

The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Vietnam

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the current situation and issues of the teaching of English in Vietnam. As a way of start, I will first provide a brief history of English language teaching in Vietnam. Then I will examine in some depth the current situation of English language teaching in Vietnam, looking specifically at English language teaching both inside and outside the formal educational system. The final section is devoted to a discussion of some of the problems we have been experiencing in the teaching of English in Vietnam in the context of integration and globalization.

1. A Brief History of English Language Teaching in Vietnam

The history of English language teaching in Vietnam can be roughly divided into two periods: (i) English in Vietnam before 1986 and (ii) English in Vietnam from 1986 up to the present. The reason for this way of division is that 1986 was the year when the Vietnamese Communist Party initiated its overall economic reform, exercising the open-door policy, and thus marking the emergence of English as the number 1 foreign language in Vietnam.

1.1 English in Vietnam before 1986

English in Vietnam before 1986 had a chequered history. Chronologically, the teaching of English in Vietnam can be subdivided into three periods: the first period extends from the beginning of the French invasion of Vietnam up to 1954; the second period, from 1954 to 1975; and the third period, from 1975 to 1986. Each of the periods will be examined in some depth in the sections that follow.

1.1.1 English in Vietnam before 1954

It is difficult to point to a specific date when English was introduced into Vietnam. But what is certain is that the language was taught in Vietnam from the French times and that although English made its presence in Vietnam during this period, it did not become a foreign language to be learned as widely as French.

It is not quite clear either how English was taught in this period for a number of reasons. First,

there are no extant writings on the teaching of English in Vietnam. Secondly, there are no extant English textbooks written by Vietnamese authors; what are left today are some English textbooks in use by that time which were written by French textbook writers such as *L'anglais Vivant: Classe de sixième*, *L'anglais Vivant Classes de troisième* (1942) and some bilingual English-Vietnamese dictionaries compiled by two Vietnamese scholars known as Le Ba Kong and Le Ba Khanh. It can be inferred from the contents of those textbooks that although some attention was paid to pronunciation drills and reading skills, the prevailing method of teaching English in Vietnam before 1954 was the grammar-translation method.

1.1.2 English in Vietnam from 1954 to 1975

1954 – 1975 was the period when Vietnam was divided into two parts – North and South. In this period, each part of the country was politically allied with a world superpower: North Vietnam was allied with the former Soviet Union and South Vietnam, with the USA. The status of English, thus, was different in each part of the country. In South Vietnam, English was the dominant foreign language; it was studied for direct interactions with the USA. In North Vietnam, in contrast, although four foreign languages (Russian, Chinese, French, and English) were recognized nationally, Russian topped the list in the formal educational system; and like English in the South, Russian in the North was studied for direct interactions with the former Soviet Union. As Russian dominated the foreign language scene in North Vietnam, English was relegated to an inferior status. In upper secondary schools, it was taught only in some classes in towns and in big cities as a pilot subject (Nguyen Nhat Quang 1993: 1). At tertiary level, there were two foreign language institutions that offered English as a discipline, namely, The Hanoi Foreign Languages Teachers' Training College (currently The University of Languages and International studies, Vietnam National University Hanoi) and The College of Foreign Languages (currently The University of Hanoi). Apart from those institutions, some universities offered English as a subject. However, due to the limited use of English in North Vietnam in this period, the goals of learning the language seemed to be confined only to understanding the USA and to fighting against the US invasion on the diplomatic front.

1.2 English in Vietnam from 1975 to 1986

The period of 1975 – 1986 was characterized by the dominance of Russian and the decline of English and French, particularly of Chinese in foreign language education in Vietnam. In this period, Chinese was cast away from the formal educational system, and the targets set for Russian, English and French were roughly as follows: 70% of the school pupils would study Russian; 20%, English and 10%, French. At tertiary level, Russian continued to predominate in the North. This can be seen in the fact that the number of students majoring in Russian in this period always far exceeded the combined enrolments of all other foreign languages. In the South, Russian study started to grow very fast: Russian departments with the whole academic staffs coming from the

North were established in many universities and the number of students enrolling in Russian both as a discipline and as a subject started to increase. The spread of Russian was further strengthened by Russian aids in education: hundreds of Vietnamese teachers and students were sent annually to the former Soviet Union for both undergraduate and graduate studies. When Russian dominated the scene, English suffered a setback; it was taught in a limited number of classes in upper secondary schools, particularly in towns and big cities. At tertiary level, the number of students enrolling for English both as a discipline and as a subject also decreased.

