Mai et al., 2023). Each DCF is developed based on different theoretical perspectives of digital knowledge and varies according to the target population. The DCF for learners, promulgated under Circular No. 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT, structures proficiency into four proficiency levels divided into eight tiers. This systematic classification facilitates the integration of DC into instructional programs and the design of grade-level-appropriate assessments (MOET, 2025). Furthermore, the framework is aligned with the 2018 GEC, emphasizing the development of learners' capacity for active, creative, and responsible technology use. The Circular's promulgation represents a significant milestone, establishing a legal foundation for synchronized DC training, assessment, and development across the national education system.

### *2.2. Methods and participants*

#### *2.2.1. Research design*

This article presents quantitative findings from a mixed-method study. The survey was conducted based on the six component domains of the DCF issued by the MOET. Each competence domain was operationalized into specific behavioral indicators aimed at assessing students' proficiency levels in distinct aspects of DC.

The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms to facilitate data collection, coding, and processing. All items were designed using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not competent at all; 2 = Very limited competence; 3 = Basic competence; 4 = Proficient; 5 = Highly proficient). In this study, the survey results were converted into corresponding DCF proficiency levels to ensure analytical clarity and consistency (Table 1).

***Table 1.*** *Scale convention in the survey on lower secondary students' DC in English learning*

| Mean Score (M) | Level of Knowledge (Likert Scale) | Proficiency Level (DCF) |
|---|---|---|
| **1.00 – 1.80** | Not competent at all | Novice |
| **1.81 – 2.61** | Very limited competence | Basic |
| **2.62 – 3.42** | Basic competence | Intermediate |
| **3.43 – 4.23** | Proficient | Advanced |
| **4.24 – 5.00** | Highly proficient | Expert |

The survey instrument comprised 23 items, corresponding to the six component domains of digital competence. Valid responses were entered and analyzed using SPSS software to calculate mean (M) values and standard deviations (SD). This quantitative approach allowed for an accurate reflection of students' current levels of DC, while also providing foundational data for subsequent studies to explore influencing factors and propose a developmental process for enhancing DC in English language learning.

*2.2.2. Participants*

The research was conducted with the participation of 324 students from grades 6 to 9, selected using a stratified sampling method by grade level to ensure representativeness across the entire Cau Kieu Junior High School, located in Cau Kieu Ward, HCMC. The data collection was carried out during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.

### *2.3. Results and discussion*

*2.3.1. Results*

- Information and data literacy competence:

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the mean score for indicators under the domain of information and data literacy was 3.33, reflecting that junior high school students demonstrated a "basic level of knowledge," corresponding to the intermediate level in the DCF for learners.

***Table 2.*** *Survey results on students' information and data literacy competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Using appropriate English keywords to search for relevant exercises and videos | 3.46 | 0.987 |
| Distinguishing which English listening and reading sources are reliable | 3.33 | 0.991 |
| Storing and categorizing reading texts, listening materials, and English vocabulary into proper folders for easy retrieval | 3.27 | 1.057 |
| Comparing two learning sources to select clearer and more accurate content | 3.26 | 1.050 |
| **Average** | **3.33** | |

Among these skills, "using appropriate English keywords…and videos" obtained the highest mean score (M = 3.46), suggesting that students possess relatively good operational skills in using search engines. Conversely, the skill of "comparing two learning sources to select clearer and more accurate content" yielded the lowest mean score (M = 3.26), reflecting students' limited abilities in evaluating and verifying information. Both Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2020) and Decision No. 127/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2021) encourage integrating AI into education. While learners are digitally literate in information retrieval, their lack of analytical and verification skills makes them susceptible to misinformation propagated by AI systems. Therefore, the development of data and information exploitation competence should advance in both breadth - enhancing students' ability to use digital tools effectively and depth, cultivating analytical, evaluative, and responsible information-handling skills to ensure critical engagement in AI-enhanced learning environments.

