The Design and Use of English Language Textbooks in Vietnamese Secondary Schools

Nguyen Be and David Crabbe

Introduction

Materials are resources for whatever procedures are used in specific classrooms. In one sense, they provide a backbone for classroom activity but in themselves they cannot dictate a particular methodology. What they do is to offer learning opportunities. When change is called for in the type of learning opportunity, it is often the materials that are used to herald the change. Materials tend to be on the conservative side. After all, they have to serve the needs of a large group of teachers. When materials are commercially published, there is an even greater demand for them to appeal to the market. For this reason, materials probably reflect change more often than bring it about.

Where reform is called for in a national system of English language teaching, a systemic approach is needed that addresses both teaching practice and the learning resources that supply that practice. Teaching is a cultural activity that is much more complex than simply the application of a technology of learning. There are established routines in classrooms that embody beliefs about teaching and learning and teacher-student role relationships that are likely to be specific to the context. In order to build reform on an inside understanding of the educational culture, we need to establish a shared understanding of that culture.

In order to understand the culture of a classroom and how materials are used within that culture, we need a process of enquiry that captures information that will help in the design of future materials and indicate the type of training that is required. It is useful to know, for example, whether materials are used more as a resource or as a script for the class event. If materials are currently relied on as a script, then their design will take that into account. If we wish to encourage teachers to use materials as a flexible resource, then a very different kind of training is required.

The paper begins by providing a background to ELT in Vietnam together with a short description of the current textbooks. It then examines dimensions of materials use that will be explored in an on-going study to find out more about the role of materials in Vietnamese secondary school classrooms.

The context

English language in Vietnam

From 1954 until the recent political changes in Eastern and Central Europe, the major language of international communication for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was Russian. For the South of Vietnam, French was the first foreign language up till 1954, and then English until the reunification of the country in 1975. After reunification, Russian was the national first foreign language for a number of years, and little attention was paid to the teaching of both English and French.
In the context of political renovation and an open-door policy by the Vietnamese government in the past decade, English has become the first foreign language. In recent years, Vietnam has seen an explosion in the demand for English. With the move to a market economy by the Vietnamese government and the growth of international business as well as an increasing number of foreign tourists, knowledge of English has become the passport to a better-paid job not only in the tourism and hospitality industries, but in many other enterprises also. English is taught in secondary schools, universities, and evening classes across the country. There are now more teachers and learners of English in Vietnam than of any other subjects. This is not to say that other languages such as French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and German are not taught, but simply that the language in great demand is English. An English language degree is in fact a vocational qualification.

The provision of English language instruction at secondary level in Vietnam

Vietnamese general education consists of 12 grades: primary school (from grade 1 to 5: for children aged 6 to 11); junior secondary school (from grade 6 to 9: for children aged 11-15); and senior secondary school (from grade 10 to 12: for children aged 15-18). Foreign languages (English or French or Russian) are taught to children from grade 6. As far as English is concerned, there is considerable provision for English language teaching and learning at secondary level. The teaching of English is now established in almost all secondary schools in 61 provinces and cities throughout Vietnam, with the exception of a number of schools located in the remote rural areas and in the highlands where there is still a shortage of teachers of English. Students learn English for three 45-minute periods a week, except in Grade 6, when they learn for four periods a week.

The goals

It is generally assumed that after approximately 700 class hours in seven years of studying, students should have mastered basic English phonetics and grammar, and to know a minimum of around 2,000 vocabulary items of English. Theoretically, students should have developed a certain level of proficiency in the four skills and be able to read materials at the same level as their textbook using a dictionary. Although there is no official written government policy on English language teaching for the formal education system in Vietnam, there is a document on English language curriculum goals issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) that reflects the government language policy. According to this document, the aims and objectives of the Vietnamese secondary school ELT curriculum and textbooks are as follows:

- To help students develop personal strategies which will enable them to participate in interpersonal communication activities outside the classroom and to motivate students to continue developing these strategies beyond the school curriculum
- To develop the skills and attitudes to use English for access to science and modern technology by listening, reading and writing English and motivate students to use these skills in order to pursue further academic knowledge as well as practical information in all areas of interest
- To motivate students to independently continue to develop their personal language skills in order to acquire and use information from a variety of aural and written sources beyond the classroom
• To develop knowledge and attitudes towards using English in order to learn about other cultures and interact with members of those cultures in order to develop mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation

