IMPLEMENTING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN VIETNAMESE SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF COMPREHENSIVE TEACHER TRAINING

CÔNG TÁC ĐÀO TẠO BỒI DƯỠNG GIÁO VIÊN TRONG VIỆC ĐƯA TIẾNG ANH THÀNH NGÔN NGỮ 2 TRONG TRƯỜNG HỌC

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Abstract - This article explores the transition of English from a foreign language to a second language (L2) within Vietnamese educational institutions, drawing on both international models and national policy frameworks. It examines the impact of the National Foreign Language Project on teachers' and students' English proficiency, highlights the challenges of improving students' language competence as a prerequisite for teaching other subjects through English, and underscores the pivotal role of teacher training and professional development. By advocating for an ecosystemic approach that integrates technology, continuous training, and international collaboration, the article proposes strategies to elevate English to the status of a true second language, thereby fostering global integration and enhancing the competitiveness of Vietnam's future generations.

Key words - English; English as second language; Teacher training; National Foreign Languages Project; English teaching

Tóm tắt - Bài báo này thảo luận về việc từng bước đưa tiếng Anh từ một ngoại ngữ sang ngôn ngữ thứ hai (L2) trong các cơ sở giáo dục Việt Nam, dựa trên các mô hình quốc tế và chính sách quốc gia. Bài báo còn đánh giá tác động của Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia, cũng như nhận định những thách thức trong việc nâng cao năng lực tiếng Anh của học sinh Việt Nam, và nhấn mạnh vai trò then chốt của đào tạo bồi dưỡng giáo viên, phát triển chuyên môn trong việc thực hiện mục tiêu này. Dựa trên thực tiễn giáo dục Việt Nam, nghiên cứu này đưa ra các chiến lược nhằm từng bước đưa tiếng Anh thành ngôn ngữ thứ hai trong trường học, thúc đẩy hội nhập toàn cầu và khả năng cạnh tranh cho các thế hệ tương lai của Việt Nam thông qua xây dựng hệ sinh thái tích hợp công nghệ, đào tạo bồi dưỡng thường xuyên và hợp tác quốc tế.

Từ khóa - Tiếng Anh; Tiếng Anh là ngôn ngữ 2; Đào tạo bồi dưỡng giáo viên; Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia; Dạy học tiếng Anh

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, English has been recognised as a global lingua franca, facilitating communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds. As defined by UNESCO in 1993, a lingua franca is "a language used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them". This concept extends beyond mere utility; English serves as a language of tourism, commerce, international relations, and globalization - often abbreviated as "Globish. In Vietnam, this reality is reflected in national policy. Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW, building on Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW from November 4, 2013, by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (11th term), emphasizes elevating foreign language skills among students, with a specific goal to gradually establish English as a second language in schools.

From regional perspective, the implementation of English as a second language (L2) in Singapore and the Philippines offers valuable models for Vietnam's ambitions to elevate English proficiency. In Singapore, English is the medium of instruction across all subjects in schools, a policy rooted in its multicultural context and economic strategy to position itself as a global hub [1]. The Philippines, similarly, adopts English as a primary medium of instruction, particularly in secondary and higher education. Philipino teachers undergo extensive training in

English-medium instruction (EMI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), fostering fluency and enabling the country to rank highly in English proficiency within ASEAN [2]. Both nations emphasize early exposure, communicative teaching methods, and professional development, aligning with SLA theories. In Vietnam's context, these models highlight the need for a paradigm shift from English as a subject to a medium of instruction, as outlined in the National Foreign Language Project. Lessons learned include the importance of early immersion, sustained teacher training, and equitable resource distribution to address rural-urban disparities. Vietnam can adopt Singapore's structured bilingual approach to balance English with Vietnamese, ensuring cultural preservation, and emulate the Philippines' focus on EMI training to enhance teacher capacity. By integrating technology and fostering international partnerships, as seen in both countries, Vietnam can build a robust ESL ecosystem, enhancing global competitiveness while addressing challenges like teacher shortages and uneven proficiency levels.

Building on this context, this article delves into models of English as an L2 from regional and global contexts, analyzes the current state of English education in Vietnam, evaluates the National Foreign Language Project's outcomes, and underscores the critical importance of teacher training in achieving these ambitions.

2. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative desk-based research approach, utilizing document analysis, literature review, to explore the implementation of English as L2 in Vietnamese schools. The research relies on existing sources for a comprehensive review and synthesis. Data were subjected to thematic analysis, guided by frameworks from Kaplan and Baldauf [3] for language policy and SLA theories for pedagogical implications.

Qualitative Desk-Based Research is defined as a form of empirical research where the researcher gathers non-numerical data indirectly, typically via the internet, without direct participant contact [4]. This approach was selected because desk-based research often enables studies that might be challenging due to limitations in resources, time constraints for field research, or ethical obstacles associated with traditional qualitative methods. The data comprised primary sources, drawing upon extant documents, including academic journal articles presenting primary research findings, public organization reports, and relevant social media postings. Data analysis proceeded through an inductive process, primarily utilizing thematic analysis, often the most common technique in qualitative research, to systematically classify the content by coding and identifying core themes, meanings, and patterns emergent from the data set [5]. This methodological transparency aids in establishing the transferability and trustworthiness of the study's findings. This methodology aligns with exploratory qualitative studies in language policy research, providing a robust basis for policy recommendations without empirical fieldwork.

In order to obtain research objectives, the artticle aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What factors should be considered when making English become an L2 in Vietnamese schools?

2. How much does teacher training help in making English an L2 in Vietnamese schools?

3. Theoretical issues and relevant studies

3.1. Second language and second language acquisition

A L2 is any language learned after the first language (L1), typically used in broader societal contexts beyond the classroom [6]. In another way, English as a Second Language (ESL) includes methods adopted by non-native speakers worldwide to communicate in English. It provides structured learning options through formal classroom settings or individualized tutoring, available either online or in person. The ESL approach equips learners with essential resources to enhance their proficiency and strengthen English language abilities. It includes comprehensive instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, paving the way for diverse educational and career opportunities.

In contrast to English as a foreign language (EFL), where exposure is academic (as in Vietnam), English as a second language (ESL) implies immersion in educational, social, and professional domains, as in Singapore [7]. Second language acquisition (SLA) is the process of learning an L2, distinct from first language acquisition (FLA) due to later onset, conscious effort, and L1 influence, leading to transfer (positive or negative) and interlanguage (a learner's evolving linguistic system) [8].

3.2. Major theories of second language acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA) involves the complicated process by which individuals learn a language beyond their first (L1), influenced by a blend of cognitive, social, environmental, and individual factors that shape linguistic development. The behaviorist approach, founded on B.F. Skinner's [9] principles, views language learning as habit formation through stimulus-response-reinforcement, relying on repetitive drills, imitation, and positive reinforcement for correct responses, which historically shaped the audio-lingual method but was later critiqued for neglecting creativity and innate capacities [10]. Conversely, the innatist perspective, rooted in Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar [11], suggests an innate linguistic faculty that supports SLA despite L1 interference, with Krashen's Monitor Model [12] adding the importance of comprehensible input (i+1) and low affective filters to facilitate acquisition over conscious learning, shedding light on critical periods and adult fossilization. The cognitive approach treats SLA as a skill acquisition process, where learners move from declarative to procedural knowledge through practice and attention, while connectionist theories [13] propose that language emerges from pattern recognition in input, supporting task-based learning and accounting for varying learner aptitudes. Interactionist theories, led by Michael Long [14], emphasize social negotiation of meaning enhanced by feedback and recasts, with Swain's Output Hypothesis [15] highlighting how production helps learners notice gaps and refine interlanguage, promoting communicative tasks and scaffolding in immersive contexts. The sociocultural approach, inspired by Lev Vygotsky [16], frames SLA as a socially mediated process within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where language is co-constructed through interactions and cultural tools, addressing identity and power dynamics to advocate for culturally responsive teaching. The usage-based approach, advanced by Ellis and Larsen-Freeman [17], argues that SLA develops from exposure to frequent input patterns, integrating cognitive and social elements to support corpus-informed teaching and a dynamic view of language emergence. Collectively, these approaches have transitioned from rigid, mechanistic models to flexible, holistic frameworks, guiding pedagogies like communicative language teaching and task-based methods, with emerging research exploring integrated, technology - enhanced strategies to meet diverse learner needs.

