

GENERIC STRUCTURE POTENTIAL OF THE ENGLISH INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION PAGES OF UNIVERSITY WEBSITES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: University websites are an indispensable means for the purposes of information, administration and promotion. In such a globalization era, university websites are designed as a kind of multimodal text with the combination of language, signs, audio and visual components, and presentation effects; and most websites are bilingual, trilingual, or even multi-lingual, so as to address a variety of audience with different access purposes, of different age groups, and from different countries and background. This paper reports on a study of the generic structure potential (GSP) of the English introductory information pages of 10 university websites in Vietnam. The GSP analysis is based on Hasan's (1985) framework. The aim of the analysis is to explore the obligatory, the optional, and the iterative elements, which together construct the GSP of these websites. From the findings, suggestions related to improving the quality and the functioning of the websites could then be drawn out.

Key words: English introduction page, generic structure potential (GSP), university, website

1. Introduction

In August 2016, more than one billion websites existed worldwide, representing an increase of almost eighty million websites since July 2016 (Agrebi & Boncori, 2017). In the knowledge-based economy, the miraculous growth of websites and other Internet intermediaries is a convincing evidence for the handiness of Internet communication and the potential of Internet intermediaries in general and of websites in particular. In Vietnam, Internet intermediaries have proliferated incredibly fast for more than two decades now, and almost all organizations in any sectors now have their own websites. In education sector, universities in Vietnam now have all built up their websites and use them as an absolutely indispensable channel for performing different functions and enacting their roles.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Research question

1. What is the generic structure potential of the English introductory pages of Vietnamese universities?
2. What could be changed in the generic structures of these pages to enhance their performance?

2.2. Genre analysis

Genres have been characterised as staged, goal oriented social processes. Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them (Martin, 1985). For Swales (1990), genres constitute a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent

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discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. In functional linguistics, genres are defined as a recurrent configuration of meaning, which enacts the social practices of a culture (Martin & Rose, 2008, p.6). To be more specific, genres can be characterized by recurrent global patterns, and the organisation of each genre can be distinguished by recurrent local patterns. For example, narrative genres in general can be distinguished globally on the presence or absence of sequence in time, and the presence or absence of a complicating event, and the fable sub-genre could be characterized by the stages Orientation^Complication^Resolution. A genre is a highly structured and conventionalized discourse which occurs among the members of a community (Bonyadi, 2012).

In the view of functional linguists, the basis for classifying texts into genre could be the social processes that the texts enact. In functional view, any linguistic analysis should start with the communicative purposes to be realized by the texts, and language only serves as the input bank for any linguistic choices in order to realize different communicative purposes, as language is a meaning making resource (Halliday, 1970). In Martin’s (1992, 1997, 2000) perspective on genre analysis, which is grounded on systemic functional linguistics, genre is defined as: “a system structured in parts, with specific means to specific ends.” (Vian Jr. & Lima-Lopes, 2005, p. 29, as cited in Figueiredo, 2010, p.127).

Taking SFL approach in their study on genres and teaching genres, Knapp and Watkins (1994) define genres as a useful way to classify the social processes that are realized through the use of language (p.25).

