

TEACHING AND LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM: the current situation and some solutions

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This article is to discuss issues related to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam at the time beings, from teaching and learning programmes at the elementary to tertiary levels; at the same time, it provides certain general recommendations and solutions to the better teaching and learning of foreign languages.

In the context of economic globalization and as Vietnam is proactively integrating into the world economy, there have emerged pressing issues relating to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam. Recently, the mass media has shown that a series of foreign-run foreign language centers have "landed" on Vietnam (principally offering English classes for Vietnamese), among them was TISC from Singapore, who had made thousands of Vietnamese learners trapped in the situation of "losing money, but getting more trouble". The Youth's Newspaper on 2-3 February 2006 had an article which indicated that in Hanoi alone TISC's centers had recruited about 10,000 learners who had to pay tuition fees up to 1.5 million USD, but all of these schools suddenly closed without any convincing explanation. Since the academic year 2006-2007, in accordance with guidelines and instructions from the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET), learning foreign language is compulsorily applied to pupils from the lower-secondary

educational level. Where conditions are sufficient, schools should encourage teaching of a second foreign language as an optional subject, while the first is a compulsory one (which may be one the following four languages: English, French, Russian and Chinese. The teaching of these languages is based on programmes and textbooks designed by MOET) (Guidelines on the teaching and learning of foreign languages – No.9893/BGDĐT-GDTrH, dated 6 September 2006).

The teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam is not simply a matter of education, but a multi-aspect issue: economic-social, educational-scientific, directly impacting on a large proportion of the population, especially on millions of pupils and students, from the elementary to tertiary levels, as well as public officials, servants and others. Since our Party and State have adopted a policy of multilateralization and diversification of

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external relations, particularly as Vietnam is now a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the teaching and learning of foreign languages are facing new requirements, in terms of size, scope, new training methods characterized by high quality, in order to meet the need for socio-economic development of the country in the renewal period.

Article 24 of the Law on Education, which was passed in 1998 by the National Assembly affirms the importance of foreign languages in primary education. The goal of primary education is "to facilitate pupils to fully develop their ethical, mental, physical characters, sense of beauty and general skills...; to help them prepare for their further study and readiness for work; to get involved in building and defense of the Homeland". As projected in "The Plan for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national educational system of Vietnam (the 2004-2010 period)", MOET submitted a request to the Government for a budget of more than 3,000 billion Vietnamese Dong (VND) in order to realize the Plan, making it a great turning point in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam.

Additionally, the Directive No.422/TTg "Concerning the strengthening of training of foreign languages for managerial cadres and public officials", which was promulgated on 15 August 1994, emphasizes on the "pressing requirement that officials at all levels should be knowledgeable of a foreign language in order to directly communicate, work with foreigners and to have conditions to further their study and research work".

Hence, teaching and learning of foreign languages is not only taken into account at the national level, but of a profoundly social character, drawing attention from the

scientific and educational circle, as well as all social strata.

In January and June 2005, in Hanoi, the Vietnamese Linguistics Association in collaboration with Hanoi's Open Tertiary Institute organized two discussions about the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam. Numerous seminars on the issue have also been conducted by universities. However, there remain a lot problems relating to foreign languages teaching and learning in Vietnam as it has been put forward by the scientific circle as well as the media. For instance, there is not any strategy for foreign languages teaching and learning, which is appropriate with the integration; is foreign languages teaching and learning a policy of linguistics or education?; is it necessary to formulate a specific policy of foreign languages? Objectives of foreign languages programmes are not sensibly designed at all training levels; programmes of training levels are not well connected; there remains a confusion of foreign language training and training of translators as a profession; the quality of foreign language teaching and learning is still poor, particularly that of foreign language training centers open for learners at A, B or C levels, etc.

I. Teaching and learning of foreign languages in schools

1. General situation

The teaching and learning of foreign languages in schools at the time being is a successive work done prior to the renewal period. It was subject to individual regions, areas and requirements of the educational and training cause in every single period, we had such crucial foreign languages taught in schools as: English, Russian, French, and Chinese. Nevertheless, we once made errors of volutararist character

when some universities and even schools gave the Chinese subject. Now that, as a matter of fact, English is taking a dominant position. It is undeniable that English is an important foreign language, but if no changes are made to the relevant policy as well as the implementation of specific steps, other foreign languages that are necessary for the country's development might be eclipsed.