It was noted, however, that in this period a small number of Vietnamese teachers and interpreters of English were chosen and sent to Britain, Australia, New Zealand and India for graduate studies in English language teaching. The training programmes of Britain, Australia and New Zealand were terminated in 1979 when Vietnam involved in Cambodia. In 1985, Australia resumed its English training for Vietnam under a UNDP Programme until 1992 and from 1992 it was done under a bilateral aid programme between Australia and Vietnam, first known as AIDAB (Australian International Development Assistance Bureau) and then as AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development), 40 Vietnamese teachers and interpreters of English were sent to Australia annually to undertake graduate studies in English language teaching (cf. Do Huy Think 2006). This programme was terminated in early 2000s.

The content of English teaching in Vietnam in this period followed both the “adopt” and the “adapt” approach to material development. The prevailing method of teaching English was the structural method with a focus on lexicogrammar, reading and translation skills. Students were first introduced to a sentence pattern; then they were taught to use substitution and transformation techniques to drill in this sentence pattern; then they were asked to make up new sentences based on this sentence pattern; and finally, as a form of consolidation, they were asked to translate their made-up sentences into Vietnamese and vice versa. Some attention was paid to the teaching of oral skills, particularly to improving language accuracy, but because the new sentences were created without context, the fluency aspect of language teaching was sacrificed.

1.3 English in Vietnam from 1986 up to the Present

The period from 1986 up to the present is characterized by the rapid growth and expansion of English in Vietnam. This English boom began in December 1986, when at its Six National Congress the Vietnamese Communist Party initiated an overall economic reform known as *Đổi mới* (Renovation), opening the door of Vietnam to the whole world. In the context of economic renovation and of the open door policy, English becomes the first (and nearly the only) foreign language to be taught in Vietnam. It is one of the six national examinations that students have to pass if they want to get the Secondary School Education Certificate and is a compulsory subject for both undergraduates and graduates at tertiary level. In a new market economy of Vietnam with the growth of international businesses and trades, and the increasing number of foreign tourists, the ability to communicate in English has become a passport to a better job not only in the tourism and

hospitality industries but in many other enterprises also. English is taught in schools, in universities and in evening foreign language centres across the country. There are now more teachers and students of English than of any other subjects. Further, the *Đổi mới* has created mounting pressures for more and more places to teach English at every stage of the far-expanding educational system. At the same time the fast process of globalization – the strongest external force for English language teaching and learning in Vietnam – has made it difficult to maintain the existing and admittedly low standards in its teaching and use. Increasingly, it was being realized in decision-making bodies that without major changes and sizeable inputs in its curricula and courses, methodology and materials, English teaching in Vietnam would soon ceased to effectively serve the demands being made on it. This has resulted in the current situation of English language teaching in Vietnam which I will be concerned with in the sections that follow.

1.4 Current Situation of English Teaching in Vietnam

1.4.1 English at General Education Level in Vietnam

Vietnamese general education consists of three levels with 12 forms/grades: primary level (from Form 1 – 5 for children aged 6 to 11); lower secondary level (from Form 6 – 9 for children aged 11 – 15); and upper secondary level (from Form 10 – 12 for children aged 15 – 18).

From 1982 to 2002, English was introduced nationally as a compulsory subject at upper secondary level and as an elective subject at lower secondary level. In this period, two sets of English textbooks were concurrently used in Vietnamese schools: the 3-year set (for students who started learning English from Form 10 – 12) and the 7-year set (for students who started learning English from Form 6 – 12). The final upper secondary school exam, however, was based on the knowledge and skills required in the 3-year set. Both sets of textbooks, although differing in orientation, are mainly grammar-based, taking the view that grammar can be taught systematically as a set of rules to be mastered and transferred by the learner into proficient language use. While they take cognizance of the significant place of reading comprehension and oral skills, the grammar sections in each unit tend to dominate.