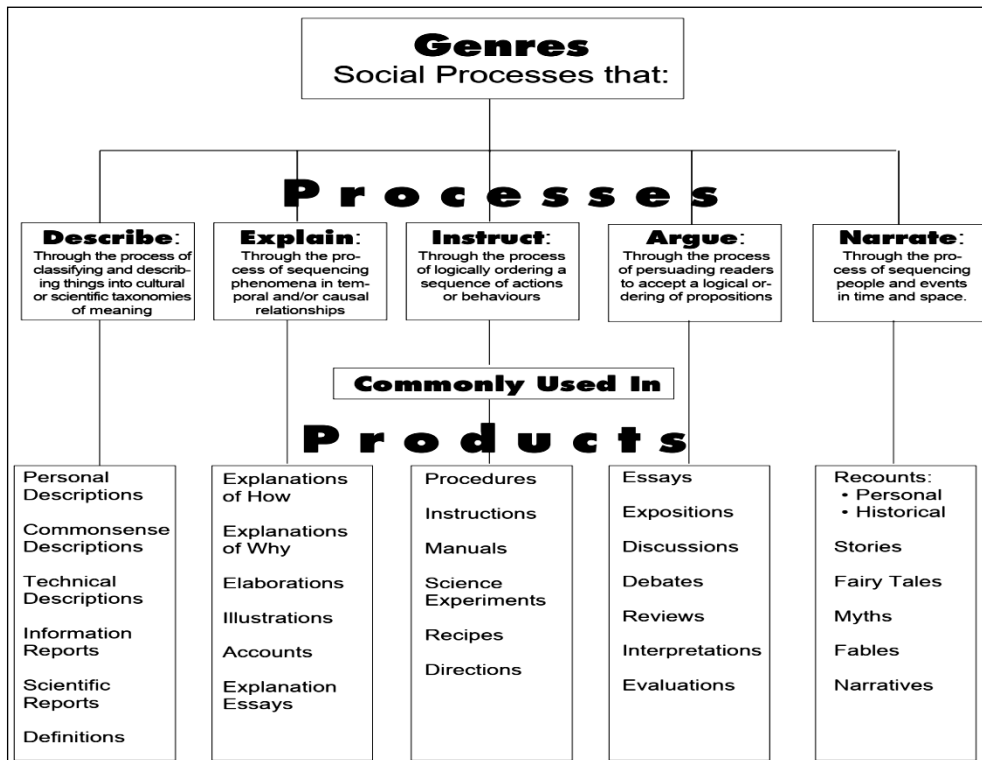


Figure 1. Classification of genres (Knapp & Watkins, 1994, p. 26)

Genre analysis, emerged in 1980s and blossomed in the 1990s, is the study of naturally occurring written discourse focusing, in particular, on analysis beyond the sentence level (Bhatia, 2004). For Bhatia (2002, p.5), a generic description can serve as a resource of “knowledge of procedures, practices and conventions that make the text possible and relevant to a particular socio-rhetorical context.”

Any genre analysis starts with identifying the communicative purpose(s) of the texts or genres under investigation and the use of language in institutionalized settings controlled by communicative conventions existing in and created by a group of participants in a defined discourse community (Martin, 1985); but the key step in genre analysis is the identification of the moves in a text (which is based on the conventions set by the discourse community). In other words, an investigation into how the text producers organize the information throughout the text – the generic structure built up from moves in a text – could facilitate understanding of a text and evaluating its function(s) fulfillment – to what extent the text could perform the communicative purpose(s) it was aimed to perform.

2.3. Generic structure potential

Generic Structure Potential (GSP) is an abstract theoretical notion developed by Hasan (1985), which is a schema that could represent all textual elements available for the development of a genre to establish the genre status of a discourse. Hasan (1985) states that for each genre, there is a potential of elements, or stages that occur / reoccur throughout texts and that could be identified in certain patterns of moves. The GSP of a particular genre is a statement of the structural resources available within a given genre (Hasan, 1984, p. 79). According to Halliday and Hasan, GSP of texts in a genre “expresses the total range of optional, [iterative], and obligatory elements and their order in such a way that we exhaust the possibilities of text that can be appropriate to (the contextual configuration of that text)” (1985, p. 64).

In other words, the GSP of texts in a certain genre represents the full possibility of occurrences of elements for a particular text in that genre. To analyze the GSP of texts in a certain genre, we must identify the following in the organization of the texts:

- (i) Obligatory elements - What elements must occur?
- (ii) Optional elements - What elements may occur?
- (iii) Sequencing of elements - what arrangement of elements is obligatory and optional?
- (iv) Iteration - How often may the elements occur?

An illustration of how GSP could be identified in a text is demonstrated in Hasan’s (1984) analysis on the obligatory and optional rhetorical elements of English shop transaction.

The GSP represented in Figure 2 below could be read that: any shop transaction is conventionalized to potentially consist of 9 elements: (i) Greeting (G), (ii) Sale Initiation (S.I), (iii) Sale Enquiry (SE), (iv) Sale Request (SR), (v) Sale Compliance (SC), (vi) Sale (S), (vii) Purchase (P) (viii) Purchase Closure (PC) and (ix) Finis (F). Among these 9 potential elements, G, SI, SE, and F are *optional* and SR, SC, S, P and PC are *obligatory*. G and SI are optional, but if they do occur, they always take the initial position in the transaction; and if they both occur,

then either G may precede SI, or follow it. SE is optional, and can be iterative; SE can occur anywhere, so long as it does not precede G or SI and so long as it does not follow P or PC or F. SR and SC are both obligatory; if SR occurs twice, then SC must also occur twice (Olaniyan, 2014, p. 73).