3.3. English education in Vietnam: current landscape

In Vietnam, English is compulsory from Grade 3 and optional in Grades 1 and 2 (Circular 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT). It is the primary foreign language, with over 90% of students studying it (EF EPI 2024: 498 points, ranking 63rd globally). However, student proficiency falls short of expectations, often limited to rote learning rather than communicative competence.

To bridge this gap, a paradigm shift is essential: from treating English as a mere subject to a tool for instruction. This would align with national goals of making English an L2, enhancing global competitiveness, and drawing on SLA theories like Krashen's input and affective filter to create engaging, low-anxiety environments.

3.4. The national foreign language project: implementation and impacts

The national foreign language project, approved under Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg (January 30, 2008), and subsequently adjusted via Decisions 729/QĐ-TTg (2017) and 167/QĐ-BGDĐT (July 3, 2018), spans 2008-2025. It aims to overhaul foreign language education in the national system.

Key results include significant improvements in teacher qualifications. From 2018 to 2024, the number of qualified English teachers in general education increased steadily. Training programs focused on enhancing language proficiency and ICT integration. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) delivered Module 1 ("Guidance on Implementing the 2018 General Education Program") to 1,339 teachers and Module 4 ("Building Student Competencies in Primary/Secondary Schools") to 2,360 teachers, preparing for English in Grade 1 from the 2022-2023 academic year.
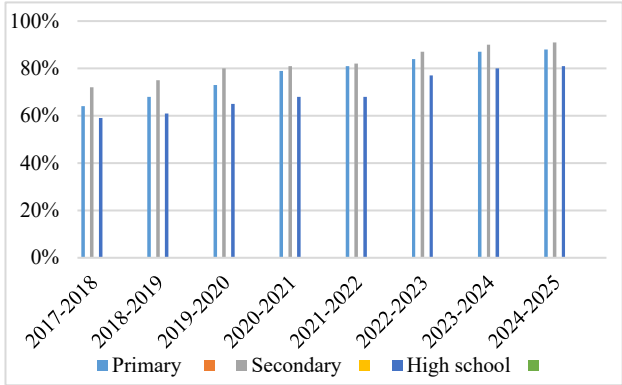

Figure 1. *The number of general education English teachers meeting the foreign language proficiency standard (NLNN) from 2018 to 2024*

Figure 1 illustrates a consistent increase in the number of general education English teachers meeting the foreign language proficiency standard (NLNN) from 2018 to 2024, reflecting Vietnam's investment in professional development to align with global educational standards. This upward trend underscores the Ministry of Education's efforts to enhance instructional quality amid growing demand for English proficiency in a globalized economy.

In addition, the new general education curriculum emphasizes competencies, with student enrollment in English programs rising from the 2017-2018 to 2024-2025 school years. Rising enrollment in Figure 2 suggests heightened student and parental recognition of English as a critical skill for academic and professional success.

Notably, the number of high school graduates exempted from English exams due to international certifications has grown, indicating improved proficiency as illustrated in Figure 3. This trend indicates improved

access to quality English education but highlights potential disparities, as students in urban or affluent areas are more likely to afford certification programs.
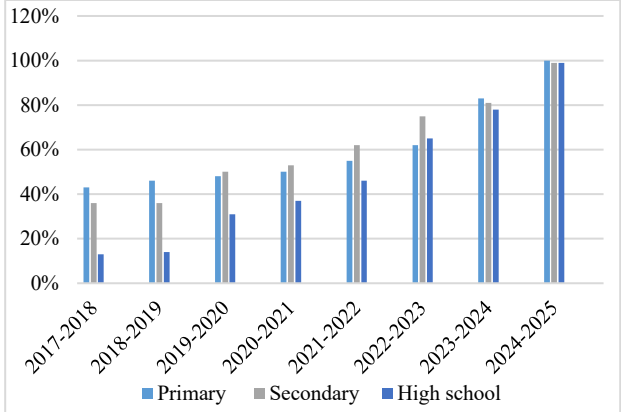