Since early 1990s, due to the impact of English as a global language, the teaching of English in Vietnam has slanted towards the view that places the learner at a focal point with the teacher seen in the role of a facilitator who provides creative contexts for language learning. With this new philosophy of foreign language teaching, the two sets of textbooks which had been in use in Vietnamese general education for nearly two decades had proved to be inadequate. In face of this situation, the Vietnamese Government issued Decree N^o 14/2001 TC-TTg on the Renovation of the Vietnamese General Education Curriculum, specifying the requirements and the tasks of the Ministry of Education and the concerned ministries and governmental organs. In implementing the Government's Decree, at the beginning of 2002, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) organized the design of the new curriculum and the writing of new textbooks for all school subjects. This national project finished in early 2008 when the new textbooks of all school

subjects were put into use across the whole general educational system of Vietnam; and in the case of English teaching, we now have one set of English textbooks for lower secondary schools and two sets of English textbooks for upper secondary schools to be used across the country: one is called the standard set which serves around 96% of the students and the other, the advanced set which serves around 4% of the students.

Unlike the period of 1982 – 2002, in the new general curriculum, English is a compulsory subject at both lower and upper secondary levels and an elective subject at primary level. At primary level, English is introduced from Form 3 – 5, 2 periods a week/35 weeks/year, making the total of 210 periods. At lower secondary level, English is studied 3 periods a week in Forms 6, 7, and 8, and 2 periods in Form 9, making the total of 385 periods. And at upper secondary level, English is studied 3 periods a week/35 weeks/year, making the total of 315 periods. The number of periods studied at each level and the total number of periods studied in the whole formal general education system in Vietnam can be summarized in the table below:

Level of Education (forms)	Number of Periods Taught Each Week	Total
Primary (Forms 3 - 5)	2/week/35 weeks	210
Lower secondary (Forms 6 – 8)	3/week/35 weeks	210
Lower secondary (9)	2/week/35 weeks	70
Upper secondary (10 -12)	3/week/35 weeks	315
	TOTAL	805

The aims of Vietnam’s English language teaching (ELT) at general educational level expressed in the new curriculum are as follows:

At the end of the upper secondary level, students will be able:

- To use English as a means of communication at a certain level of proficiency in four macroskills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and to be able to read materials at the same level of their textbook, using a dictionary;
- To have mastered basic English phonetics and grammar, to have acquired the minimum of around 2500 vocabulary items of English;
- To attain a certain level of understanding of English and American cultures, to become aware of cross-cultural differences in order to be better overall communicators, to better inform the world of the Vietnamese people, their history and culture, and to take pride in Vietnam, its language and culture. (MOET 2007)

To promote the study of English further and to better the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam to meet the increasing trends of globalization and international interdependency of the global village, on September 30th, 2008 the Vietnamese Prime Minister issued Decision N^o 1400/QĐ-TTg on Approving the 10-year National Plan for “*Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008 –*

2020”, which is said to be worth 9.378 billion VND (currently equivalent to about 5 billion USD). According to the Decision, the Plan consists of three phases. The first phase extends from 2008 to 2010; the second phase, from 2011 to 2015; and the third phase, from 2026 to 2020. In the first phase, top priority is given to developing and perfecting the 10-year foreign language curriculum, focusing particularly on English; writing foreign language textbooks; preparing necessary conditions for exercising the pilot 10-year foreign language (English) programme (from Form 3). In the second phase, the focus is on introducing the 10-year foreign language programme throughout the whole general educational system. And in the third phase, the focus is on perfecting the 10-year foreign language programme throughout the whole general educational system and on developing intensive foreign language programmes for vocational schools, colleges and universities.

In terms of English standards, the Plan explicitly accepts the 6-level testing system as developed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language as the standard for assessing the quality of English learning in Vietnam and encourages Vietnamese educational institutions to actively develop and carry out bilingual programmes.