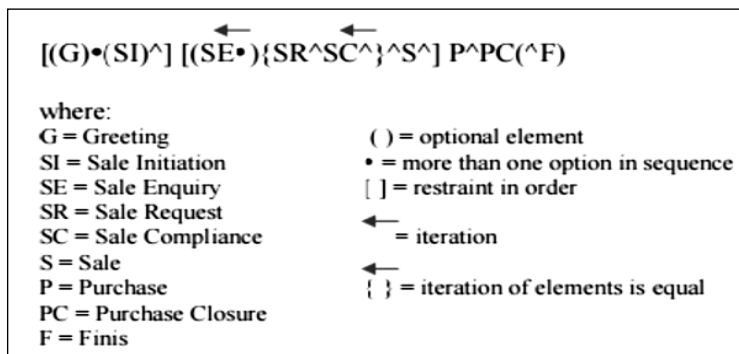


Figure 2. The GSP of shop transaction (Hasan, 1984)

The analysis of obligatory and optional elements, their sequence and iteration in texts of other genres could be done in the same way, thanks to which the GSP of those genres could be seen.

2.4. University websites

In the era of globalization, universities are expanding their goals and enriching their features. Modern universities are taking complex roles including educating, researching, and preserving and disseminating knowledge (Altbach, 2008). They are no longer limited to the role of knowledge providers - ensuring the qualified personnel for different sectors; they are extending to the field of research and development, taking the roles of innovation facilitators, innovation promoters, talent builders, and knowledge pioneers. Recently in its 2017 report, UNESCO also emphasizes the roles of universities in fostering sustainable development and empowering students, and addressing global crises. Intensive and large-scale changes in the higher education today have been directed and signposted by the emergence of new technologies, the expansion of integration processes in the higher education system and the formation of the global education space, and the spread of the “continuous” learning concept in the last decade (Pogodaeva, Zhaparova, & Efremova, 2015). The complex roles of universities are enacted and promoted via different channels, and Internet intermediaries are essential.

Websites as well as other Internet intermediaries are indispensable means for the purposes of administration and promotion for any organizations nowadays. In its 2010 reports, OECD emphasizes the importance of Internet intermediaries in advancing the development of bodies in different sectors:

“As the Internet has grown to permeate all aspects of the economy and society, so too has the role of Internet intermediaries that bring together or facilitate interactions, transactions or activities between third parties on the Internet. Internet intermediaries influence and determine access to and choice between online information, services and goods. They

provide tools that enable users to access information and provide new opportunities for social activities, speech and citizen participation.” (OECD, 2010, p. 3).

Just like in other sectors, in tertiary education, websites are where various web-based applications are put out for various purposes. Linguistically speaking, websites are multimodal text with the combination of language, signs, audio and visual components, and presentation effects; and many websites are bilingual, trilingual, or even multi-lingual, so as to address a variety of audience with different access purposes, of different age groups, and from different races and background. However, as universities are classified as academic institutions, the business function is very much inferior to their educating function, researching function, and knowledge preserving and disseminating function (Altbach, 2008). The main functions to be enacted through university websites are generally administration, knowledge dissemination, and most importantly, promotion. For the functions to be fully performed, websites must be effective in the sense that they have the attributes allowing them to best do the job that they are assigned.

Websites, which are defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary as “a group of World Wide Web pages usually containing hyperlinks to each other and made available online by an individual, company, educational institution, government, or organization”, are a special kind of texts. Websites are actually collection of individual linked pages that share a common graphic and navigational look and feel. Page headers are like miniature versions of the home page that sit atop each page and do many of the things that home pages do, but in a limited space; page footers are mostly about housekeeping and legal matters; while page contents is so multifaceted that few general rules apply (Patrick & Horton, 2008). According to Karayanni and Baltas (2003), the characteristics of interactivity, navigability and multimedia design, and marketing communication content could have impact on the performance of websites. So in analyzing the GSP of university websites, besides the content of information posted on the site, factors related to interactivity, navigability and multimedia design could also be taken into account.