It goes without saying that foreign language teaching and learning in school at present mainly focuses on English. The learning level is also broadened, from the elementary to the lower-secondary, higher-secondary educational levels. General speaking, more diligent efforts are put on designing textbooks and curricula, which are of practical nature; more attention is drawn to teaching of how to communicate, rather than applying the old methods, which was simply to provide foreign language knowledge (principally teaching how to translate a document) for students.

Le Anh Tam, an expert of the Institute for Education Strategy and Programming, said that positive changes could have been seen in foreign language teaching and learning from 1975 up to present. For instance:

- Four languages, including English, Russian, French and Chinese, are taught at lower-secondary and higher-secondary schools in accordance with a nation-wide synchronized programme.
- The number of schools teaching foreign languages is increasing. As of the 2003-2004 school-years, the figures were 32.2%, 91.1% and 97.7% of primary schools, lower-secondary schools and higher-secondary schools respectively teaching foreign languages.
- Foreign language is a compulsory subject at the secondary level, but an optional one

at the primary level. English, French, Russian and Chinese are principal majors at specialized higher-secondary schools. Furthermore, foreign language is chosen as a subject for the final-exam at the higher-secondary educational level. The number of pupils taking part in the final-exam with a foreign language test is increasing. According to statistics released by the Department for Secondary-level Education, in the 2001-2002 school-years, 593,644 pupils (equivalent to 90.36%) took part in the final-exam with a foreign language test.

However, there remain limitations of foreign language teaching and learning at schools, such as:

- Lack of a strategic and synchronized direction
- Teaching and learning programmes at all levels are not properly linked one to another
- Programmes are inconsistently organized. Contents and teaching methods do not yet concentrate on the development of communicative skills. Hence, having finished their secondary-level education, most of pupils can not communicate in foreign languages as expected.
- The contingent of teachers is insufficient in number, unqualified against the programme's requirements. At present, the number of teachers who just took part in intensive courses for foreign language certificates at A, B, C levels accounts for approximately 0.5% and 0.3% at the lower-secondary and higher-secondary educational level, respectively.
- Infrastructure and facilities for foreign language teaching remain poor and simple. As per se survey outcomes released on July 2004 in eight provinces and cities representing for eight geographical-economic regions of the country, the

average number of classroom counted for individual lower-secondary schools was 0.07; the proportion of lower-secondary pupils per visual-audio equipment is about 1229 pupils per one equipment; the average number of audio tape, visual and audio discs developed for foreign language teaching of a school is 7.69; the average number of referential and documentary pictures designed for foreign language teaching and learning is 2.13 units per school.

- As far as the form of testing and assessing of foreign language qualification of pupils at present is concerned, writing test is the most common method; a comprehensive test of all four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – is not yet applied.

There are various reasons attributable to the above situation, but the main ones could be indicated as follows:

- It is slow in renewing the thinking of foreign language teaching and learning goals in our country. So far, attention has been drawn to foreign language teaching and learning as to other subjects in programmes at all educational levels. We have not yet reset the goal of foreign language teaching and learning as a possible means for pupils in their study and employment in future upon their release from the school.

- Chronic lack and inconsistency of foreign language teaching programmes at all levels is the fundamental reason of wasteness and inefficacy of foreign language teaching and learning.

- The contingent of teachers is not synchronized in terms of training level, outdated with teaching methods, lack of enthusiasm with the profession. All the combined factors become major obstacles to the renewal of teaching methods and

increase of efficacy of foreign language teaching and learning.

- Examination and assessment of learning results mainly focus on linguistics knowledge, rather than on comprehensive tests of communicative skills, which include listening, speaking, reading and writing, particularly the listening skill since it is the weakest point of Vietnamese learners.

- The managerial and directing work over foreign language teaching and learning is still clumsy, especially when there appear changes in the diplomatic relationship between our country with the one whose language is being taught in schools in Vietnam.

2. Some solutions

So as to overcome weaknesses and problems of foreign language teaching and learning at schools, it is necessary to make strategic reforms at the national level. In that process, it is imperative for MOET to keep the key part in the training work, setting a common standard on the contingent of teachers, minimum facilities and equipment for foreign language teaching and learning, etc.