- Communication and collaboration competence:

As presented in Table 3, this domain attained a mean score of 3.36, corresponding to an intermediate level in the DCF for learners. The highest-rated skill was "using online tools to ask questions and communicate in English" (M = 3.43), demonstrating student proficiency with platforms like Zoom and Google Meet for expanding learning spaces. Conversely, the lowest score was for "sharing English exercises or materials...with proper source citation" (M = 3.29), reflecting limited awareness of academic integrity in collaborative digital environments.

***Table 3.*** *Survey results on students' communication and collaboration competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Using tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, Zalo, or email to ask questions or communicate in English with peers/teachers | 3.43 | 1.112 |
| Commenting or asking questions in English under posts or lessons on online learning platforms | 3.34 | 1.063 |
| Sharing English exercises with peers or groups through digital tools with proper source citation | 3.29 | 1.114 |
| Adjusting spoken or written language to suit the communication context | 3.36 | 0.945 |
| **Average** | **3.36** | |

The implementation of Learning Management Systems (LMS) under Decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg (January 25, 2022) approving the Project on Strengthening ICT Application and Digital Transformation in Education and Training for the Period 2022–2025, with Orientation to 2030 (Prime Minister, 2022) further reinforces the importance of digital platforms in fostering online collaboration. Overall, junior high school students have built a foundational capacity for digital communication and collaboration in English. To meet the demands of DCF and 21st-century education, schools should prioritize project-based learning, online presentations, and academic debates to enhance students' abilities in communication, cooperation, and responsible information sharing within the digital environment.

- Digital content creation competence:

As shown in Table 4, the domain's overall mean score was 3.28, corresponding to the intermediate level in the DCF for learners. The indicator of "using ChatGPT or Grammarly to write and revise English paragraphs" scored highest (M = 3.40), demonstrating relative proficiency with AI writing tools. This was followed by "creating English presentation videos... using Canva, PowerPoint, or other AI-assisted tools" (M = 3.38, SD = 1.124), though its high standard deviation indicates noteworthy divergence in competency. Conversely, the lower scores for "combining images, text, and sound..." (M = 3.23) and "citing authors, inserting watermarks..." (M = 3.10) suggest limited proficiency in systematic content creation and digital copyright compliance.

***Table 4.*** *Survey results on students' digital content creation competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Creating English presentation videos, infographics, or dialogues using Canva, PowerPoint, or other AI-assisted tools | 3.38 | 1.124 |
| Using ChatGPT or Grammarly to write and revise English paragraphs | 3.40 | 1.070 |
| Combining images, text, and sound to create review materials or summarize English grammar structures systematically | 3.23 | 1.059 |
| Citing authors, inserting watermarks, or including references when sharing English lessons, images, videos, or presentations | 3.10 | 1.104 |
| **Average** | **3.28** | |

The survey results reveal substantial variation among students, as all four indicators recorded SDs above one, suggesting unequal access to and use of digital creative tools across grade levels. These findings align with the 2018 GEC, which emphasizes fostering creativity and self-directed learning. However, they also highlight a persistent challenge: students focus on using tools to produce outputs while neglecting digital ethics and copyright compliance. This supports Law et al. (2018), who identified creative content production with legal compliance as a common weakness among students in developing contexts. Therefore, there is an urgent need to not only provide access to AI tools like ChatGPT and Canva but also to integrate digital copyright and data ethics education into English learning.

- Digital safety competence:

***Table 5.*** *Survey results on students' digital safety competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Knowing how to set passwords to protect documents and English learning accounts on digital platforms | 3.42 | 1.114 |
| Using individual learning accounts and avoiding personal information disclosure when participating in online English classes | 3.48 | 1.054 |
| Regulating online English study time to avoid negative impacts on health | 3.33 | 1.070 |
| **Average** | **3.41** | |

As shown in Table 5, the overall mean score for this domain was 3.41, corresponding to the intermediate level in the DCF for learners. The SDs (1.114, 1.054, and 1.070) indicate considerable variability among students in their access to digital devices, self-management, and online learning conditions. The results confirm that digital safety encompasses both information security and digital health management, highlighting the challenge of teaching students time management and balanced technology use—issues noted in Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg on the health impacts of prolonged online learning (Prime Minister, 2020). Therefore, in addition to account protection, schools should provide digital health education integrating time management, balanced screen use, and digital ethics to establish a solid foundation of digital safety competence, enabling students to engage responsibly and healthily in digital environments.

