

Chapter 1.6

Challenges in Development of English Language Proficiency: A Perspective from Vietnam

Le Hoang Dung

In the globalized context, English has become indispensable to the socio-economic development of Vietnam. Since the “open-door” period, English has also been the “visa” that allows the nation to better integrate with the ASEAN region as well as the world. Teaching and learning English in Vietnam have experienced several changes while they also have witnessed several achievements. Despite much effort being put into promoting the teaching and learning of the English language, there remain difficulties that need both short and long-term solutions. In this regard, this paper attempts to: (1) provide an overview and initial analysis of current teaching and learning of the English language in Vietnam; (2) explore the problems and challenges faced by the teachers of English in the mainstream schooling of Vietnam; and (3) to propose some suggestions for the better integration of Vietnam in the ASEAN community.

Current Context of Teaching and Learning English in Mainstream Schools in Vietnam

English has been a compulsory subject at junior high school (secondary level) and high school, starting from grade 6 until grade 12 with a certain number of required hours per week. Table 1.6-1 roughly shows an estimated total number of hours for teaching English as a required subject across the years from grades K-12 and at the higher education level. Since academic year 2003-2004, some selected primary schools that meet the requirements of teaching and learning conditions have volunteered to teach English at grade 3 with the consent of students’ parents. In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET 2010) promulgated a decision on the implementation of teaching English to grade 3 at 94 primary schools in 20 cities and provinces all over the country. This part of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL 2020) requires students to take four periods of 55 minutes each per week.

At the tertiary level for undergraduate students, English is a compulsory course at all academic levels. An entrance exam in English or submission of an equivalent international or local English certificate is an admissions requirement for all graduate programs. This illustrates how English is well recognized by MOET as

well as Vietnamese people as one important driver of change and regional integration since the *Đổi Mới* reform in 1986.

Kindergarten	Optional
Primary school (Grade 3-5)	60-90 hrs/year; Total 180-270 hrs
Secondary school (Grade 6-9)	120 hrs/year; Total 480 hrs
High school (Grade 10-12)	140 hrs/year; Total 520 hrs
College/ University English majors	4-6 years
College/ University Non-English majors	4-6 years, 120hrs/year; Total 480-540 hrs

Table 1.6-1. Estimated hours of English taught at each level in mainstream schooling in Vietnam.

Since 2008, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project has expanded its influence and training programs to the majority of teachers of English at all levels. Specifically, five major regional centers for English language assessment are established in affiliation with five selected universities in different parts of the country. One major responsibility of the centers is to provide standardized tests of the four skills based on the six-level CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) guidelines or equivalents, and provide the necessary training for English teachers at the secondary and high school level to achieve required levels. As depicted in the MOET documents of Vietnam’s six levels of English proficiency (as modified from the CEFR), teachers of English should meet the C1 level in English language skill competencies in addition to having the minimum required bachelor degrees in English language, teaching English, or English linguistics at the high school level, and have at least a master’s degree in TESOL or equivalent for teaching at the tertiary education. Several training workshops have been conducted by the different organizations and institutions to enhance the teachers’ teaching skills.

To achieve the necessary teacher qualifications, English teachers are encouraged to take in-service training courses and also are limited to teaching 18 hours per week to provide sufficient time for preparing lessons and accumulating training experience. Policies such as these are examples of supportive language efforts by the central government to expand English to lower levels of the K-12 school system of the country, aiming to educate younger generations to become fluent in English.

Textbooks used in grades 6 to 12 are mainly written by Vietnamese authors, in cooperation with the native experts, and are updated periodically. In each unit these texts aim at developing in equal measure the four language skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing), as can be seen clearly in the latest version of English textbook series from grades 6 to 12.

For English education at the secondary and high school level, each school is well-equipped with one or two language labs, though how effective these labs are

for teaching and learning English is not clear or well-researched. Similar facilities exist at tertiary institutions as well. While there have been many training workshops on ICT and its application to teaching and learning English, teachers, students, and parents complain, to varying degrees, about the effects of using ICT in teaching and training.