In line with the globalization trend in almost every aspect of modern life, in tertiary education, targeting at international students has undoubtedly become an essential goal for the development of globalized education. The development of bilingual, trilingual, or multilingual websites as an effective channel for communication and promotion is definitely a must to bring information to the students from different countries. Keswani and Kumar (2016) confirm: “Providing good quality education has always been a thrust for nations across the globe. And if the websites of educational institutions are not accessible to all, it might be difficult to reach the resources for some” (p.210). In Vietnam, English introductory information pages is therefore more and more popularly found in the websites of any tertiary institutions, and the analysis of the GSP of these pages is hoped to shed light on how well the English introduction pages of Vietnamese university websites might support international students in learning about the institutions and deciding their enrollment.

3. Methodology

The data for this study are the English introductory information pages (hereby called the English introductory pages) of the websites of ten leading universities in Vietnam, collected in

June 2018 in the form of screen captures. The universities were chosen on the basis that all of them are multi-disciplinary tertiary institutions with a variety of faculties or have different campuses, with large international relation network; so the need for online information, administration and promotion of these institutions is high.

The analytical framework was constructed with the basis on the content and structure of websites as multimodal promotional texts. The elements to be identified in Levitt and Shneiderman’s (2006) guidelines are:

- (i) logo/ header graphic (LG);
- (ii) page title (PT);
- (iii) search tool (ST);
- (iv) navigation bar/ links to other sections/ pages (NA);
- (v) news and events (NE);
- (vi) information/ promotion articles (IP);
- (vii) images, photos (IM);
- (viii) embedded media (EM);
- (ix) contact/ address, copyright (CO).

As websites are often structured in 3 parts: header, main content, and footer, each with a distinctive function, the analytical framework for analyzing the GSP of English introductory pages is accordingly separated for three parts, but these three parts are all resourced from the same banks of items as potential elements. The analytical framework for analyzing the GSP of English introduction pages is constructed as in Figure 3 below.

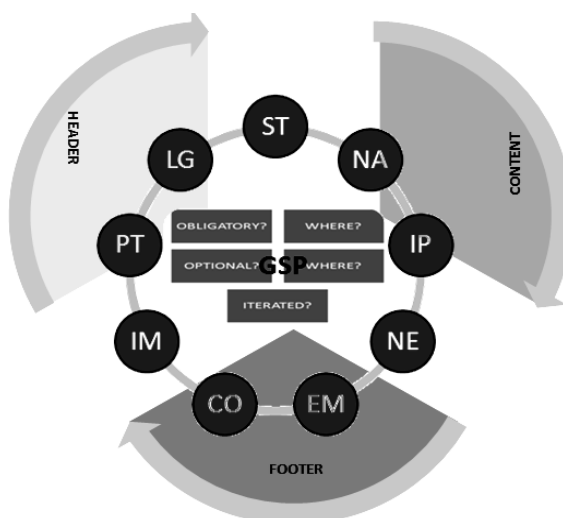


Figure 3. Analytical framework

In data analysis, the analytical framework as in Figure 3 was used to identify the elements that potentially appear in the different parts of the English introductory pages. These elements were then screened for their level of obligation and iteration, their positions on the page, and their sequence in iteration with other elements. The interpretation of the elements is interpreted from left to right, and from up to down.

4. Findings

The analysis of elements in the websites reveals that the number of elements in each website varies. The website with highest element number is quite crowded with 17 elements (8 elements in the Header, 6 elements in the Contents, and 3 elements in the Footer) while the website with lowest element number has only 10 elements (6 elements in the Header, 3 elements in the contents, and 1 element in the Footer).

There are 21 potential elements in the English introduction page of the 10 websites under investigation; the distribution of them could be summarized in Figure 4 below.