It is necessary first and foremost to promote and raise awareness on the role of foreign language teaching and learning in schools today, rethinking the goals of teaching and learning programmes. Foreign language teaching is aimed at providing learners with a communicative means additional to the mother tongue language, appropriate with every training level. Still, it needs to make planning of the contingent of foreign language teachers at all levels, making sure that one hundred percent of the teachers is recognized to meet required performance standards. Further research should be done on defining contents and

methods of examination and assessment of teaching performance as well as learning outputs in accordance with internationally-recognized standards. To that end, therefore, schools should be equipped with sufficient and efficient facilities; it is imperative in future to establish multi-functional foreign language teaching colleges applying the renewed teaching-learning methods.

It is necessary for one who needs to tackle the current problems of foreign language teaching and learning at lower-secondary and higher-secondary educational levels to carry out a substantial reform in order to renew teaching contents appropriate with the times, the development level of science-technology, in which more focus should be placed on renewing teaching methods and reducing textbook-based contents of subjects. Based on the renewed programme, new textbooks had been composed, corrected in accordance with inputs from evaluation boards as well as MOET's regulations.

II. Teaching and learning of specialized foreign languages in universities

1. The general situation

The teaching and learning of specialized foreign languages in universities are facing not a few difficulties in a way of how to improve the training quality, particularly the ability of using foreign languages of students. It necessarily seeks to ensure that graduates can use fluently a foreign language in support of their work and profession. However, it seems to be a fact that the above requirement is far to be met as many graduates from universities are poorly using foreign languages for their career and professions.

As Dinh Van Duc and Kieu Chau says

foreign languages especially designed for different professions are understood as those being taught at tertiary and college levels or at universities not specialized in foreign languages for the benefit of professional training (such as basic science, technical science and technology, economics, finance, commerce, social sciences and humanity, etc.). Where specialized foreign languages are being taught (English be a dominant among others in tertiary institutions), there have emerged the following attention-worthy issues:

- Concerning learners: Students who are learning specialized foreign languages can be classified into three categories:

+ Those that had never learned a foreign language at schools

+ Those that had opportunity to learn a foreign language at schools, but just took half-way learning.

+ Those that had not only learned with a diligent manner at schools, but also followed additional programmes.

The second category makes up a great proportion, about 60-70 percent. Those belonging to the first category are not many, basically they are pupils in far-flung and remote areas or where there is insufficient of teachers or due to policy changes. The third category is mainly composed of urban pupils or those from targeted schools, specialized schools or selected classes.

- With regard to teachers: Generally, foreign language teachers are trained at different sources, some of them even had passed post-graduate programmes in the country or abroad. However, they simply have the knowledge of foreign languages, but are insufficiently knowledgeable of a

certain profession, which is far from meeting the requirement for teaching of a specialized foreign language.

- Regarding learning programmes: The essence of foreign language learning programmes does not only rest with programme frameworks, but basically relates to the allocation of selected teaching and learning contents which are appropriate with targets and training methods. For instance, Hanoi University of Social Science and Humanity runs a specialized foreign language course with 28 credits. Each its Faculty (of 13 Faculties and Departments) has different ways to organize the course. The hardware (which is the general subject) normally accounts for 20 of 28 credits, while the rest is given to the specialized subject. The Faculty of Linguistics Studies spends 8 credits for teaching of how to translate a profession-related document. For high-quality undergraduate classes, the number of hours given for specialized foreign language teaching and learning is increased thanks to the coordination between teachers of the applied linguistics subject and other language classes.

- With regard to textbooks: Generally speaking, foreign language teaching in Vietnam has turned into a new strategy, which is text-based teaching and communicative methods. Learners are taught how to describe actions by words and practise speaking styles of native speakers. Nevertheless, the teaching and learning of specialized foreign languages at present in Vietnam is more prone to the reading culture, which means the teaching focuses more on textbooks and text analysis skills. Though this teaching method is good for text-based work, it constrains other skills, particularly the listening skill.

- We are still in short of textbooks, books on foreign language instruction for special professions. Foreign language teaching and learning programmes for special professions should be designed in accordance with the educational system of basic sciences.