Problems and Challenges in Implementing Teaching and Learning of English in Vietnam

Within the English teaching context in Vietnam described above, several major challenges exist at the level of practice and implementation. Some of these became apparent to me through personal experience and survey results when I conducted training workshops for high school teachers of English from cities and provinces in the south of Vietnam in 2010, 2011, and 2012: Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc, Tay Ninh, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, and Vinh Long. The study results from my mentees 2012, Ca Mau Mau provided further documentation. By and large teachers of English in

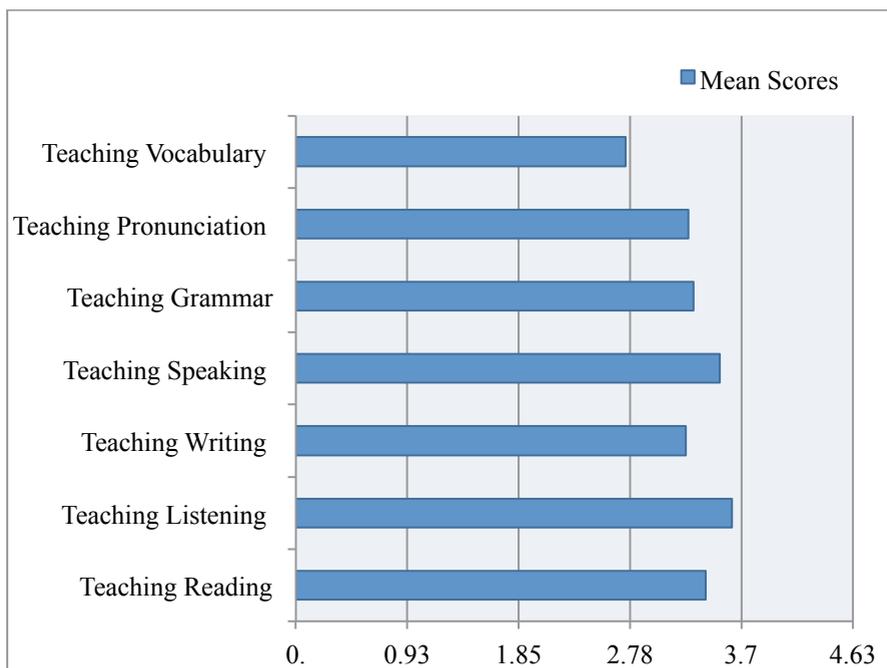


Figure 1.6-1. Difficulties encountered by high school teachers of English by skills (N=50) (Note: 0 = Strongly disagree . . . 4 = Strongly Agree).

those provinces encounter difficulties in teaching the discrete language skills or integrated skills. Figure 1.6-1 shows the surveyed teachers (N=50) are well aware of their real difficulties in teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading,

listening, speaking, and writing at a relatively high level. Though this might not reflect the whole picture of teaching English in these provinces, it implies that there is real need for further training, even in basic language issues for teachers. Despite the fact that they all have the required degrees in English language, they do not focus on communicative skills and pursue exam-oriented teaching, which is reinforced by the exam-oriented educational system. As these teachers orally shared after the training workshops, they are not confident in demanding their students to focus equally on all four language skills. This is one of the mismatches that can be seen in different reports by scholars. Identification of similar difficulties are also found in the reports by the Department of Education and Training of Ben Tre province, based on the examination of English proficiency administered to 684 English teachers from all secondary schools and high schools in the province (DETBT 2011). According to this report, 98.7 percent of the teachers did not pass the B1 Level of the 6-level CEFR, meaning they are under qualified as compared to the basic requirements and standards set out the MOET regulations.

Other provinces experience more or less similar situations and results as described above. A survey done in 2010 by the Foreign Languages University of Da Nang, showed that out of 385 English teachers from all local secondary and high schools in Da Nang city, the majority were graduates from full-time undergraduate programs in English who could perform well in speaking skills but not in listening, reading, and writing. These findings matched the results of Ms. Ton Nu Xuan Phuong, an instructor from the same university, who investigated difficulties in teaching and learning listening comprehension among 100 non-English major students (Ton n.d.). In this case 81 percent of the student respondents had seven years of learning English at Secondary and high school level and 16 percent of respondents had three years of learning English at high school. Her study also interviewed a group of ten English teachers in combination with class observation. The study found that 98 percent of the students consider listening as the most difficult skill to them while 76 percent of them said that listening was totally new to them. They also believe that the duration of three hours per week is inadequate for them to learn. Meanwhile 27 percent of the students confessed that they did not put in adequate self-study time, at only approximately one to two hours per week. Poor listening skills from the teachers and poor listening skills among the learners seem to reflect one of the most difficult aspects of teaching English in Vietnam.