Figure 2. *The number of students enrolled in the 10-year English Program and the 2018 English Subject Program from the 2017-2018 to the 2024-2025 school years*
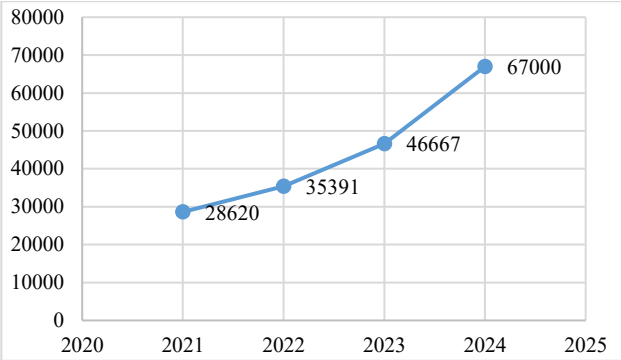

Figure 3. *The number of students with English certificates exempt from the English subject in the high school graduation exam*

According to a summary report of national foreign language project, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) initiatives have expanded: 7,348 students in integrated English programs and 11,296 learning other subjects in English. These outcomes demonstrate the project's positive trajectory, though challenges in uniform implementation persist, particularly in aligning with SLA theories like interaction and output.

Collectively, these figures demonstrate Vietnam's progress in advancing English education, driven by policy reforms and social demand. However, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to qualified teachers and certification opportunities across rural regions. Sustained efforts in teacher training and resource allocation are essential to maintain this positive trend and address inequalities, ensuring all students can compete in an increasingly interconnected world.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Comprehensive training programs

Comprehensive training programs for educators should include a balanced combination of short-term, long-term, and ongoing professional development initiatives. Short-term courses, such as intensive workshops on CLIL implementation or technology integration, are designed to meet immediate instructional needs. For instance, the 2018

training modules (Module 1: 1,339 teachers; Module 4: 2,360 teachers) focused on curriculum implementation and enhancing student competencies (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Complementing these are long-term programs, such as degree courses in English-medium instruction (EMI) offered by universities, which prepare teachers to teach content subjects like mathematics and science in English, following Canada's successful immersion model [18]. Additionally, continuous professional development (CPD) through regular in-service training ensures that teachers remain informed about current second language acquisition research and evolving pedagogical practices, thereby preventing skill stagnation and supporting sustained instructional quality [19].

4.2. Technology integration

Digital tools play a vital role in enhancing teacher training by offering interactive platforms that support practice, feedback, and continuous learning. Learning management systems (LMS), open educational resources, and language learning applications such as Elsa and Duolingo provide dynamic, learner-centered environments that facilitate skill development and reflection. Training in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) further empowers teachers to design engaging, input-rich instructional settings, as demonstrated by Indonesia's technology-driven teacher education programs. Moreover, the integration of online courses and webinars - exemplified by Vietnam's 2018–2024 training initiatives - ensures scalable and flexible professional development opportunities, extending access to educators in remote and rural areas while promoting equitable participation in ongoing training.

4.3. Building professional networks

Workshops, forums, conferences, and webinars serve as vital platforms for knowledge sharing and professional collaboration, fostering a dynamic "network of educators" as proposed in the presentation. These interactive spaces enable teachers to exchange best practices, share innovative approaches, and collectively address pedagogical challenges, as demonstrated by Japan's successful native-speaker programs. Moreover, the development of communities of practice - where educators collaborate on lesson planning, curriculum design, or action research - embodies the principles of social learning theory (SCT), emphasizing the importance of interaction, shared experience, and collective problem-solving in professional growth.

4.4. International collaboration

Partnerships with institutions in English speaking countries and regional leaders such as Singapore offer valuable opportunities for enhancing teacher training by providing access to native trainers and exposure to advanced teaching methodologies, as exemplified by South Korea's EPIK program. Such collaborations can be further strengthened through exchange programs and joint research initiatives, which enable educators to engage directly with global trends in second language acquisition (SLA). These experiences not only deepen teachers'

pedagogical knowledge but also enrich their cultural and linguistic competence, equipping them to deliver more effective and contextually relevant instruction in diverse educational settings.

