Foreign Language Education Policy in Vietnam: The Emergence of English and Its Impact on Higher Education

Do Huy Thinh

Introduction

At a decisive time in the escalating Vietnam War, the then-President of the American Association of Applied Linguistics, Monika Kehoe (1968), made the following prediction: "What the role of English may be in Southeast Asia will depend on the outcome of the conflict there" (p. 129). The choice of English in particular, and foreign languages in general, to be taught in an educational system for the most part bear the political, economic and social imprints of that society. In Vietnam, during the twenty years since national reunification in 1975, the teaching and learning of foreign languages have experienced many major changes, and after each change a language usually emerges as the main one taught in school. When Vietnam adopted doi moi in 1986, conditions for a thorough look at the role of foreign languages in national development started to emerge.

After 1975, Russian was taught throughout the whole country. Patricia Denham (1992) — an international expert familiar with foreign language education in Vietnam, and also the head of a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) project for English training for Vietnamese teachers for more than a decade after 1985 — notes that targets were set for foreign language education at high school in these early years: 60% studying Russian, 25% studying English and 15% studying French. In the North, Russian, which had developed a solid footing during the war, continued to predominate. The number of Russian majors in this period always outnumbered the combined enrolments in all other foreign languages. In the South, Russian departments, the whole faculty of which came from the north, were established in many universities in 1976, and began to enrol students in 1977. The spread of the language was further strengthened by Russian aid in education, through which hundreds of Vietnamese teachers and students were sent annually to the Soviet Union for Russian studies, at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Besides Russian, Chinese, French and English maintained the same pace of development in the North as before 1975. The situation was, however, different in the South, where French and particularly English were deep-rooted at many social strata. Both languages continued to be taught: Russian, however, began to develop. In early reunification was emphasized, inevitably including a restriction of foreign language use and development.

Since English had been widely used before, its retention was inevitable but very limited. Since all schools were nationalized, hundreds of private English-language centers were closed, and as an immediate result of the weakening of all the commercial ties with capitalist nations, English was only language taught in a limited number of classes in high schools, particularly in big cities. In higher education, enrolments in English also decreased dramatically. For instance, at the University of Ho Chi Minh City, the annual quotas for English training declined from 60 students in 1975 to a dozen or so in 1985.
During this period, a small number of English language teachers were chosen and sent to Britain, Australia and India for graduate training (Fox, 1992; Do, 1994; Gayle, 1994; McCrum et al, 1986; Nguyen Ngoc Hung, 1992). The training programs in Britain and Australia were terminated during the period 1979-1985. Australia resumed its English training for Vietnamese in 1985 under the UNDP project, and since 1992 under bilateral aid agreements, approximately 40 teachers and interpreters annually — of English have participated in programs for higher degrees and certificates annually (Denham, personal correspondence). Approximately 200 Vietnamese teachers of English, mostly in higher education, received such training between 1985-1993 (ibid.), while a few people were trained in Britain and India.

The period 1975-1986 witnessed Vietnam experiencing various major difficulties, including economic decline. At the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1986), Vietnam decided to expand its relations with all foreign countries irrespective of different political systems and to adopt a market-oriented economy. This was seen here as a farewell to the obsolete subjectivism of the past. The famous term doi moi reflects reforms not only in the economy but also in other aspects of society.

As a result of these reforms, more English-speaking foreigners began to visit Vietnam again along with products and advertisements in English. English started to become popular and was used not only between Vietnamese and foreigners but also between Vietnamese and Vietnamese (Denham, 1992). All this prompted the re-emergence of English as the main foreign language. As a common trend, the demand for English training was quickened by an increasing influx of foreign investments, most of which came from capitalist societies such as Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, Malaysia and the European Union, and these investors required English as the means of communication.

In the late 1980s, students began to have the right to choose the foreign languages they wanted to study. English use was strongly supported by the variety of jobs with foreign ventures. English language underwent explosive growth during the early 1990s (Denham, 1992; Do, 1994; Nguyen, 1992, Shapiro, 1995; Mydans, 1995; Penaflorida et al, 1992; UCLA-LRP-BAVE, 1995; Wilson, 1993a, 1993b), leading to an official acknowledgment of the role and status of English.