• To enable students to become aware of their own culture and/or cross-cultural differences in order to be better overall communicators and to better inform the world of the Vietnamese people, their history and culture

• To foster students' self-confidence and self-worth so that they make full use of their English language skills in order to enhance personal development and contribute to the development of Vietnam

• To enable students to become more effective language users by developing their learning skills and cognitive processes. These abilities will carry over to their use of the first language, Vietnamese and will produce a better overall linguistic competence

• To enable students to use English in order to further their academic and professional development (MOET, 1997)

Assessment
Besides the continuous and regular assessment made by school teachers of all students' work, especially through two semester examinations every school year, students' progress in learning English at secondary school is officially assessed through two important provincial and national examinations. At the end of both grade 9 and grade 12, all students must take a graduation examination. In the grade 12 examination, which is known as the National Baccalaureate, English is a compulsory subject and the exam paper is set by MOET. The exam paper format typically focuses on reading comprehension skills through knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and translation. This examination therefore has a backwash effect on the method of teaching and learning of English at secondary level.

The materials
The series of current ELT textbooks for Vietnamese secondary schools consists of seven student’s books: the four textbooks English 6, 7, 8 and 9 are for junior secondary school students whilst the other three textbooks English 10, 11 and 12 are for senior students. This series of textbooks was designed and produced by a group of Vietnamese textbook writers in MOET from 1989 to 1992 and was introduced into Vietnamese secondary schools stage by stage during those four years. They have been used across the country until now.

These student’s books are theoretically part of a “complete” package. However, due to funding constraints from the government, the accompanying teacher’s guides have not all been written. The available textbook package together with dates of publication may be summarised in Table 23:
No cassettes are available to go with the textbooks at any level, although some teachers have made their own by recording on tape their own voice or that of foreigners working in Vietnam.

Illustrations are provided in nearly all the books in the series, particularly in the lower levels. The pictures serve as definitions of new words or accompany the dialogues to tell the learners more about the context of situation.

Glossaries are provided at the end of all the textbooks with meanings given in Vietnamese. In addition, there are several appendices in some textbooks including a list of irregular verbs (as in English 7), grammar notes (as in English 8), extra tables of weights and measures (as in English 11) and key to phonetic symbols, maps of the United Kingdom and the United States, a list of the chemical elements, and lists of common abbreviations and common forenames (as in English 12).

These textbooks are essentially bilingual, but become more monolingual in the more advanced three texts for senior levels, although occasional explanations, translation exercises and glossaries are given in Vietnamese. At times, some key vocabulary in the passages is translated into Vietnamese, but on the whole, the texts are in English.

It should be noted that although at present, a new set of materials called English For Vietnam is being produced with funding from an American business organization (BAVE/The Business Alliance for Vietnamese Education), this new materials project has not so far received full official backing. The five textbooks published until now (i.e. English for Vietnam Grade 6, Grade 7, Grade 8, Grade 10 and Grade 11) have not been officially approved by MOET for classroom use. A pilot project is being carried out in a number of selected schools in the country to trial the feasibility of the published materials as well as the proposed curriculum and the approach of teaching and learning. The remaining two important textbooks in the series (for Grades 9 and 12) are still at the draft stage. Therefore, there is still a long way to go before the BAVE series of textbooks is completely implemented in Vietnamese schools. It is our understanding that MOET plans to have all the newly designed textbooks completed, trialled, adapted and approved in the coming years and ready for implementation nationally by 2005.

Table 23: The available textbook package

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's book</th>
<th>Teacher's book</th>
<th>Supplementary Reader</th>
<th>Publication date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English 6</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 7</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 8</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 9</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 10</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 11</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 12</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aims and objectives

In the textbooks themselves, although there are no stated aims in the four junior-level textbooks (English 6 to English 9), some general aims are stated in the introduction of each of the senior-level textbooks (English 10, English 11 and English 12). In the introduction to English 10 and English 11, they are spelt out as follows:

This is designed to provide a comprehensive course for senior secondary students who have completed the series of English from English 6 to English 9. It continues to train the student for the four language skills: listening and comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, in that order, but gradually focuses on developing his reading skill.