Apart from issues related to their language competency and skills, the surveyed teachers from Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc, and Tay Ninh provinces identified other challenges from external factors, such as little concern from administrators regarding the quality of teaching and learning, low motivation among the learners, and less than satisfactory teaching materials and facilities. Figure 1.6-2 illustrates such observations more clearly. Putting things together, it seems that to simply blame the teachers for their inadequate English capability is not fair. A more significant factor influencing their proficiency is foreign language policy and planning. Professor Vu Cao Dam, the former founder member of National Institute for Educational and Scientific Strategy, strongly presented his view in a 2012 interview and report (Vu 2012).

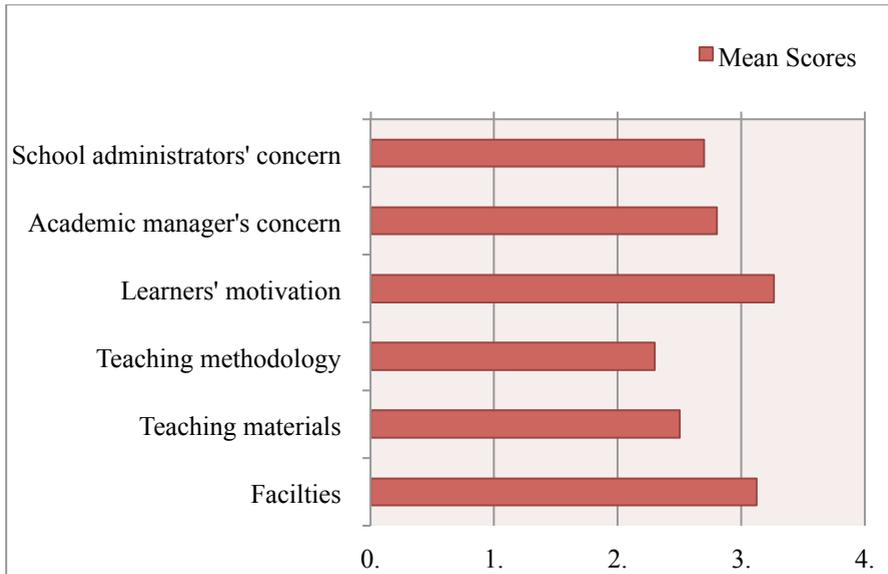


Figure 1.6-2. Other difficulties encountered by high school teachers of English (N=50) (Note: 0 = Strongly disagree . . . 4 = Strongly Agree).

He believes that the current situation of teaching and learning English in particular and education in general has failed to have a well-executed strategy and appropriate policy for sustainability.

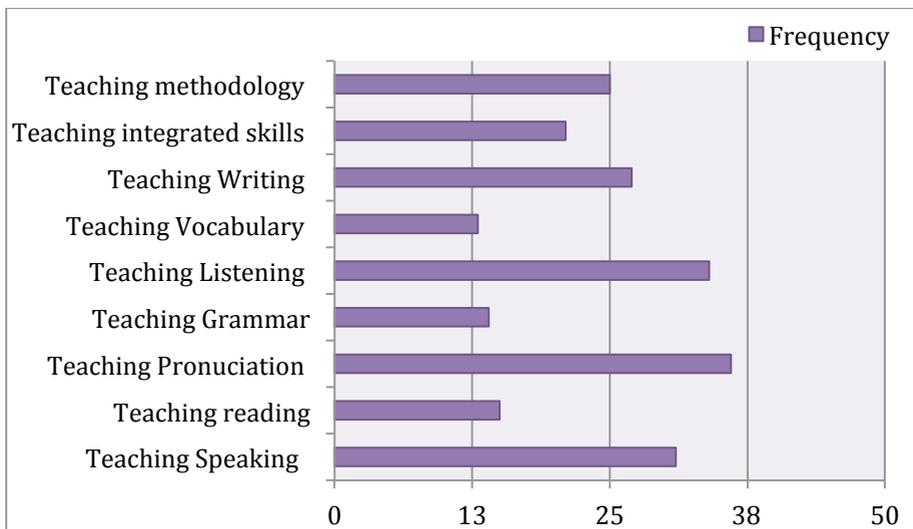


Figure 1.6-3. Teacher training needs (N=50).