MOET, for the first time, conducted a statistical survey of foreign language needs in late 1993 (MOET, 1993). This initial work has contributed to the building of “A National Strategy for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning throughout All Levels of Education” (MOET, 1994). This research project aimed to review foreign language education in the previous two decades or so and a proposal for future implementation in foreign language teaching and learning. University students are now required to take foreign languages for their graduation exams. In addition, many universities require students of all majors to take a foreign language at the entrance exams. Post-graduate education and the granting of faculty positions also require foreign language proficiency. Foreign languages, especially English, are increasingly used widely in education and in daily-life activities. As a matter of fact, the status of foreign languages, particularly English, has recently been reconfirmed by an Order, signed by the Prime Minister (August 15, 1994), in which government officials are required to study foreign languages, usually English. It should be noted here that, in contemporary Vietnam, there has never been a stronger, clearer decision concerning foreign language education policy and planning made at the highest-level authority.
The study

This study was conducted in Vietnam from September 1995 to February 1996. The researcher used four methods: document review, interviewing, participant observation and a questionnaire. Primary and secondary document sources were obtained from MOET, the General Library, individual universities, and professional journals. Interviews and observations were made at six major geographical concentrations of Vietnamese higher education from North to South: Hanoi, Hue, Da Nang, Da Lat, Ho Chi Minh City, and Can Tho. From these locations, fifteen universities and colleges were selected in which to administer a questionnaire and conduct follow-up interviews with students.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, many of the students volunteered to exchange opinions and ideas in individual or group discussions. These discussions were helpful since they revealed what students — the most affected people — think about the national foreign language education policy and its related issues. Furthermore, their opinions helped clarify the interview questions when the researcher approached high-ranking officials in MOET to discuss foreign language education policy and its implementation.

In this paper, only the questionnaire results are presented. The questionnaire was aimed at understanding university student attitudes toward foreign language education policy, especially toward the choice and use of English, motivation for English learning, and the impact of English on higher education. The questionnaire was constructed within the Vietnamese educational context, and was an adaptation of models developed by Benson (1991) and Dimmitt (1994). Although the Benson model adapted from Cooper and Fishman (1977) was used with Japanese freshmen, some aspects of it were adaptable to Vietnam, i.e., motivation for learning English. The Dimmitt model, adapted from Harrison et al (1975), Cooper and Fishman (1977), and Agheyisi and Fishman (1970), was used with university students in Armenia. This provided information on the nature of appropriate background questions, and particularly on value clarification statements related to student attitudes toward language policy, language use, and language choice.

A pilot test was conducted in English during the month of February 1995, with a group of 26 US-sponsored Vietnamese students studying in American universities. The questionnaire was pre-tested in Vietnamese with 30 second-year students at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Agriculture and Forestry in September 1995. Follow-up interviews were carried out after each test. Necessary information was obtained from these tests. The two versions, English and Vietnamese, were crosschecked to revise the wording, grammar and meaning of questionnaire items. Ambiguous items were either revised or discarded, while some important details were added. There was no difference in meaning between the two versions.

The questionnaire was administered to 641 undergraduate students at fifteen universities and colleges. The selection of these institutions was based on in-depth consultation with key educational experts; institutions selected were major four-year universities and colleges that had a higher number of student enrolments and offered a greater variety of fields of study than other schools. This ensured a good representation of higher education institutions around the country.

The researcher administered the questionnaire directly to 641 students. The leadership of each university was cooperative in helping the researcher get access to a wide range of students. There was a representation by fields of study: humanities and pure
sciences (such as literature, foreign languages, and math), specialization (such as teacher training, agriculture, economics, and medicine), and polytechnic (such as engineering, industrial management, and technology of communications), and grade levels (year 1 to year 4).