This aim is then modified in the introduction to English 12:

The aim of this book is to help the student review and systematise the materials he has learnt, and at the same time continue to train his four language skills: listening and comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. In this last book of the series, more emphasis is placed on the development of the student's reading skill.

The MOET curriculum goals listed earlier in this section were issued after the publication of the set of textbooks. Therefore the course cannot be expected to fully reflect the goals of the curriculum.

Principles of selection and sequencing

There is no statement in the text or elsewhere on the principles of selection or sequencing of materials. Therefore, the following comments are based on the authors' analysis.

The tasks, language and content in the textbooks are selected according to topic difficulty and text difficulty. Most of the textbooks in the series are based on a grammatical syllabus in which grammatical structures are divided into sections graded according to difficulty and/or importance. The first textbook in the series, English 6, which is for beginners, however, uses a mixed or 'multi-strand' syllabus. Topics, tasks, functions and notions, as well as grammar and vocabulary can be found in this textbook. In the main, however, the whole set of textbooks is more grammatically oriented and less communicatively oriented as is illustrated by the schematic format of the units below:
Table 24: Textbook formats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior-level textbooks</th>
<th>Senior-level textbooks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Presentation of material (one or two dialogues or a reading passage)</td>
<td>1. Presentation of material (a reading passage of two pages. In the English 12 textbook alone, each reading passage is preceded by Preliminary Activities part, which offers a general preview of the reading passage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Practice (drilling of new sentence patterns and grammar points used in the dialogue(s) or reading passage)</td>
<td>2. Comprehension practice (a series of questions about the content of the reading passage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Further Practice (activities and exercises on grammar and vocabulary to reinforce what students have learnt and apply their new knowledge to similar contexts in Vietnam).</td>
<td>4. Extended practice (activities such as pairwork with conversations, a Test with various exercises on grammar and vocabulary, and More Exercises with “additional exercises for smart students” (Tu et al, 1991:3)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fun Corner (“lively activities to cheer up the classroom” (Tu et al, 1991: 4) such as riddles, jokes, crossword puzzles.)</td>
<td>5. Summary of grammar and vocabulary (summary of the sentence patterns learnt in the unit through tables and charts, and list of the vocabulary items covered in the unit).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Homework</td>
<td>6. Summary (list of the new vocabulary items and the main language points covered in the unit).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics covered in the presentation of material vary widely from a reading about Mathematics to one about Jogging (such as the ones in English 11). Various topics are dealt with in the textbooks and all the texts, exercises, and use of vocabulary are thus selected to have relevance to each particular topic. To illustrate, Table 25 gives an extract from the contents of English 12 textbook showing how various these topics are:
Table 25: Topics in English 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Who Uses English?</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The First Job</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Car Mechanic to Teacher</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Air Pollution</td>
<td>Pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Left-hand Traffic</td>
<td>Traffic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Being a Welcome Guest</td>
<td>Etiquette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Sword That Can Heal</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>To Build a Fire</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Consolidation</td>
<td>Revision Lesson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most topics were chosen by the authors to reflect the characteristics of the society, the life-style, the civilisation and the culture of English-speaking people. There are, however, some exceptions including occasional topics from the Vietnamese context such as Vietnamese New Year’s Holidays (Unit 17, English 8), Vietnamese Capital (Unit 19, English 8), A Vietnamese Hero (Unit 18, English 9), or from a Soviet context, such as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (Unit 8, English 11).

Types of teaching/learning activities

The textbooks provide a clear framework: teachers and learners know where they are going and what is coming next, so that there is a sense of structure and progress. The activities provided by the textbooks cover a range of language content and skills. They comprise the following categories (Table 26):

Table 26: Textbook activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of new material</td>
<td>New material is presented in the form of a dialogue or a reading passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation explanation and practice</td>
<td>Pronunciation of certain sounds, syllables, and stress and intonation patterns are explained with examples and drills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary explanation and practice</td>
<td>Meanings of new words are given in Vietnamese in the glossary at the end of the book or through occasional illustrations supplied in the lesson. These words are introduced in the part of sentence pattern practice or grammar exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension practice</td>
<td>Exercises aimed at improving or testing students' understanding of the reading passage or the dialogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking communicative tasks</td>
<td>Role-play activities are provided and questions for practising asking and answering are given.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and writing tasks</td>
<td>Reading passages or dialogues are given at the beginning of each unit for improving student's reading comprehension skill. Various writing tasks are given after that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar presentation and practice</td>
<td>New grammar points are presented and explained, followed by exercises for practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation practice</td>
<td>Students are asked to translate some sentences (or sometimes paragraphs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Categories | Description
--- | ---
Review of previously learnt material | Words and expressions and sentence patterns learnt previously are recurrently reviewed in the later parts through exercises.
Some fun activities | Lively activities such as games, crossword puzzles, comic strips, riddles, jokes, etc. are provided to cheer up the classroom and to create more learning opportunities.