Extracted in Figure 1.6-2 are a few difficulties and challenges commonly found in the current teaching and learning of English in Vietnam. The same mini-

survey confirmed that English teachers training needs further improvement as does updating of teaching practices and methodologies, as illustrated in Figure 1.6-1. Almost two-thirds of the teachers agreed that they need more training and updating of knowledge and techniques in teaching speaking skills, pronunciation, listening skills, and writing, as well as teaching methodology in general (Figure 1.6-3). The lack of adequate workshops and in-service training courses and programs demands more efforts from key stakeholders.

Major Difficulties and Challenges Faced by Teachers of English

Despite the on-going efforts and continuous policy initiatives in promoting the effectiveness of teaching and learning English in Vietnam (especially recently through the National Foreign Language 2020 Project), the reality may appear quite different. Student abilities to communicate in English vary widely and there tends to be a large gap between cities and provinces. Based upon the discussion above and drawing from my personal teaching and training experiences with different institutions, I present below a summary of the major challenges to teaching and learning English in Vietnam to highlight and particularize key issues that impose real challenges to teaching and learning English to non-major students in the mainstream schooling of Vietnam. (This does not include students who enroll in undergraduate programs in English language or English Linguistics and Literature.)

- Positive aspects
 - Teacher qualification
 - Higher training programs (mainly MA in TESOL/TEFL) offered at universities / linkage programs
 - Updated teaching methods applied at some top Universities (esp. teacher training workshops)
 - Learner factors
 - Career-oriented attitude
 - English as a medium of instruction for English majors and some selected institutions
 - Teaching & learning materials
 - Various materials available for teaching
 - Available soft wares and / accessible online resources or English learning programs
 - Varied materials applied at primary levels and lack of good sequence of teaching materials used across the different schooling levels from K-12 to college level
 - Teaching loading and impact of market-oriented economy
 - Teaching English is one of the “hot” profession in VN
 - Language content and assessment

- Teachers' possession of basic knowledge in the language and teaching-learning methodology
 - Language policy
 - Supportive initiatives and intention from the MOET and Vietnamese Government (National Project on Foreign Languages for 20202)
- Negative aspects
 - Teacher qualification
 - Lack of well-qualified English teachers
 - Imbalance between quality and quantity of English teachers
 - Learner factors
 - Students' low motivation (English is a compulsory subject for students of majors other than English)
 - Low number of self-study hours/ level of self-investment by students
 - Teaching & learning materials
 - Low investment by teacher and students in exploration of materials and resources
 - Limited instructional time invested by the teachers for their lessons
 - Teaching loading and impact of market-oriented economy
 - Inadequate financial assistance (for teachers to be more devoted to mainstream schooling or in public institutions)
 - Language content and assessment
 - Inadequate and imbalanced coverage of skills in language assessment (test-oriented attitude and practice)
 - Language policy
 - English is currently just a foreign language in Vietnam (not as a second one or for wider communication)
 - Absence of a well-articulated overall strategic plan and macro-level language policy for English language in the country
 - Lack of professionalism, congruence, strategic thinking, progress monitoring and quality assurance in implementing the project

Suggestions and Conclusion

This chapter concludes with suggestions to address difficulties and challenges identified above.

Academicians at university levels that provide graduate courses in TESOL¹ should take the lead in providing more training courses on updated teaching methodologies and how learner autonomy should be maximized both inside and

outside the classroom towards realization of a life-long learning philosophy. There should be a strong official network and forum for teachers of English, academicians, scholars, and administrators in Vietnam where they can freely and scientifically voice and share their experiences and research outputs for wider impact, application, and suggestions. The VietTESOL association or TESOL Association in HCMC, for example, should be promoted and pushed forward. Though several training workshops have been held recently, more impact and research-based suggestions should be provided and expanded to English teachers in neighboring provinces.