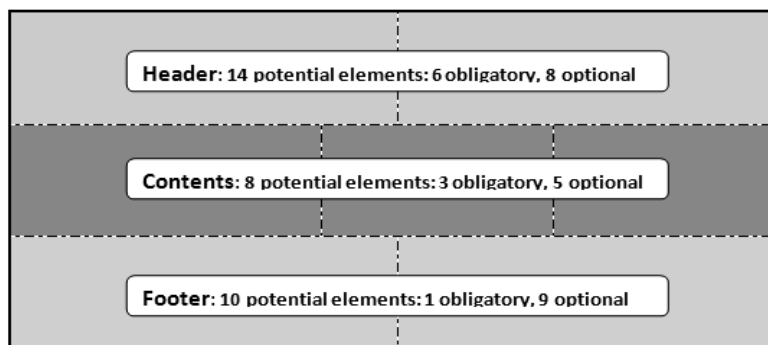


Figure 4. Distribution of website potential elements

As seen in Figure 4, the Header parts are where information appears in 14 different types, while the Content parts, which account for the largest area on the pages, are where articles of quite few major types come out. The Footer parts are where different English introductory pages vary the most, with only one obligatory element shared and all other elements clustered without strict constraints.

The four obligatory elements and optional elements are specific to each part, which means one and the same element could function as an obligatory element in one part and, at the same time, as an optional element in another part.

The four iterative elements in Vietnamese university websites are: *NA* (*navigation bar/ links to other sections/ pages*), *LG* (*logo*), *PT* (*page title*), and *email/ support*. *NA* functions as an obligatory element in the Header but as an optional element in the Content and the Footer. *LG* and *PT*, which are always organized in fixed order, appear as obligatory elements in the Header but as optional elements in the Footer. *Email/ support* acts as an optional element in all of the three parts.

4.1. The Header parts of English introductory pages

The English introductory page headers of the Vietnamese university websites under investigation are all divided into 2 areas: the left area, where most of the obligatory elements are distributed, and the right area, where most optional elements appear. The English introductory page headers investigated do not cover much area on the pages but potentially consist of 14 different elements. Besides the 5 types of elements which already exist in the analytical framework, other 9 types of elements could be identified. As regards the obligation and the

positions of the elements, the features of GSP of the website header could be summarized as follows:

+ The six obligatory elements of the Heading part include: *logo (LG)*, *page title (PT)*, *images/photos (IM)*, *navigation bar/ links (NA)*, *search tool (ST)*, and *language choices*.

+ The eight optional elements of the Heading part include: *motto*, *statement of achievements* (medals awarded, accreditation), *message from the president*, *working agenda*, *web structure*, *email/ support system (library, map)*, *social network link*.

The average number of elements is 6.9 elements (min 6, max 8). The GSP of the university English introductory page header is as below:

$$\{ \mathbf{LG} \cdot \mathbf{PT} \} \wedge (\text{motto}) \wedge \bullet \mathbf{IM} \wedge (\text{achievements}) \wedge (\text{message from the president}) \wedge \mathbf{NA} \wedge \mathbf{ST} \cdot \mathbf{language\ choices} \wedge (\text{web structure}) \wedge (\text{email/support}) \wedge (\text{social network link})$$

4.2. The Content parts of English introductory pages

The contents parts of the English introductory pages could be divided into three sub-areas: the right area, the center and the left area. The center is where the obligatory elements are located while the right and the left areas accommodate most of the optional elements. Though the Content parts are the most important parts of the websites which convey all key information and messages from the institution, they potentially consist of fewest types of elements (**8**) in comparison with the Header and the Footer parts. Besides the elements in the analytical framework, 4 new elements could be identified.

- The three obligatory elements of the Content parts include: *news and events (NE)*, *information for administration/ promotion articles (IP)*, and *embedded media (EM)* (featured videos and photos library/gallery)

- The five optional elements of the Content part include: *highlights*, *navigation links (NA)*, *news of other related organizations* (scholarship funds, employers), *bulletin*, and *support* (transportation, map)

The average number of elements is 4.1 (min 3, max 6). The GSP of the university English introductory page contents is as below:

$$(\text{Highlights}) \wedge (\mathbf{NA}) \wedge \mathbf{NE} \wedge \mathbf{IP} \wedge \mathbf{EM} \wedge (\mathbf{NA}) \wedge (\text{news of other related organization}) \wedge (\text{bulletin}) \wedge (\text{highlights}) \wedge (\text{email/ support})$$

4.3. The Footer parts of English introductory pages

Similar to the Header part, the elements in the Footer part is distributed into two areas: the obligatory parts tend to focus on the left and the optional parts mostly go to the right. The Footer parts of the English introductory page consist of 10 potential elements. Besides the elements in the analytical framework, 4 new elements could be identified.