1.4.2 English at Tertiary Level in Vietnam

At tertiary level, English is introduced nationally both as a discipline and as a subject. In the first category, students study English to get a BA, an MA or a doctoral degree in English. Trained in this category, they can become teachers, translators and/or interpreters, or researchers either in English linguistics or in English language teaching methodology. In Vietnam at present there are three tertiary institutions which offer undergraduate and graduate programmes in English: The University of Hanoi (previously the Hanoi University for Foreign Studies), The College of Foreign Languages – Da Nang University, and The College of Foreign Languages – Hue University; and one institution which offers undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programmes in English: The University of Languages and International studies – Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

In the second category, English is a compulsory subject applied across the whole higher educational system in Vietnam. In this category, students study 14/140 credit hours, accounting for 10% of the total credit hours of an undergraduate programme; 7/50 credit hours, accounting for around 12% of the total credit hours of a graduate programme; and 3 (self-studied) credit hours at a doctoral programme. In a recent research, Hoang Van Van *et al.* (2008) found that among the five foreign languages recognized nationally at tertiary level in Vietnam (English, Russian, Chinese, French and German) around 94% undergraduates and 92% graduates are studying English as a subject. Unlike primary and secondary students, tertiary students are better motivated to learn English because their colleges or universities are based in cities where they can have access to more input to the target language and, more importantly, they can find a good job with their command of English. In terms of needs, however, Vietnamese tertiary students fall into three categories. Some view English as a tool for more attractive and lucrative employment opportunities

after graduation; a small number of others need a good knowledge of English to study further at graduate and doctoral levels, either in Vietnam or in an English-speaking country, while the majority of them learn English just to pass the examinations (for more details, see Hoang Van Van 2007b). Although the needs for learning English differ from student to student, the general tendency is that English is an indispensable language for international exchange and better paid employment.

To promote the English language teaching and learning at tertiary level, in recent years the Vietnamese government has encouraged pivotal tertiary institutions to carry out what is referred to as “advanced programmes” in which English is required to be the medium of instruction. They have also encouraged tertiary institutions to teach in English fundamental science subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry and some specialized subjects in the senior years. It is suggested that work start at the two national universities (Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City), three regional universities (Thai Nguyen University, Hue University, and Da Nang University), and other pivotal universities in Vietnam with 20 percent of the students being involved in these advanced programmes; then this percentage will be increased and expanded so that finally all advanced programmes will be applied throughout the tertiary educational system.

The contents of English teaching present one of the most challenging issues in Vietnamese higher education. Unlike general education, where the contents of teaching are imposed by the Government, at tertiary level, the question of what to teach is left to each particular institution to decide. What the government does is to provide the general time frame for all institutions. This has created diversity on the one hand, but chaos on the other. Different institutions take a different view on what to teach. Up till now, however, there have been three different views on what register of English should be taught at tertiary level in Vietnam: the **GR** (general register) view, the **GR-and-AR** (academic register) view, and the **AR** view. The GR view holds that GR and AR are essentially not so much different. In both registers, the student will have to learn the phonological system of English; i.e. she has to learn how to pronounce correctly the English sounds, words, word combinations and sentences; she will have to learn how to use the grammatical structures and how to use them in appropriate contexts. The only difference between GR and AR seems to lie in the terminology, but once the student can pronounce correctly the sounds, has acquired enough knowledge of English lexicogrammar, has used them correctly and appropriately, and has reached a certain level communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), she will have no difficulty learning the technical terms in her discipline. Supporters of the GR view even believe that once the student has mastered the GR, she can self-study its relevant AR through reading books and specialized journal articles in English. Their argument is supported by the evidence that in the past there were quite a few Vietnamese scholars who were taught only GR, and due to their self-study efforts, now they are still able to read books and articles in their specialization, write articles for specialized journals, understand their foreign colleagues and make themselves understood in

international academic settings such as seminars, conferences, and workshops. The other evidence supporters of the GR view often rely on in arguing for their viewpoint concerns the contents of the current internationally recognized English testing systems such as the TOEFL and the IELTS. These testing systems, they maintain, are mostly concerned with testing the examinee's knowledge and communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, structures and written expressions), and the topics for testing these skills are often of the GR or popular science type. They even claim that it is not effective to learn AR because the student has known the knowledge of the subject matter well before she is provided with words and grammatical structures in English, and this is a waste of time because the knowledge the student is being taught is only a kind of translation of the knowledge she has already learned in her Vietnamese, and thus she may lose her motivation to learn English.