4.5. Focus on pedagogical innovation

Teacher training should evolve beyond traditional behaviorist, rote-learning methods toward communicative and task-based approaches to more effectively address Vietnam's existing language proficiency gaps. One effective strategy is training educators in the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which promotes authentic language use by integrating language instruction with subject content - an approach already adopted by 7,348 students enrolled in integrated programs. Furthermore, incorporating formative assessment techniques, such as portfolio-based evaluation, aligns with the output hypothesis by encouraging active language production, self-reflection, and deeper engagement in the learning process [15].

4.6. Challenges and solutions

Despite notable progress in teacher education reform, several challenges continue to hinder effective implementation. A significant issue is the persistent teacher shortage, with an estimated 113,491 general education teachers still needed in 2024, English teachers being particularly scarce at the primary level (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2025). Addressing this requires expanding pre-service training programs and introducing incentives, such as scholarships or salary enhancements, to attract and retain talent in the field. Additionally, uneven proficiency levels among educators remain a concern, as only 91.9% of primary school teachers meet professional standards compared to 99.9% at the secondary level (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2025). Targeted training programs focusing on early second language exposure, as supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis [20], are essential to bridging this gap. Resource limitations further worsen disparities, particularly in rural regions where access to technology and professional development is limited. Leveraging mobile-based applications and online platforms offers a cost-effective solution, as demonstrated by Indonesia's approach to continuous professional development.

4.7. Role of universities

Universities play a central role in scaling and strengthening teacher training by serving as hubs for both professional preparation and pedagogical innovation. Specialized degree programs in English-medium instruction (EMI) and second language acquisition (SLA) research equip future educators with the skills needed for implementing CLIL and other advanced teaching methodologies. Furthermore, universities contribute to the continuous improvement of national teacher education through research and innovation. Studies on effective instructional strategies, grounded in SLA theories, can directly inform policy and classroom practice. For instance, research on scaffolding techniques in Vietnamese classrooms has the potential to enhance the application of the

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), thereby improving teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes [21].

In addition, event organization also plays a crucial role in advancing teacher development, with workshops, webinars, and conferences as they provide valuable platforms for professional growth, knowledge exchange, and networking. Equally important are international partnerships, which strengthen training quality through collaboration with global institutions and support Vietnam's broader goal of educational integration into the global community. By embedding principles of second language acquisition (SLA) into teacher education, Vietnam can cultivate a new generation of educators equipped to create an English as a Second Language (ESL) ecosystem - one in which English functions as a medium for learning across disciplines rather than merely a subject of study.

5. Conclusion

In the context of Vietnam 4.0, according to Professor Trần Văn Nhung, former deputy minister of Ministry of Education and Trainng, citizens must be equipped with strong health, intellectual capacity, digital literacy, and English proficiency - essential competencies for effective integration into the global landscape and enhanced competitiveness.

By prioritizing comprehensive teacher training within a supportive ecosystem grounded in second language acquisition (SLA) theories, Vietnam can transform English into a genuine second language, equipping its youth to succeed on the global stage. Achieving this vision requires coordinated reforms in both policy and practice. On the policy side, increased investment in teacher education, particularly at the primary level and in rural regions, is essential to address ongoing shortages (113,491 teachers needed in 2024) and to close the proficiency gap between primary (91.9%) and secondary (99.9%) educators (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2025). Policies should also mandate the expansion of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and offer incentives for teachers to obtain English-medium instruction (EMI) certifications. On the practical level, training must shift from behaviorist approaches to communicative, task-based methodologies that embed English across the curriculum as a tool for learning. Leveraging digital platforms such as learning management systems (LMS) and language apps can further scale training and create richer input and output opportunities, while fostering professional learning communities and building international partnerships will ensure sustainable development of teaching expertise.

The broader impact of these initiatives extends beyond language education. Establishing English as a second language will significantly enhance Vietnam's global competitiveness, aligning with the national Vietnam 4.0 vision of intellectual and technological advancement. It will empower students to access international education, participate in global commerce, and contribute to innovation, positioning Vietnam as a dynamic and influential actor within ASEAN and the wider world. Ultimately, embedding English into all dimensions of education through robust, theory-informed teacher training will transform it into a powerful instrument of communication, collaboration, and creativity, ensuring that future generations are equipped to thrive in an increasingly interconnected global society.

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