- The only obligatory element is *contact / address, copyright (CO)*

- The nine optional elements are: *email/support* (map), *embedded media* (EM), *social network link*, *culture introduction* (VUNH), *navigation links* (NA), *user session* (number of people online), *page title* (PT), *logo* (LG), and *brief introduction*.

The average number is 2.6 (min 1, max 5). The GSP of the university English introductory page footer is as below:

$$(\text{Brief intro}) \wedge \text{CO} \wedge (\{\text{LG} \cdot \text{PT}\}) \wedge (\text{EM}) \wedge (\text{NA}) \wedge (\text{social network link}) \wedge (\text{email/support}) \wedge (\text{user session})$$

5. Discussion

From all the findings above, the answers to the two research questions could be found.

5.1. Answer to research question 1

The GSP of the English introductory pages of Vietnamese university websites is the combination of the Header part GSP, the Content part GSP, and the Footer part GSP, which is summarized in Figure 5 below:

HEADER	$\{\text{LG} \cdot \text{PT}\} \wedge (\text{motto}) \wedge \bullet \text{IM} \wedge (\text{achievements}) \wedge (\text{message from the president}) \wedge \text{NA} \wedge \text{ST} \cdot \text{language choices} \wedge (\text{web structure}) \wedge (\text{email/support}) \wedge (\text{social network link})$
CONTENT	$(\text{Highlights}) \wedge (\text{NA}) \wedge \text{NE} \wedge \text{IP} \wedge \text{EM} \wedge (\text{NA}) \wedge (\text{news of other related organization}) \wedge (\text{bulletin}) \wedge (\text{highlights}) \wedge (\text{email/support})$
FOOTER	$(\text{Brief intro}) \wedge \text{CO} \wedge (\{\text{LG} \cdot \text{PT}\}) \wedge (\text{EM}) \wedge (\text{NA}) \wedge (\text{social network link}) \wedge (\text{email/support}) \wedge (\text{user session})$

Figure 5. GSP of English introductory pages of Vietnamese universities

In general, there are 21 potential elements on the English introductory pages of Vietnamese universities, 10 of which are obligatory elements. With the six obligatory elements of logo, page title, images / photos, navigation bar / links to other sections and pages, search tool, and language choices systematically appearing in all the pages under investigation, the function of the Header part is highlighted to be: engaging audience and giving them some clues to navigate and to use the page and related sites. With the three obligatory elements of news and events, information/ promotion articles, and embedded media systematically prevailing in all the pages under investigation, the function of the Content part is confirmed to be: emphasizing information and directing audience' attention. With only one obligatory element of contact/ address, copyright appearing in all the pages under investigation, the function of the Footer part is emphasized to be: evidencing credibility of the information provided on the pages.

The GSP with the obligatory elements as identified in Figure 5 is generally appropriate for the English introductory pages to fulfill their main function of providing their targeted audience, who are future international students (and possibly their parents) with core

information about the institutions. Such a GSP creates a consistent layout for the pages, which in turn enhance the usability of the pages.

5.2. Answer to research question 2

Though the English introductory pages of Vietnamese universities generally succeed in providing their targeted audience, who are future international students (and possibly their parents) with core information about the institutions, there are still things that might be not quite appropriate and could be improved.

Headers: On some pages, such as in Figure 6 there seem to be too many elements which provide different details about the institution in the page headers. Besides the logos and the page titles to provide the identity of the websites, photos/ images to engage the audience, the page headers are perhaps characterized by the functions of navigation direction and support (with search tool and language choices). The elements used for the functions other than the above mentioned might be considered irrelevant.



Figure 6. A page header with many elements

As seen in Figure 6, the page header is quite crowded with 8 different elements namely: logo, page title, medals achieved, navigation bar, working agenda, photos/images, email/support, and language choices. What might be dropped out is the medals achieved, as this element convey no plausible information to the international audience. The appearance of the medals might be evidence that the website owner is not so clear about the targeted audience of this English introductory page. With the targeted audience as future international students and parents, who make no sense of what the medals mean; so there is no need to display them in the limited space of the header. The images of leaders signing ceremonies and the AUN certificates for accredited programs might be not interesting enough to run on the photo slide show, which are aimed at engaging the young audience, who are more interested in learning about campus life and future friends. The presentation on the page header illustrated in Figure 7 could better attract future students.