In contrast, supporters of the GR-and-AR view hold that although before entering a university, a student might have already learned English for at least 700 hours in schools, the real knowledge and skills she has acquired is still modest (for more details on this point, see Hoang Van Van 2007a). That is why, in order to learn the contents of a subject through the medium of English, the student first of all should be taught in GR; she should be given enough drills in pronunciation, should be helped to revise and expand her GR vocabulary, and should be given enough practice in the four English macroskills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Further, they believe that interactions in GR contexts are easier than those in AR ones, because interactions in AR contexts often contain highly specialized academic contents which require the use of technical terms, particularly those of Latin origin which are difficult to learn and to put into use. For these reasons, they propose that an English curriculum for tertiary level in Vietnam should start with GR, and once the student has acquired adequate linguistic competence (in pronunciation and lexicogrammar) and skills in GR, she will be taught AR as a follow-up.

Contrary to the two views presented above, supporters of the AR view propose that AR should be introduced from the beginning. Using the argument of the GR view as the antithesis, they argue that because GR and AR only differ in technical terminology, it would be a waste of time to teach what the students do not need (cf. Strevens 1988). In their opinion, when a tertiary student learns English in a foreign language environment, she does not only learn it for daily communication but, more importantly, she will have to learn it in order to deepen and expand her academic knowledge in the discipline she is studying. To put it more specifically, she will have to read and translate books and specialized materials in English so that she will be able to write her term papers or graduation projects in Vietnamese. While language is a complex thing, they maintain, it is impractical to teach either its GR or GR first and its AR later. The best way to help the tertiary student to gain her academic knowledge through English, they argue, is to teach the AR to tertiary students from the beginning, and only in so doing can she be able to learn what she really needs.

1.4.3 English outside the Formal Educational System

As with English inside the formal education system, English outside the formal educational system in Vietnam has also been developing rapidly. Various English centres, public and private, have been established and a large number of foreign and joint venture language schools, language centers of universities, professional associations, government agencies, socio-economic organizations and private enterprises which teach English and use it as the medium of communication have been set up throughout Vietnam. In this non-formal educational sector, one can also see the presence of the British Council, the American Apollo, the Cambridge International Examinations, and the American TOEFL and TOEIC. These teaching and testing syndicates offer various English courses and different levels of English tests to meet different needs of different types of learners. In addition, several private English-medium schools have been established chiefly in big cities in Vietnam, attracting a considerable number of children from the rich families. Thanks to the efforts made by them, English in Vietnam has been developed faster and the quality of English teaching and learning has been increasingly improved.

2. Problems Experienced in Teaching English in Vietnam

The booming of English in Vietnam has caused the country a number of problems which can be presented below.

First, there is a disproportionate demand-supply. With a population of over 85 million, of whom a sizeable proportion have a strong desire to learn English, the demand for English language teaching far outstrips the supply of native speaker and competent non-native speaker teachers.

Secondly, textbook writing and teacher retraining are the two important aspects to implement its curriculum. As motioned in Section 2.4.1, textbook writing has been completed, but to do massive and long term retraining of teachers in English competence would demand manpower and logistic resources beyond the capacity of the system at present. This problem will be compounded when Vietnam starts to carry out the new 10-year National Plan to introduce English nationally from Form 3.

Thirdly, despite the importance of English in the new context of integration and globalization, English language teaching in Vietnam, due to its low quality, has not met the demand for competent English-speaking people. The main reasons are that (i) most of the English teachers, particularly those who are teaching at primary and lower secondary levels are disqualified, (ii) most teachers, except some who are teaching at tertiary level, have not had a chance to study in an English-speaking country, and that (iii) many of them do not normally communicate in English and cannot sustain teaching that mainly depends on communicative interactions.