The questionnaire took 35 to 40 minutes of class time. The researcher explained items carefully in Vietnamese and asked respondents to respond to each before going to the next item. After completing the questionnaire, the researcher asked the respondents to go over each item again in order not to miss or misunderstand anything.

Findings

Respondents' characteristics

Gender, age and race

Of the respondents, 330 (51.5%) were male and 311 (48.5%) were female. The majority of them, 611 (95.3%), were in the college age group, 18-25. The rest included 17 students (2.7%) below 18 years of age and 13 (2.0%) above 25. With regard to race, 625 of them were Kinh, the majority ethnic group in Vietnam.

Parental types of occupation and education levels

Parents worked largely in the government-run sector with 247 (38.5%) for father and 212 (33.1%) for mother, and then in self-paid jobs in rural areas with 192 (30.0%) and 210 (32.8%), and in urban areas with 105 (16.4%) and 109 (17.0%) respectively. These not working included those who had retired or who stayed at home to take care of familial work (14.0%). Only a few parents worked in foreign- or Vietnamese-run private companies or in other types of jobs.

There was a difference between fathers and mothers in terms of level of education. Whereas the number of fathers who achieved higher levels of education was increasingly larger, from primary (72 or 11.2%), lower secondary (141 or 22.0%), upper secondary (164 or 25.6%) to undergraduate (199 or 31.0%), the situation was opposite to for mothers. The numbers of mothers were 153 (23.8%) for primary education, 153 (23.8%) for lower secondary, 148 (23.1%) for upper secondary, and 127 (19.8%) for undergraduate level. A much smaller number in both groups held higher degrees: 30 (4.7%) for father and 10 (1.6%) for mother. In addition, 35 (5.5%) fathers and 50 (7.8%) mothers acquired other levels of education like trung cap (two- or three-year vocational training).

First/Main foreign language at high school

The vast majority of respondents (73.3%) studied English as their first foreign language, while studied Russian, 3.1% French, and 7.0% no foreign languages at all (Table 3).
Table 3: Main foreign language studied at high school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No study</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foreign languages currently studied in the university

393 of all respondents studied one foreign language, 218 studied two foreign languages, 29 studied 3 foreign languages, and 1 studied 4 foreign languages. The overwhelming majority (621) studied English. A very distant second were French-language learners (176). The foreign languages they were studying are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Foreign languages presently studied at university (by response)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Studying 1 foreign language</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying 2 foreign languages</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying 3 foreign languages</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying 4 foreign languages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL*</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The total number includes all the foreign languages students studied.

Levels of foreign language proficiency

Four levels of proficiency were specified:

a. Speaking fluently and understanding without difficulty.

b. Speaking fairly fluently but understanding with difficulty.

c. Understanding but not speaking well.

d. Understanding a little, but not able to speak.
For all foreign languages studied, respondents tended to choose level c. Table 5 provides a detailed summary of levels of proficiency in each foreign language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Foreign languages used in study and research*

There was a difference between the foreign languages studied and those used in study and research. 421 respondents claimed to use one foreign language in study and research; 208 used two foreign languages, 11 used three foreign languages, and one who used four foreign languages. Of these foreign languages, 598 respondents (93.3%) said English was the most used. Chinese ranked second with 18 (2.8%), French ranked third with 15 (2.3%), and Russian ranked fourth with 10 (1.6%).

*Foreign languages used at home*

Of the total, 67 respondents (10.5%) used foreign languages frequently at home. Of these, 66 used English and one used French. Among those who used English at home, three students claimed also to use another language, Chinese.

*Duration of English learning*

Of 621 respondents who studied English, 314 (50.6%) had been studying for more than five years, 152 (24.5%) from three to five years, 133 (21.4%) from one to less than three years, and 24 (3.8%) for less than one year. Of 621 respondents who studied English, 314 (50.56%) had been studying for more than five years, 152 (24.47%) from three to five years, 133 (21.42%) from one to less than three years, and 24 (3.85%) for less than one year. Of 621 respondents who studied English, 314 (50.56%) had been studying for more than five years, 152 (24.47%) from three to five years, 133 (21.42%) from one to less than three years, and 24 (3.85%) for less than one year.