- Problem-solving competence:

***Table 6.*** *Survey results on students' problem-solving competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Handling technical errors when doing online English exercises | 3.24 | 1.039 |
| Selecting appropriate digital tools for specific English learning skills | 3.38 | 0.888 |
| Sharing effective English learning tips that apply technology and AI tools | 3.16 | 1.065 |
| **Average** | **3.26** | |

Table 6 shows an overall mean score of 3.26, corresponding to the intermediate level in the DCF for learners. The skill of "selecting appropriate digital tools for specific English learning skills" achieved the highest mean (M = 3.38; SD = 0.888), indicating a consistent basic proficiency in tool selection. In contrast, "Sharing effective English learning tips that apply technology and AI tools" had the lowest mean (M = 3.16), showing that this collaborative behavior is still limited and uneven among students. The skill of "handling technical errors when doing online English exercises" (M = 3.24) suggests growing confidence in resolving simple technical issues. These findings highlight problem-solving, critical thinking, and ICT competence as core educational objectives. Furthermore, the DCF for learners (MOET, 2025) identifies "using technology to solve learning problems" as a key component of digital competence. Taken together, the data suggest students are developing basic problem-solving skills using technology and AI tools in English learning. However, greater focus is needed on peer collaboration, reflective AI use, and critical problem-solving to meet 21st-century educational demands.

- AI application competence:

As presented in Table 7, the overall mean score across five indicators was 3.30 on a five-point scale, indicating a basic level of knowledge, corresponding to the intermediate level in the DCF for learners.

***Table 7.*** *Survey results on students' AI application competence*

| Skills | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Creating English presentations/videos by integrating tools such as Canva, Slide AI, ChatGPT, and InVideo AI | 3.30 | 1.107 |
| Recognizing strengths and limitations when using AI | 3.46 | 1.027 |
| Modifying AI-generated content to match one's own English proficiency or learning context | 3.42 | 1.003 |
| Sharing effective ways of using AI with peers to practice speaking, writing, or vocabulary note-taking | 3.13 | 1.073 |
| Suggesting AI tools or combining AI with traditional learning methods to improve English learning | 3.19 | 0.996 |
| **Average** | **3.30** | |

Among the indicators, the highest scores were for "recognizing strengths and limitations when using AI" (M = 3.46), suggesting that students have begun to develop self-awareness and reflective learning strategies when engaging with AI tools. Similarly, the skill of "modifying AI-generated content to match one's own English proficiency or learning context" (M = 3.42) demonstrates students' adaptive editing skills. Conversely, the indicators of "sharing effective AI usage methods…or vocabulary learning" and "suggesting AI tools… for improved English learning" recorded the lowest mean scores (M = 3.13 and M = 3.19, respectively), revealing students' limited collaboration and innovation roles as "change agents" in the AI-integrated learning environment. The SD ranging from 0.996 to 1.107 reflects disparities in students' familiarity and engagement with AI tools. From the perspective of the 2018 GEC, this competence aligns with developing student autonomy, technological literacy, and innovation in English education. However, while students demonstrate nascent awareness and adaptability in applying AI for language learning, their lower proficiency in sharing and proposing tools reveals a deficiency in collaboration. This underscores the imperative for educators to design collaborative, project-based activities and AI-enhanced discussion forums that foster active, creative, and community-oriented student roles within the digital learning ecosystem.

