

Chapter 1.7

Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 Project: Challenges, Opportunities, and Solutions

Nguyen Ngoc Hung

Introduction

In 2008, Vietnam embarked on an ambitious project to increase foreign language proficiency among its people. The National Foreign Language 2020 (NFL 2020) was initiated with the aim “to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2008). Among all foreign languages, emphasis is placed on English and this 12-year project managed by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) aims to develop the English capacity of its workforce and increase their ability to engage in a globalized world. In order to achieve this aim, the NFL 2020 will explore new approaches to make English language teaching and learning in Vietnam more relevant, efficient, and productive. It is expected that by 2020, most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary and vocational schools, colleges, and universities will be able to use a foreign language in their daily communication.

Policies implemented include adopting the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and establishing a Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam. The CEFR was selected because MOET needed a guideline for measuring and assessing language proficiency. The CEFR provides a guide in setting curriculum, teaching and learning practices, and evaluation. It is thought to promote democracy and accountability in education. It is seen to be teacher-friendly, with there being an abundance of supporting teaching and research material, and it also empowers students with more independence in learning. As the CEFR is widely used in Europe and beyond, it is an ideal standard to adopt in Vietnam.

Developing Teachers Competency

With the adoption of the CEFR, teacher proficiency benchmarks are being set and teachers retrained to meet expected standards. From 2011-2012, a review was carried out evaluating teachers' proficiency in English. Table 1.7-1 shows that 83 percent of primary school teachers, 87 percent of lower secondary school teachers, and about 92 percent of upper secondary school teachers are under-qualified to teach English. A survey conducted among 319 college teachers who taught English found that almost 45 percent were under-qualified to teach English.

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Primary School English Teachers	22.1%	30.6%	30.3%	8.9%	0.3%	0%
Lower Secondary School English Teachers	14.5%	33.9%	38.7%	7.7%	0.4%	
Upper Secondary School English Teachers	3.6%	17%	47.7%	23.5%	5.2%	0.1%

Table 1.7-1. Review of teacher proficiency in English.

Recognizing that competent teachers are the key to the success of the project, an English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) has been developed. It is anticipated that the ETCF will be the blueprint for equipping English teachers in Vietnam with the knowledge needed and methods of implementation. The ETCF encompasses five domains. The first domain focuses on knowledge of language, language learning, content, and curriculum. This addresses the teacher’s language proficiency as measured by the CEFR. A B2 is required of primary and lower secondary school teachers, while upper secondary school teachers are expected to have language skills at C1. Teachers will be expected to have a working knowledge of CEFR and be able to apply it to their teaching practice. Teachers will also need to have an understanding of how languages are learned, the cultures of English-speaking and ASEAN countries, the academic content in English, and language curriculum.

The second domain focuses on knowledge of teaching. This addresses the methodology in teaching languages, preparing lesson plans, conducting lessons, and assessing how much students have learnt. It also introduces teachers to resources and technologies available that can be adapted for language teaching. There are plans to match schools’ English curriculum to the CEFR and develop new textbooks. Information and communications technology (ICT) is expected to be used in English language training, though there are concerns with teachers being trained well to use technology in their teaching practice. There have also been attempts to digitalize English textbooks.

The third domain focuses on knowledge of language learners. It seeks to understand the learners’ cognitive ability and effective ways to increase motivation. It also seeks to reflect on learners’ values and prior learning experiences. Emphasis is placed on developing learners’ creativity, autonomy, and critical thinking skills.

Domain four concentrates on professional attitudes and values. Teachers will be expected to show professionalism in language teaching. This domain will focus on developing cooperation and teamwork skills, and also provide opportunity for professional development and life-long learning. It is hoped that teachers will be able to make a contribution to the language teaching profession. Interest has also been expressed in learning from Malaysia on how to put a Teacher Mentoring System in place.

Domain five encompasses the practice and context of language teaching. It seeks to connect the learning beyond the language classroom and also require

teachers to reflect on their own language learning and their own teaching questions, and use this information in their teaching practice.

Other policies to be implemented include matching the English curriculum with the CEFR and setting proficiency benchmarks for students. There are plans to develop new English Teacher Development Programs (Blended Certificate Programs) based on the ETCF. There are also plans to set up Regional Foreign Language Centers to build teaching capacity.

Future Direction

Beyond increasing teachers' competency, other plans include setting up a National Language Testing Center. University courses, such as ICT, engineering, tourism, and business will be offered in English. At the school level, mathematics and science will be taught in English. Vietnam's English proficiency level is increasing and Vietnam was classified as moderate in proficiency and ranked 28th in the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI 2013).

In terms of working towards a more integrated ASEAN, it would be useful to have a common Language Framework of Reference for ASEAN for benchmarking language proficiency levels. Recognition of certificates and degrees and a common qualification system to allow for higher education visibility and exchanges would enable for better integration. Having a common employability skill standard will also facilitate labor mobility.

References

- EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI). 2013. "EF English Proficiency Index 2013." Education First. Available online at: <http://www.ef.edu/~media/efcom/epi/2014/full-reports/ef-epi-2013-report-master-new.pdf>.
- Socialist Republic of Vietnam. 2008. "National Foreign Language 2020 Project." Article 1.1, Decision 1400. Available online at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/237474972/National-Foreign-Language-2020-Project-English-Translations>.