*Motivation for Learning English*

Item 14 sought to find out respondents’ motivation for learning English. Nine answers marked from a to i were provided, and respondents were asked to respond to each answer by circling one of four choices: (1) very important, (2) important, (3) little important, and (4) not important. The nine answers were as follows:

# a. It was a compulsory subject and exam.
It would provide opportunities to get a better job.
It would allow me to get to know tourists better.
It would allow me to enjoy entertainment more.
It would help me to further my overseas study.
The lessons were interesting.
It would give me more fun and personal satisfaction.
It would help me to understand Western culture and values.
It would enable me to live the same way as English-speaking people.

Total responses to this motivational question can be seen in Table 6. The results did not include 20 respondents who claimed not to have studied English. Item #a sought to determine whether the motivation was extrinsic. 442 of the respondents (71.2%) circled “very important” or “important”, while 179 (28.8%) chose “little important” or “not important”. Items #b and #e referred to an instrumental motivation. For item #b, the overwhelming majority of respondents (91.8%) regarded as “very important” or “important” that English would provide opportunities to get better jobs. However, a smaller number of the respondents, 356 (57.3%), chose “very important” and “important” for opportunities for overseas study (item #e).

Items #c, #h, and #i were related to an integrative orientation. Three hundred and forty nine respondents (56.2%) considered item #c — getting to know tourists better — “very important” and “important”, and 272 (43.8%) chose “little important” and “not important”. Likewise, for item #h that English would help them understand Western culture and values, 418 respondents (67.3%) circled “very important” and “important”, while the rest (32.7%) circled “little important” and “not important”. Contrasting results were seen in item #i, where almost all the respondents (91.1%) regarded as “little important” (24.2%) and “not important” (67.0%) the reason that English learning would help them live the same way as English-speaking people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 14: Reason for learning English</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Total N=621</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. a compulsory subject</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. a better job</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. knowing tourists</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. entertainment</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. overseas study</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. interesting lessons</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. personal satisfaction</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Western culture</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. live as Westerners</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1: Very Important 2: Important 3: A little important 4: Not important
* 20 respondents not studying English (N=621)
Items #d, #f and #g were personal reasons. For item #d (that English would allow them to enjoy entertainment more), the majority of respondents, 431 (67.2%), chose “little important” and “not important”. For item #f, interesting English lessons, 381 respondents (61.4%) answered “little important” and “not important”. Particularly interesting were the almost equal results for both “important” and “not important” found in item #g (that English would give more fun and personal satisfaction): 49.4% circled “very important” and “important” and 50.6% chose “little important” and “not important”.

Varieties of English
In response to item 15 (Which variety of English would you like to be able to speak well?), 283 of the respondents (44.2%) preferred British English, 209 (32.6%) chose American English. One hundred and one respondents (15.8%) would like to speak English with a Vietnamese accent (Vietnamese English or “Vietlish”), 28 (4.4%) preferred Australian English, and the rest (1.3%) chose other varieties, like Chinese English (Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Varieties of English</th>
<th>Total N=629*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>British</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Varieties of English preferred by respondents

12 missing

Value clarification statements
Questionnaire items 16-32 were value clarification statements on foreign language issues in Vietnam related to respondents’ attitudes toward foreign language education, the government policy, the English language, the use of English, and the role of English in higher education. A 1-6 scale was used in this section with 17 belief statements. Respondents were asked to circle for each belief statement one choice among the following: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) no opinion, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree, and (6) don’t know.

Foreign language education
Three of the statements (16, 17, 18) revealed respondents’ attitudes toward foreign language education:

# 16. It is unpatriotic for Vietnamese students to speak languages other than Vietnamese.

# 17. Vietnamese students need to learn at least one foreign language.

# 18. The more languages a person knows, the more knowledgeable s/he is.

Almost all the respondents (95.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with item 16 (unpatriotic to speak languages other than Vietnamese). The vast majority of respondents (88.0%) agreed or strongly agreed with item 17 (that Vietnamese students need to learn a foreign language). Quite similarly, almost all of them (97.0%) strongly
agreed or agreed with item 18 that the more languages one knows, the more knowledgeable that person is.