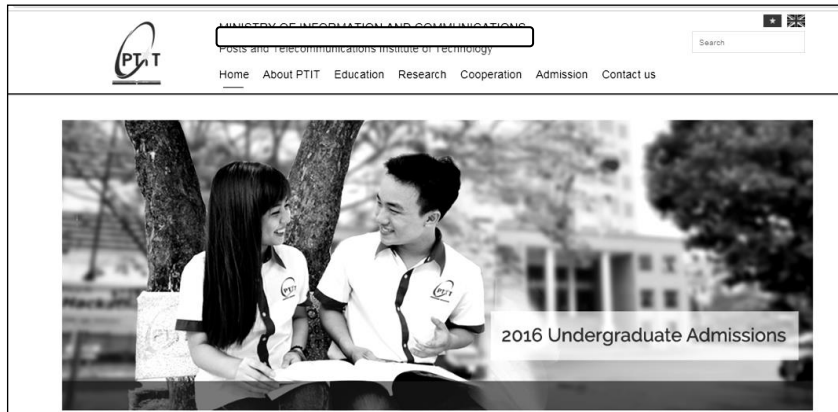


Figure 7. Header with appropriate number of elements

Contents: On some pages, for example in Figure 6, the contents are still very crowded with texts of small font size, and the articles not categorized. Levitt and Shneiderman (2006, p.50) point out that locating a target in a crowded area took longer than when the target was in a sparse area. Targets in sparse areas of the display tended to be searched earlier and found faster than in crowded areas.



Figure 8. Crowded contents part with uncategorized articles

As seen in Figure 7, the articles are not categorized into subgroups but listed in the order of uploading time, making up a long range of news in different topics. In order to search for the targeted piece of information, the audience read the latest news first, then scroll down and work out what to read among many articles in the list. However, critical content and navigation options are suggested to be towards the top of the page, visible with no, or a minimum of, scrolling (Levitt & Shneiderman, 2006, p.47); so this way of arranging the contents of the page is not considered a user-friendly way.

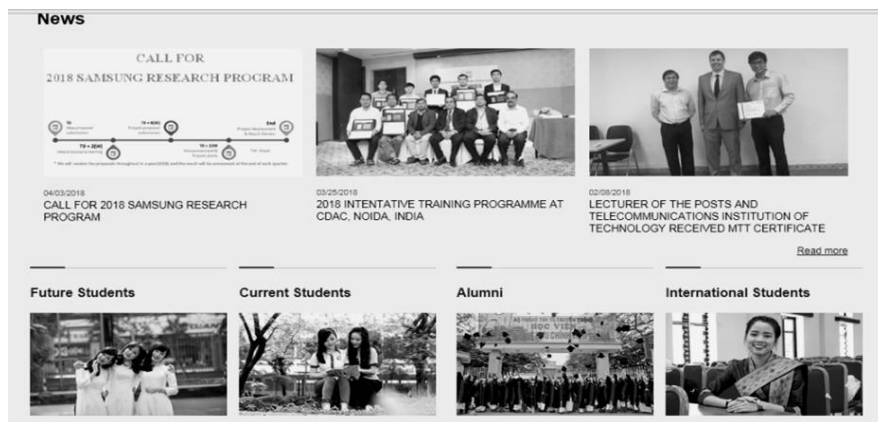


Figure 9. Well-designed contents with categorized articles

In Figure 8, the contents of the page are organized according to the targeted audience (also the name of each group) in an easy-to-navigate way. There is, thus, no need for audience to scroll down and search, but quickly identify the articles readily grouped for them to access.

Footers: With the downmost position, the footers take the least important role in providing key information to the audience. Instead, the page footers are for copy right statement and support. The footers of the pages under investigation in this paper are quite appropriate in terms of both functions and layout. Some universities are very creative in adding elements like Vietnamese culture introduction (Figure 10) and even a brief introduction to the institution (Figure 11) at the page footers.