Fourthly, there are classroom constraints: schools are often located in noisy places, with poor ventilation, overloaded beyond their capacity to classes of fifty or even sixty, with poor libraries and poorly paid staff. Better teachers often go to the cities to seek employment in non-teaching fields or

leave the profession for other jobs in the country. There are the material constraints too: tape recorders, electronic equipment, and language lab do not exist in average schools except in the cities and in affluent private institutions. The only sure aids available are the blackboard and sometimes a cassette player, and the frequent voice heard is the teacher based on what she makes of the day's textbook lesson. To make matters worse, class contact hours are few (only 2 or 3 hours a week).

Fifthly, although the rhetoric of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training stresses the development of practical communication skills, this is rarely reflected at the classroom level, where the emphasis is on the development of reading comprehension, vocabulary and structural patterns for the purposes of passing the end-of-school and university entrance examinations into colleges or universities. New teacher training programmes – pre-service and in-service alike – have been designed and delivered with a focus on training communicative teachers in a bid to address the faults of teaching methodology. Unfortunately, not much improvement in terms of teaching methods has been noticed in English classes. During the training courses, Vietnamese teachers show great interest in new methodologies, but after they return from those courses, they continue teaching in the old methods.

Sixthly, there is a mismatch between testing and teaching in English language teaching in Vietnam. While teaching follows the communicative approach, testing seems to focus on measuring students' lexicogrammatical knowledge. To make matters more complex, at tertiary level, what the Vietnamese tertiary institutions do is to adopt either TOEFL or TOEIC or IELTS as the main yardstick to measure the student's knowledge and skills in English. These instruments, as is known, are suitable for measuring the knowledge and skills of English of those students who are going to study either in Britain or in the USA or in an English-speaking country.

And finally, the fact that English is introduced into primary schools in Vietnam makes some people express their concern about the negative effects that early introduction of English is having on national identity (cf. Crystal 2000, Nunan 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have been concerned with the current situation and issues of the teaching of English in Vietnam. I have provided a brief history of teaching English in Vietnam. Although the presentation is short, one can realize that foreign language teaching in Vietnam has witnessed the rise and fall of a number of dominant foreign languages in its own territory. For many years French was the major foreign language in Vietnam because of France's role as a colonial power. French was succeeded by Russian after 1954, but then due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian declined in popularity and was replaced by English in the early 1990s. I have also presented in some detail the current situation of English teaching in Vietnam. It is clear from my presentation that English teaching in Vietnam has been developing at an unprecedented speed since 1990s; it

has become the number 1 foreign language to be taught both inside and outside the formal educational system. I have also pointed out that in present Vietnam, English is used as the medium of international communication and is the language of professional advancement, and although English in Vietnam does not seem to have anything to do with social classes, it does act as a gatekeeping tool in the society, particularly with employment and educational opportunities: almost all jobs require a certificate in English, and even work promotion now considers English proficiency as a criterion (cf. Nunan 2003).

The high status of English in present Vietnam is obvious. This is reflected in the fact that those who do not have sufficient competency in English may have a feeling of being excluded from positions which may lead to power. At this point, it may be appropriate to quote Michael Halliday, an eminent British linguist, to end my paper:

English has become a world language in both senses, international and global: international, as a medium of literary and other forms of cultural life in (mainly) countries of former British Empire; global as the co-genitor of the new technological age, the age of information. So those who are able to exploit it, whether to sell goods and services or to sell ideas, wield a very considerable power. Many people would like to resist this dominance of English. The strategic response would seem to be: do away with English. Don't teach it, or do anything to perpetuate its standing in the community. But most serious thinkers believe that that won't now work: English is too deeply entrenched, and if people are deprived of the chance of learning it they are the ones who suffer. That is not the case 50 years ago, when English was just one international language among many, and it may well not be the case 50 years from now; but for the movement that is how it is. It seems that if you want to resist the exploitative power of English, you have to use English to do it. (Halliday 2006: 362).

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