**Foreign language policy**

Items 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 dealt with foreign language policy in Vietnam:

# 19. Vietnamese students should not have a choice in what foreign languages are taught in school.

# 20. The Vietnamese government’s policy of promoting learning foreign languages, mainly English, is the suitable choice for Vietnam at present.

# 21. Vietnamese students should start learning English as early as in primary education.

# 22. The Vietnamese education system should offer fewer hours of English instruction each week. (Presently, 6 hours/week are offered in secondary schools and 6-8 hours/week for non-English majors in higher education).

# 23. Elementary-level English should be a criterion for university admissions.

Total responses for these five policy items can be seen in Table 8. Almost all the respondents strongly disagreed (50.1%) or disagreed (42.4%) with item 19 that Vietnamese students should have no choice in foreign language education. In contrast, most of the respondents strongly agreed (29.3%) or agreed (56.5%) with item 20 that the government’s current policy of promoting foreign languages, mainly English, is the suitable choice. The majority of them (82.2%) strongly agreed or agreed with item 21 that English should be taught in primary schooling. Four hundred and fifty two respondents (70.5%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with item 22 that English instruction should be offered fewer hours in school, while 141 (22.0%) had no opinion or did not know. For item 23 that elementary-level English should be a criterion for university admissions, 412 of the total 641 respondents (64.3%) cited “strongly agree” or “agree”, while 131 respondents (20.4%) chose “disagree” or “strongly disagree”.

**Table 8: Beliefs about foreign language education policy (by percent)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree or disagree</th>
<th>No opinion or don’t know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. Students should have no choice</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Government policy is suitable</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. English in primary school</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Less English hours</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. English should be a criterion for university admission</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The choice of English*

Questionnaire items 24, 25, and 26 referred to the choice of English:

# 24. The majority of Vietnamese students should not choose to study English.

# 25. English should become the most important foreign language taught in Vietnam.
26. Vietnamese parents generally support their children in learning English.

Total responses to these items can be seen in Table 9. A slight majority of respondents (54.6%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with item 24 that the majority of Vietnamese students should not choose to study English while a remarkable percentage (39.2%) of them had no opinion or did not know. On the contrary, 68.6% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that English should become the most important foreign language (item 25), though 21.4% had no opinion or did not know. However, the great majority (89.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that English learning would receive parental support (item 26).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9: Beliefs about the choice of English (by percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Majority of students not choosing English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. English is most important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Parental support for English learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of English in higher education

Items 27, 28 and 29 sought to know respondents’ attitudes toward the importance of English in higher education:

# 27. English does not help Vietnamese higher education to develop.

# 28. More Vietnamese university students are learning English in Vietnam than five

# 29. University students would like to have:

a. more proficiency in English.

b. more native English instructors.

c. more English-written textbooks and professional materials.

d. more English programs on TV and radio.

e. more newspapers, magazines and novels in English.

Total responses to these items can be seen in Table 10 and Table 11. The great majority of respondents (86.9%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that English did not help Vietnamese higher education to develop (item 27). In contrast, almost all the respondents (96.3%) strongly agreed or agreed with item 28 that more university students were focusing on learning English than 5 years ago. Similarly, “strongly agree” or “agree” was the choice of 97.8% of respondents for item 29.a (university students would like to have more English proficiency); the choice of 85.3% of respondents for item 29.b (more native English instructors); the choice of 94.1% for item 29.c (more English-written textbooks and professional materials); the choice of 84.4% for item 29.d (more English programs on TV and radio); and the choice of 80.2% for item 29.e (more English newspapers, magazines, and novels).
Table 10: Beliefs about the importance of English in higher education (by percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree or disagree</th>
<th>No opinion or don't know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27. English is not helping higher education to develop</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. More students learning English than before</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Beliefs about English needs in higher education (in percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item # 29: Students want to have</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree or disagree</th>
<th>No opinion or don't know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. more English proficiency</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. more native English teachers</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. more English textbooks and materials</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. more English programs on TV and radio</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. more newspapers, novels and magazines in English</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of English

Questionnaire items 30, 31 and 32 were related to respondents' attitudes toward the use of English:

# 30. English is more beneficial than other foreign languages.
# 31. English is now used in a greater variety of situations than 5 years ago.
# 32. English should be spoken in Vietnam wherever possible.