Planners, decision makers, and school administrators should be a proactive in changing teaching materials and language assessment so that they give equal weight to developing each of the four language skills. Acceptable financial assistance for teachers and related bodies would definitely be provided. Strengthening quality and assuring it does not come about without strong financial assistance. Universities and academic institutions should provide teachers with more workshops on teaching methodology, students and related bodies would definitely provide improvement techniques, and create more opportunities for staff mobility, academic exchange, and credit transferability.

At a *higher level* of MOET and National Foreign Language 2020 Project, there is a need to revisit and reformulate the overall strategic plan for the development of English in the country given that it is considered as a means that actively contributes to accelerating Vietnam's process of regional integration towards ASEAN Community 2015. Monitoring and ensuring quality achievement in project implementation is a real must for success. In order to gather a strong community of coaches and trainers for teaching English, MOET and NFL 2020 administrators should involve all the faculty, departments, and colleges of English or foreign languages, making sure that none are left out. This will definitely create a better and more qualified pool of English teachers who can sustainably harness their collective power for country development. This observation and analysis emerges from the author and is based on NFL 2020 implementation at the faculty level.² Specifically, the higher administration should therefore:

- Commit to and implement radical change and improvement in *language assessment* (e.g. English), taking into account the four language skills equally (or integration of the four);
- Set more strategic goals and realizable objectives in foreign language planning policies toward regional and international integration, paying serious attention to: (1) equipping the schools with sufficient basic conditions and facilities for teaching and learning of English; (2) enhance the teachers' capacity; and (3) and provide acceptable financial assistance for English teachers.

Teachers of English from kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) should be more proactive and ready to change their own teaching methods as well as to encourage their students' engagement in active learning. It is easier said than done, and is actually the most critical aspect to address among the problems and challenges identified earlier. Teachers of English across the levels should therefore:

- Actively update their knowledge in teaching pedagogies/ techniques (in both traditional and virtual learning environment);
- Effectively help promote learners' autonomy in the English classes; and
- Proactively apply updated instructional technologies in teaching, thus facilitating students' learning.

The paper so far has presented a few snapshots of the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam. The analysis and discussion, though subjective and not very detailed as probably expected, somehow illustrates the author's effort in proposing a few necessary suggestions at the implementation or practical level that might be forgotten or neglected by the involved higher administration since the onset of the national language planning and during the process of any project implementation. The paper surely invites further research and investigation into more specific foci and other domains of teaching English in Vietnam. It suggests two key directions and needs for this research:

- Larger-scale research-based results and analysis in current teaching and learning of English at different levels (from primary school to college level or even higher degree training programs);
- And macro- and micro-level research on the teaching and learning context with a need to identify, re-identify, and seriously (re)consider the root of problems and challenges facing the teaching and learning of English.

References

- Department of Education and Training of Ben Tre Province (DETBT). 2011. "Reports on Results of English Language proficiency test for Teachers at primary and secondary schools." July 7, 2011.
- Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). 2010. "Decision on 'Pilot implementation of English Curriculum for Primary School.'" Decision 4674/QĐ BGDĐT, October 15, 2010.
- Ton, N, X. P. n.d. "An investigation into the difficulties in teaching listening comprehension skill to non-major English learners." College of Foreign Languages, Đà Nẵng University.
- Vu, C. D. 2012. "Vietnamese educational policy: a 'bogging down' situation." Answers to the interview with VietBao news (in Vietnamese). Available online at: <http://vietbao.vn/Giao-duc/>. Accessed: September 2013.

Notes

¹ Such as the University of Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam National University—Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam National University—Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh University of Pedagogy, Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Can Tho University, Da Nang University, Hue University, Thai Nguyen University, et cetera.

² As Dean of the faculty of English Linguistics & Literature (USSH, VNU-HCM), the author has been actively involved and experiences obstacles in implementing the NFL 2020 at the faculty or institutional level.