*2.3.2. Discussions*

The survey results across the six DC domains show that while junior high school students possess a foundation of digital skills, they still lack higher-order competencies. Students demonstrated strengths in using English keywords to search for information and in managing digital safety, but they struggled with evaluating sources, collaborating responsibly, and adhering to copyright rules. These findings align with prior studies (Dang et al., 2025; Degirmenci, 2024; Kopinska, 2020; Law et al., 2018) that highlight limited critical thinking and responsible creativity among young learners in developing contexts. Students were competent in using platforms such as Google Meet, Zalo, and Zoom, yet source citation and ethical collaboration were minimal. They engaged with AI tools like ChatGPT and Canva, but

their use remained largely functional rather than innovative. Although they showed awareness of AI strengths and weaknesses, they could not apply AI flexibly in project-based learning, echoing the findings of Alghasab (2025) and Ericsson and Johansson (2023).

Four key reasons underline these limitations: (1) unequal access to digital infrastructure, (2) insufficient pedagogical focus on higher-order digital skills, (3) habitual use of technology for convenience rather than creativity, and (4) the novelty of AI integration in general education. These insights underscore the urgency of teacher professional development, the design of AI-integrated learning projects, and digital ethics education to cultivate comprehensive and responsible digital competence aligned with Vietnam's educational digital transformation agenda.

## 3. Conclusions

This study concludes that students at Cau Kieu Junior High School exhibit an intermediate level of DC in English learning, aligning with broader national and international trends. Students demonstrated strengths in the domains of information and data literacy and digital safety, as reflected in their ability to search for learning resources effectively and maintain awareness of account security. However, their competencies in digital content creation and problem-solving remain limited, especially in areas related to copyright citation and AI application in English learning. These findings gauge student readiness for the 2018 GEC and the DCF (Circular No. 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT), providing empirical evidence for targeted intervention programs within the context of English education. The study proposes integrating AI-based projects and digital ethics education to comprehensively develop student competencies. Consequently, future research should contribute to the formulation of a contextually appropriate model for DC development that aligns with the realities of Vietnamese lower secondary education using AI tools.

❖ ***Conflict of Interest:*** *Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.*

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# NĂNG LỰC SỐ CỦA HỌC SINH TRUNG HỌC CƠ SỞ TRONG HỌC TẬP MÔN TIẾNG ANH: NGHIÊN CỨU Ở MỘT TRƯỜNG TRUNG HỌC CƠ SỞ TẠI PHƯỜNG CẦU KIỆU, THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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## TÓM TẮT

*Trong bối cảnh chuyển đổi số giáo dục, việc đánh giá năng lực số (NLS) của học sinh (HS) phổ thông trở thành yêu cầu cấp thiết nhằm đáp ứng Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông (GDPT) 2018 và Khung NLS cho người học (Thông tư số 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT). Bài báo tập trung khảo sát thực trạng NLS của 324 HS tại một trường trung học cơ sở (THCS) tại phường Cầu Kiệu, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (TPHCM) trong học tập môn Tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được thu thập bằng bảng hỏi về 6 miền năng lực thành phần gồm khai thác dữ liệu và thông tin, giao tiếp và hợp tác, sáng tạo nội dung số, an toàn, giải quyết vấn đề và ứng dụng trí tuệ nhân tạo. Kết quả cho thấy, HS tự đánh giá NLS ở mức độ Trung cấp, thành thạo các kĩ năng khai thác thông tin và an toàn số, nhưng còn hạn chế ở năng lực sáng tạo nội dung số và ứng dụng trí tuệ nhân tạo một cách linh hoạt. Nghiên cứu khuyến nghị nhà trường tích hợp các dự án học tập gắn với công cụ trí tuệ nhân tạo và tăng cường giáo dục đạo đức số để nâng cao NLS toàn diện cho HS. Nghiên cứu hi vọng không chỉ lấp đầy khoảng trống trong nghiên cứu NLS cấp THCS mà còn đóng góp vào hoạch định chính sách và chiến lược giáo dục số phù hợp, thúc đẩy năng lực HS trở thành công dân số toàn diện và năng động.*

***Từ khóa:*** năng lực số; khung năng lực số; học sinh trung học cơ sở; môn Tiếng Anh