Table 12: Beliefs about the use of English (by percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree or disagree</th>
<th>No opinion or don't know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30. English is more beneficial</td>
<td>78.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. English is more often used</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. English is spoken wherever possible</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total responses to these items can be seen in Table 12. For item 30, 401 respondents (78.2%) strongly agreed or agreed that English was more beneficial than other foreign languages. Five hundred and eighty nine of the respondents (91.8%) strongly agreed or agreed with item 31 that English was now used in more varied situations than 5 years before. For item 32, that English should be spoken in Vietnam wherever possible, 362 respondents (56.5%) strongly disagreed or disagreed while 140 respondents (21.8%) agreed or strongly agreed, and 139 (21.7%) had no opinion or did not know.
Analysis and conclusions

The current foreign language education policy

As clearly defined, the policy encourages the teaching and learning of a variety of foreign languages, with an emphasis on English. English is recognized as the most important foreign language. The Prime Minister’s Order confirmed the central status of English in foreign language education policy. It is interesting, however, to note that students had a slightly different viewpoint. While 54.6% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed that the majority of students should choose not to study English, a considerable percent (39.2%) had no opinion or did not know. Similarly, while 68.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed that English should become the most important foreign language taught in Vietnam (item 25), 21.4% had no opinion or did not know. Follow-up student interviews revealed the reasons for this apparent hesitation. Students generally accepted the very important role of English and indicated they would be willing to study it. Vietnamese students are open-minded and eager to learn foreign languages (38.7% of students in the questionnaire studied at least two foreign languages while at university). Nevertheless, the students mentioned with regret their past experience when they were required to study Russian regardless of their language preference. Thus, even though English was emphasized as the language of reform and cooperation, they did not want English to be the unique foreign language to be promoted. Students wanted to have the right to choose the language they would study.

Choice is also a new feature in the current policy. In order to make a choice, the policy provides for a variety of foreign languages. Language diversity is the right way to meet Vietnam’s very diverse diplomatic and economic relations. The student questionnaire revealed a clear picture of foreign language priorities through the number of enrolments in each: English (621), French (176), Chinese (76), Russian (24), Japanese (22), and German (1). The researcher’s observations also confirmed that Russian was almost phased out in the universities visited. Most of these institutions upheld student choice. The language of choice was English. Most universities offered English to 90% of first-year students. Some universities, such as Hanoi University of Technology and the people-founded Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology offered 100% English classes. There might be two reasons for universities not to offer English courses despite student choice:

1. There are not sufficient English-language teachers, while teachers of other foreign languages are available.

2. Universities set the quotas for each foreign language taught according to their assistance and cooperation programs with foreign governments and organizations whose primary language is not English.

In addition, on the student side, some students do not choose English at school, not because they do not acknowledge its importance, but because they want to study another foreign language they know better so that they do not need to spend so much time studying and can pass the language exam easily.

Foreign language requirements for high- and middle-ranking government officials clearly profoundly strengthened foreign language education in Vietnam. Foreign languages became a job requirement and a criterion for promotion and personal advancement. This might be a compelling force for the language movement to go forward. The questionnaire data revealed that students supported the objectives and tasks of foreign language education policy: foreign languages as a compulsory exam.
subject and a criterion for university admission (64.3%), the teaching of foreign
languages in primary schooling (82.2%), and bilingual programs (usually English-
French, English-Chinese, like at the Hanoi University for Foreign Studies, and at
Phuong Dong University).