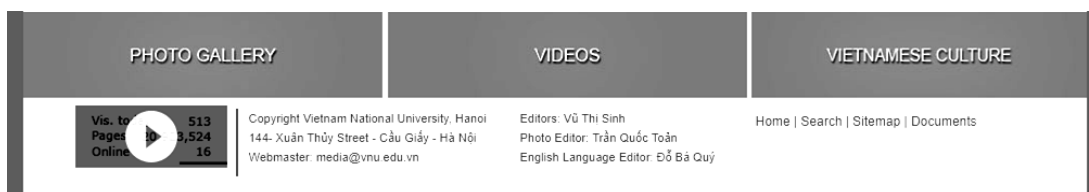


Figure 10. Footer with shortcut to the article introducing the Vietnamese culture

In Figure 10, the shortcut to the article introducing the Vietnamese culture is a good offer for the international audience who want to learn about the place they are planning to visit. In the form of the shortcut, the element does not take much space.

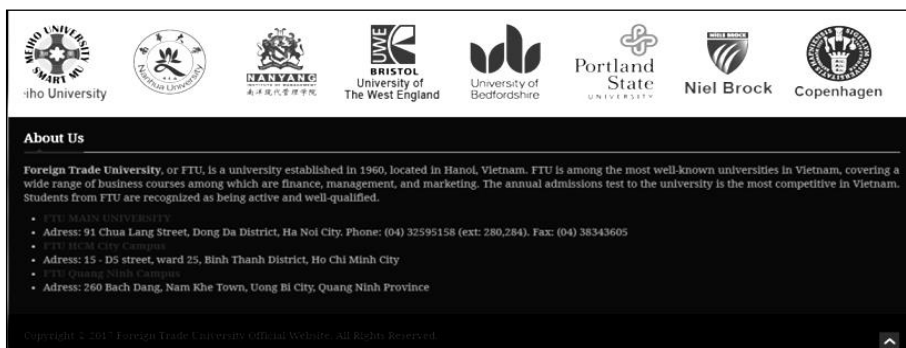


Figure 11. Page footer with a brief introduction to the institution

In Figure 11, the way of providing information about the universities in the form of “About us” at the page footers is such a non-imposing way to introduce the institution to the audience. The back-to-top button is also useful. As the footers are the place for supporting information, other useful information might be added as well.



Figure 12. More supporting options on a page

As illustrated in Figure 12, the page footer could be employed for inspiring motto or supporting direction of transportation means for future students.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis on the GSP of the English introductory pages of Vietnamese university websites, which could be further divided into headers, contents, and footers, reveals that these pages are playing quite well their primary roles in administration, knowledge dissemination, and most importantly, promotion. However, to better fulfill their functions, the page headers and the page contents of some English introductory pages could be improved in the sense that the elements which are too specific to Vietnam and irrelevant to the international audience common knowledge should be omitted, the layout should not be too crowded and the elements should be categorized in subgroups to enhance navigability of the sites. In the footers, some additional supporting elements could be added.

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CẤU TRÚC TIỀM NĂNG THỂ LOẠI CỦA PHẦN GIỚI THIỆU BẰNG TIẾNG ANH TRÊN CÁC TRANG THÔNG TIN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Với các trường đại học, trang thông tin giới thiệu (website) là kênh truyền thông không thể thiếu. Để tăng hiệu quả quảng bá, công khai thông tin, đáp ứng yêu cầu toàn cầu hóa trong phát triển học thuật, nhiều website được truyền tải qua nhiều dạng thức và ngôn ngữ đa dạng để hỗ trợ việc tiếp cận thông tin tối đa từ nhiều đối tượng. Trong nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi phân tích phần giới thiệu tổ chức bằng tiếng Anh trên các website trường đại học dựa trên khung phân tích tiềm năng cấu trúc thể loại của Hasan (1985) trên ngữ liệu là phần giới thiệu tiếng Anh trên website 10 trường đại học ở Việt Nam, từ đó đưa ra nhận định về điểm hợp lý và điểm cần điều chỉnh để phần giới thiệu tiếng Anh này có hiệu quả tốt hơn.

Từ khoá: Trang giới thiệu tiếng Anh, cấu trúc tiềm năng thể loại, đại học, trang thông tin