According to Nguyen Thi Kim Thanh, universities that offer non-specialized foreign language teaching programmes are facing problems in most of aspects: from the organizational work to training methods and ways (especially in relation to English). Such problems, for example, include:

+ Time frame is broad, but its allocation is inappropriate, causing the imbalance between contents and learning ability of students.

+ The number of students in a class is excessively crowded, while the understanding level of foreign languages among university and college entrants is unequalled. Infrastructure is poor (lack of audio-visual means, or low quality facilities).

+ There is a rich available source of textbooks and materials, but they are not appropriately selected and effectively utilized in teaching and learning.

+ Teaching and learning methods are irrational, hardly responding to the needs and foreign language learning objectives of students (excessive teaching makes it become monotonous and a reluctant work).

+ While denying the traditional method of foreign language teaching and learning and enhancing the communicative method without taking into account specific factors (for instance: student's knowledge level, teacher's qualification, facilities, etc.), the teaching and learning is ineffective.

+ Without basic norms for the design of an

appropriate specialized foreign language programme, the teaching and learning in this area is more or less of formalistic character.

+ Teachers are not insufficiently enabled to participate in training courses in the country and abroad, to upgrade their professional level or to be updated with new teaching methods or developments of language (foreign languages).

Training at special subjects in English for Vietnamese students in Vietnam at present has emerged as a new training method, which has recently drawn much attention and is increasingly applied in Vietnam as a way of "on-site study abroad". Nevertheless, there remains much concern about the teaching method as well as its objectives. As Nguyen Dang Huy Dang and Nguyen Huy Can put it, it must be very hard for those students whose English background is poor to learn special subjects taught in English. Their foreign language test scores for the entry probably match with the standard requirement, for instance TOEFL score must be 450 or above, but it does not guarantee that their study in English is successful of special subjects like:

- + Financial Management;
- + Strategic Management;
- + Human Resources Management.

As of learning and taking exams in English, it is a big deal of difficulties for many Vietnamese students, and the hardest work for them in that process is to understand the lecture.

If lectures are completely delivered in English, only about twenty percent of the students can understand the lectures' content and the rest eighty percent understand nothing about the lectures.

It would be better if a half-half bilingual lecture is given. However, there is no point to say the so-called "teaching and learning of special subjects in English".

It is the same story in terms of reading comprehension for student. Approximately eighty percent of students do not comprehend English textbooks. This is attributable to their foreign language comprehension level, learning attitude or textbooks that cover too much intricate contents to understand.

Nevertheless, speaking and writing skills of students are, among others, drawing the most attention. The fact is that they learn English in the Vietnamese setting (hardly having a chance to communicate with native English speakers), consequently the speaking ability of Vietnamese students is very poor. If an oral final-exam is required for some subjects, the proportion of failure is rather high – fifty percent. For written exams, very few students can write in a correct and clear manner consistent with English standards. They basically interpret in English from their Vietnamese thinking, therefore many grammatical errors are committed and wrong words are used.

Distance learning is a new training method, which is also applied to English teaching. This method of MOET has been implemented by certain universities from 1995. The English Department of the Hanoi Open University has carried out a distance learning programme with the admission of two hundred credits. After ten years of running this programme, there is one issue that comes up to the University: it is necessary to conduct studies on teaching and learning methodologies of this training method. Curricula should be synchronized and consistent with international standards. So far, under this distance learning programme, Hanoi Open University has

had 1,075 graduates and by 2005 it has admitted 1,600 distance learners from Northern provinces to its English programmes.

Teaching and learning of a foreign language in support of special subjects at the time being is under positive reforms, especially in terms of training administration. A department for specialized foreign languages has been established at the Foreign Languages University under Hanoi-based National University, functioning as foreign languages training centre. The department is accountable for foreign languages teaching at affiliate schools and faculties of the University. According to Do Ba Loc, the former secretary of the Council for Language and Vietnamese Studies under MOET, curricula of this department are rather advanced, covering updates from foreign textbooks and appropriate with research subjects of students. Textbooks are designed for developing communicative, speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of students, helping them not only to improve the usability of foreign languages, but also to increase other knowledges.

