

Current status of english education in Viet Nam

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Abstract: This paper examines the current state of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Vietnam, highlighting historical context, recent advancements, and ongoing challenges. Despite significant efforts by the Vietnamese government and society to improve English proficiency, the results have been mixed. This study explores the effectiveness of English language teaching (ELT) methods, the impact of cultural and societal factors, and the role of government policies. Furthermore, it discusses the integration of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in higher education and their significance for Vietnam's international integration and economic development. The findings underscore the need for a more systematic approach to ELT, improved teacher training, and enhanced educational resources to overcome existing barriers.

Keywords: English education, English as a foreign language, English learning and teaching, English in Vietnam

1. English and foreign language education in Vietnam

The introduction of English as a major foreign language in the Vietnamese education system has been driven by the need for international communication and economic opportunities. Despite substantial investments and policy initiatives, the effectiveness of English language teaching in Vietnam has been hindered by various cultural, societal, and educational factors. This paper aims to analyse these factors in detail, with a particular focus on the implementation of English as the major foreign language to be taught in Vietnamese educational system, which have become crucial for students' academic success and career prospects.

With a total of 54 ethnic groups speaking more than a dozen different languages, Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. Vietnamese is the language of the Viet or Kinh people, who make up about 86% of the whole population. Spoken by more than 90% of the population, Vietnamese is the official language in administrative and educational systems in the country (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017).

Several foreign languages such as Chinese, French, Russian and English have been introduced into the education system in Vietnam during its thousand-year-long history, through colonisation or alliances. Following the arrival of the American army to the South of Vietnam, English was the most popular foreign language in schools and universities there between 1958 and 1968 (Wright, 2002) and was even incorporated into the curricula of some universities in

the North in 1971 (Denham, 1992). After the American withdrawal, English became less popular due to the anti-American sentiment and almost completely disappeared from the Vietnamese education system at the end of 1970s (Wright, 2002).

Since the enactment of "Doi moi" (Renovation policy), Vietnam has established diplomatic and economic relationships with over 180 countries, trade ties with 230 countries and territories in the world (Tran, 2016), and joined different international organisations including ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), and CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership). As English is the principal means of communication in these organisations, it is expected that improving English competency will enhance Vietnam's presence in these organisations (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This triggered an "English language fever" (Le, 2012, p. 17) and improved the status of English in the Vietnamese education system.

Since the 1990s, English has been the major foreign language taught at Vietnamese schools, universities, and language centres. "There are now more teachers and students of English than of any other subjects" (Hoang, 2010, p. 10). In 2020, 83% of school students across the country took English as a subject for their national high school graduation examination (Nguyen & Duong, 2020). The focus on English is because of its being identified as important to integrate Vietnam into the world, and to bring the world to Vietnam, such as through tourism and attracting foreign investment, in the era of globalisation. Presently, English "acts

as the gatekeeping tool in the society, especially with educational and employment opportunities” (Hoang, 2010, p. 17); proficiency in the language is now an essential requirement in most professional employment in the country. Despite this status, poor English-language ability among school students and university graduates were a matter of concern among universities and employers (Chi, 2014; Vietnamnet, 2016). Such concerns might be explained by the nature of the teaching of English language in the country, which is detailed in the following section.

2. English language teaching in Vietnam

The increasing awareness of the importance of English has made learning English a societal need in Vietnam. This need has been supported by the Government through its different policies to promote ELT in Vietnam (Phan, 2015). For example, in 1994, the Prime Minister issued instruction No.422-TTg (“Instruction, the Government, No. 422-TTg, 15/08/1994,” 1994), which required that personnel working in Government agencies should have the ability to communicate in English. In 2008, the government also mandated the National Foreign Language Project (Project 2020), an important policy to implement the teaching of English at all school levels in Vietnam (“Decision, the Government, No.1400/QĐ-TTg, 30/09/2008,” 2008). One of this project’s general objectives is that “university graduates should be capable of communicating in a foreign language and working in a multilingual and multicultural environment” (“Decision, the Government, No.1400/QĐ-TTg, 30/09/2008,” 2008, p. 1). Some government-funded programmes, such as Projects Number 322 and Number 911, were launched, sending thousands of teachers and lecturers abroad to improve their professional knowledge and English proficiency (Tran, 2013). Other policies have encouraged English language learning among citizens, such as: the requirement of B1 level in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) as English proficiency for undergraduate students (“Decision, the Government, No.1982/QĐ-TTg, 18/10/2016,” 2016) (equivalent to band 5.0 of the International English Language Test System (IELTS) (Cambridge Assessment, 2021)); the organisation of annual national English examinations for high school students (Le, 2015); and the mandate to teach English as a compulsory unit in schools from Year 3 (Nguyen, 2011). However, the Government’s overall goal to improve English communication ability among Vietnamese citizens is, to date, still a work in progress. Recent research shows evidence of

low English proficiency among university graduates (Le & Mai, 2017; Le, 2011; T. L. Nguyen, 2013) and school leavers (Chi, 2014; Nguyen & Duong, 2020). In particular, results of the national high school graduation examination in 2020 showed that Vietnamese high school students achieved their lowest average scores in the subject of English (Nguyen & Duong, 2020). This result can be traced to the actual practice of English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam, with many obstacles found in cultural factors and societal factors, at different levels of the educational system (Le, 2011; Mai, 2017)