Students attitudes and motivation toward English

The majority of students in this study started their high school education after the
adoption of doi moi in 1986, when they were offered the right to choose English
(73.3% were studying English), even in rural schools. Almost all students (621/641)
chose to study English at the university. This increase emphasizes the growing needs of
learning English in higher education. The majority of students in this study started their
high school education after the adoption of doi moi in 1986, when they had the right to
choose English (73.32% were studying English), even in rural schools. Almost all of
the students (621/641) chose to study English at the university. This increase
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English (73.32% were studying English), even in rural schools. Almost all of the
students (621/641) chose to study English at the university. This increase emphasizes
the growing needs of learning English in higher education.

Most respondents during interviews agreed the issue of varieties of English they would
like to speak well is not important. No matter what variety, all acknowledged that
English is used for communicative purposes. However, the questionnaire data showed
that a slight majority preferred British English (44.2%) to American English (32.6%).
The availability of British teaching materials, aids, teachers and scholarships in
Vietnam for a long time in the past might have strengthened the spread of British
English.

English is now more widely used in Vietnam than before. Even though spoken English
is encouraged, it seems that the language should be used in suitable contexts. 56.5% of
respondents either disagree or strongly disagree, as opposed to 21.8% who agree or
strongly agree. Interviews with respondents revealed that they feel uncomfortable
when they hear their friends speak the language all the time. It is suggested that
English be used among the people who agree to use it and who feel comfortable with it
in situations such as language practice or communication with foreigners. Some
respondents preferred to speak English wherever possible since it is a good way to
improve their speaking skills.

The fact that 71.2% of respondents study English because it is required as a
compulsory exam subject (item 14.a) indicates that extrinsic motivation seems to be
important for learning English.

It is apparent that Vietnamese students are instrumentally motivated to learn English.
Responding to the question why they study English, 91.8% and 57.3% of respondents
agreed that a knowledge of English can provide them with more opportunities for
better jobs (item 14.b) and overseas study (item 14.e) respectively. Asked in follow-up
interviews why there was a big difference between the two percentages, students
conceded that opportunities for better jobs were more realistic than for overseas study. They would love to study abroad but cannot find ways to achieve the goal; English proficiency is not enough. In addition, another important instrumental reason emerged through student interviews: Students want to study English because they want access to the world's knowledge and skills in science and technology.

In contrast, an integrative motive seems not to be important. While 56.2% of respondents agreed that English would help them know tourists better (item 14.c), and 67.3% thought they would use English to understand Western culture and values (item 14.h), the vast majority of respondents rejected the suggestion that English could help them live the same way as English-speaking people. During follow-up interviews, respondents conceded that they studied the language to understand more about foreign people and culture to broaden their minds. This does not mean that they accepted Western values and sought to live the same way as Westerners. Many students said that the Western way of life is so different from their own that it cannot help them. Moreover, they see Western society through movies and magazines that focus mostly on its negative aspects, such as crime and family problems rather than the positive ones.

Studying English for personal reasons, like enjoying more entertainment, having more fun and satisfaction or because English lessons were interesting, appear not to be important, as demonstrated by almost equal percentages for and against.

The impact of English on higher education

86.9% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that English does not help higher education to develop. Thanks to English competence, as revealed from the follow-up interviews with students, Vietnamese higher education has more faculty studying in countries where English is required, gets more access to science and technology, and cooperates more with the outside world. As a matter of fact, English is attracting more students than before. Vietnamese students want to have more English proficiency not only to better their lives but also to help improve higher education. They believe knowing English might be the shortest way to achieve these goals. Students would like to have more access to English through the mass media, the availability of native speakers of English and English printed materials. This not only helps them study English more effectively, but also enriches their knowledge about the world. In addition, English ability helps people, especially those at MOET, gain access to the ways in which higher education is administered in the outside world to adapt these concepts to the situation of Vietnam. In addition, English ability helps people, especially those at the MOET, get access to the ways in which higher education is administered in the outside world to adapt these concepts to the situation of Vietnam.