2. Some solutions

Solutions in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning of foreign languages for special major studies at universities in Vietnam should focus on education and training policies, particularly on training methods, the contingent of foreign language teachers, curricula, testing forms, etc. As Ho Hai Thuy suggested, we may invite experts from native speaking countries for help and use in an appropriate way textbooks designed by foreigners for foreign language (basically English) teaching. A recent positive gesture from MOET is that universities are allowed to

actively carry out training cooperation with foreign partners, even to buy specialized textbooks as well as textbooks for foreign language teaching. However, there would emerge some problems in relation to the strategy and issues pertaining to social justice in the training field. This is because those only students from well-off families can afford for these training programmes.

As Nguyen Thi Kim Thanh suggested, in order dealing with the inefficacy in foreign language teaching and learning of students from the science-technology faculty, it is necessary for us:

1. To re-conduct a survey on the educational level, needs and goals of learning a foreign language of individual students, in order to determine the right foreign language to be taught and contents necessary to be provided.
2. To take reference to textbooks developed by foreigners for foreign language teaching with a view to select appropriate textbooks for different categories of Vietnamese students.
3. To combine different textbooks; to encourage students to learn from different information sources and to take advantage of multi-media equipment for teaching and learning.
4. To design comprehensive and module-integrated foreign language teaching programmes in consistent with international standards.
5. To develop an assessment regime for the benefit of justice and stimulating the self-awareness of students.
6. To enable teachers to improve their professional level and update themselves with and use advanced technologies for teaching in an effective way.

III. Some recommendations

There are a huge bunch of problems related to teaching and learning of foreign languages at present in Vietnam, which should be addressed at the macro-level. To deal with them, public authorities, training institutions, the contingent of teachers and students themselves have a role to play in this regard. We can not execute reforms of the education, including the teaching and learning of foreign languages, if all of the above issues are not taken into account. Foreign language teaching and learning is very crucial for the national industrialization and modernization, but at the same time it is a must to preserve and bring into play the role and function of Vietnamese in the education and training drive.

At the state administrative level, in 2005, MOET submitted to the National Assembly the draft amendments and supplements to the Law on Education (1998). At a seminar organized by the Central Committee of Vietnam Association for Education Extension on 16 April 2004, scientists and educators contributed various inputs to the tenth draft of the amended Law on Education presented by the Minister of Education and Training. Recommendations among others include:

1. Adding a paragraph, namely paragraph 3, to Article 5 regarding the language used in schools and other educational institutions that reads as follows: "Schools and other educational institutions within the national educational system can use foreign languages for teaching and learning. The Minister of Education and Training shall determine the teaching and learning of foreign languages".
2. In Article 36, emphasis should be placed on the requirement that university

graduates should be able to use at least a foreign language for their job. This is also consistent with point a, paragraph 1 of this Article that reads: "Tertiary training is aimed at ensuring students to acquire basic and relatively complete knowledge of a profession; to have a scientific working method; to be able to translate theory into practice, to use a foreign language and to have basic computer skills for their jobs".

With a view to renew teaching contents in keeping with developments of science and technology, as well as the needs of society, it is important to pay attention to the following urgent issues:

a. Composition of foreign language textbooks

Currently, it is necessary for us to develop textbooks in a more advanced and scientific manner, which are more appropriate with different categories of students. Importance should be given to the development of communicative skills. It is also necessary to provide students with the linguistic-cultural background of every language. Foreign language textbooks developed by Vietnamese authors at present are mainly based on the theory of language reference (comparison), the theory of language contact. Though the above theoretical bases give positive contributions to the composition of textbooks for foreign language teaching, there remains a lack of psychological-linguistic grounds in foreign language teaching and learning, which in turn brings about limitations on the outcome of foreign language teaching and learning.

b. Selection of foreign languages to teach and learn

We can not only use English for the national industrialization and modernization, but other languages like Chinese, Russian, French, etc. are also very

important, depending on the needs and requirements of society. Japanese, Korean, etc. are necessary for the tourism and economic sectors at the time being.

c. Foreign language teaching and learning, on the one hand, must be consistent with standards and requirements of Vietnam, but also at the same time complying with those of international character.

It is important to rectify the current arbitrary certification of foreign languages in a synchronized way in accordance with the general rules. Good experiences of famous foreign universities in conducting tests and granting certificates (like TOEFL, IELTS, etc.) should be learned and taken into consideration for their applicability in Vietnam.

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