In terms of culture, 10 centuries of Chinese colonisation left indelible imprints on Vietnamese intellectual activities. The hierarchical principles of Confucianism and Taoism left a residue of a governing doctrine of resignation and inaction associated with the teacher-student power distance (Le, 2011). In classes, teachers are often seen as knowledge transmitters and students are usually expected to be knowledge receivers. These beliefs have led to the quite common image of an English class, where the teacher is the sole speaker and students are passive listeners (T. H. Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen, 2016). The encouragement of memorisation through rote learning, imitation, and of conservation of knowledge rather than critical thinking or challenging ideas, have contributed to the view of passivity among Vietnamese students, which has been evidenced in the existing literature about English language classes in Vietnam (Hang, 2020; Hiep, 2007; Nguyen, 2016; Nhat et al., 2018). Such passivity inhibits students from taking a proactive role to self-regulate their English language learning.

Societal factors are constraints on the success of ELT in Vietnam. First, the dominance of Vietnamese nationally (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017) means that there are limited opportunities for students to use English outside class (Nguyen, 2016). Spoken by 90 per cent of population, Vietnamese is the language used at home, at school, and in the office. Since almost all communication is in Vietnamese, Vietnamese students have almost no immediate need or desire to use English (Hiep, 2007; T. L. Nguyen, 2013) despite being aware of the benefits of mastering it for their future career (Le & Mai, 2017; Tran, 2013). To many students, school is the sole place for their exposure to English. Additional practice can be offered in private language centres, but these services are mainly accessible in urban, not rural areas (Nguyen, 2015; Phan, 2015). Moreover, in more rural areas where other languages are common, English may represent a third language to some students who are not

fully competent in Vietnamese, their second language. This has created more challenges to the teaching and learning of English for both teachers and learners.

Other practical factors constraining effective ELT in Vietnam are found in the educational system, especially in the academic curriculum and grammar-based examinations. The curriculum framework introduced by MoET stipulates the time allocation for units in the educational system, including English (Nguyen, 2016). At primary schools, English is taught in four 40-minute classes a week (Nguyen, 2011); this time allocation is reduced to three classes a week at high school. By the time students finish high school, they have had approximately 500 hours of English instruction (Nguyen, 2015). At the tertiary level, foreign language education carries 10% of the total credits of an undergraduate program (Tran, 2016). Specifically, students have English instruction in five semesters, with about 45 hours per semester (Tran, 2013). This total of 225 hours of English language instruction for a Vietnamese tertiary student is still considered too limited, compared to the time considered necessary for an international student living in a native English speaking country to gain oral proficiency (three to five years) or academic English proficiency (four to seven years) (Hakuta et al., 2000). In addition, an emphasis on linguistic competence together with the absence of speaking, listening and writing in many examinations, including high-stakes ones such as the National high school graduation examinations, has encouraged a more grammar-oriented than communicative English approach (Ngoc & Iwashita, 2011; Nguyen & Duong, 2020). A serious lack of facilities and well-trained teachers also hinders the promotion of ELT in Vietnam (Le, 2011). Vietnamese students are packed into large English classes of between 25 and 60 (Dang & Seals, 2018), regardless of English proficiency (Tran, 2013). Class size and the mixed levels of competence make it hard for teachers to implement teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Hiep, 2007) which is expected to help improve students' communication abilities in English – the target of the Vietnamese government's Project 2020. Furthermore, many teachers, especially in schools, revert to traditional methods such as grammar-translation or audio-lingualism (Phan, 2015), or have to modify CLT due to its mismatch with the local classroom culture (Nguyen et al., 2016). Many schools, even in big cities, lack essential facilities for ELT such as cassette players or CD players (Phan, 2015). Textbooks for schools and universities are also not available across the system. According to

Dang and Seals (2018), "Before 2013, there was no consensus about official English textbooks across the country, and each school used different teaching materials" (p.3). After 2013, MoET introduced a new set of English textbooks at primary level; however, there are no official textbooks for other school levels. In universities, textbooks are often imported and/or poorly edited (Tran, 2013), chosen by teachers without taking students' experience and proficiency level into account (T. H. Nguyen, 2013). According to the results of a proficiency test, which was part of Project 2020, 90% of high school English teachers across Vietnam failed to achieve B2 level (Le & Mai, 2017), which is equivalent to an IELTS score between 5 and 6.5 (Cambridge Assessment, 2021). This low proficiency can be attributed to teachers' lack of opportunities to use English (Phan, 2015), their previous teacher training (Le & Mai, 2017; Phan, 2015) and a lack of in-service training during their careers (Le & Mai, 2017). Teachers' inability to communicate effectively in English may explain their reluctance to use a more communicative approach to improve their students' English communication.

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