At junior level, there is a balance between accuracy and fluency practice: that is to say, activities whose objective is the production of correct language forms, and those whose objective is communicative language use. However, at senior level, more emphasis is put on the former and little or no attention is paid to the latter.

Although the textbooks claim to train the students for the four language skills, direct practice is not provided for all the four skills. Few tasks for listening and comprehension are provided throughout the series of textbooks and more emphasis is placed on reading skill. The only exception is in English 7 where, for some reason, special attention is paid to the practice of the two skills: listening and speaking. Overall, the time and space allotted in the textbooks and in the curriculum for each language skill is not equal. Little opportunity is provided through the materials to develop the listening skill, and as the textbooks progress to higher level, more opportunity is provided to develop the reading skill but less is devoted to the speaking skill. This is perhaps because of the backwash effect of the structural end-of-level graduation examination on textbook design and methodology. The allocations are represented in Table 27:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English 6</th>
<th>English 7</th>
<th>English 8</th>
<th>English 9</th>
<th>English 10</th>
<th>English 11</th>
<th>English 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking</strong></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the 1997 government goals document (MOET, 1997) suggests a greater orientation towards the communicative approach, these earlier textbook activities largely focus on conscious and analytical study of structure.

**Exploring the use of materials in Vietnamese secondary schools**

Language classroom activity everywhere addresses a similar goal — the development of linguistic skill and understanding. Materials, as documents for language learning activity, are important components in achieving this goal. Technically, they provide potential learning opportunity in the form of exposure to and practice in the language and they can be evaluated for the quality of that potential.

In use, however, materials become a component in complex individual cognitive processes and group social processes. Cognitively, individual factors such as
personality, motivation and prior experience will determine the ways in which the learning opportunities are taken up by the learner. One would also expect, however, the uptake of learning opportunities to be affected by the ways in which they are presented in the classroom — the emphasis that is given to certain elements, the degree to which the activities are explicitly related to the student’s motivation, the guidance given on how to use the materials in class and at home and so on. All classroom activity, whether learning-focused or not, is culturally-based. That is to say, it builds on role-relationships, expectations and routines that have resonances with other events in the community (Coleman, 1996b). We need to understand this cultural level in order to fully appreciate the design and use of materials.

We have therefore at least three levels of materials analysis. The first level is materials as a set of potential learning opportunities. Description at this level is presented above in the section entitled The materials. The second level is materials in use by the individual — how the individual processes materials, remembers vocabulary, absorbs patterns as a part of an emerging system of grammar. The third level is materials in use by a group of learners under the leadership of a teacher — how the learning opportunities are mediated by the teacher as a classroom manager and as a leader in learning.

This section is concerned principally with this third level of analysis. What information is needed in order to guide the design of new materials or the design of in-service teacher training courses? In either case, it would be difficult to instigate change without a clear and shared understanding of what role materials currently play in the learning process, what learning opportunities are made salient and what expectations the teachers and students have of materials. What information about materials use is likely to be relevant to those concerned with instigating change in the teaching of English? There are materials evaluation frameworks (Candlin and Breen, 1979; Breen and Candlin, 1987; Dougill, 1987; Sheldon, 1988; Littlejohn, 1998) but our emphasis is on simply describing what happens rather than evaluating how well it works. The aim is to understand how learning opportunities in the materials are activated in the classroom. In our research into the use of materials in classrooms, there are four general questions that have been identified as relevant to the purpose. These questions are listed below:

- Are the textbook materials used as a script or a resource?
- What are the dominant teacher/learner preferences amongst given learning activities?
- In what ways do teachers select from, modify or supplement the current materials?
- What is the role of materials in setting work to be done individually — at home and at school?

Each of these questions will be dealt with in turn.

*Are the textbook materials used as a script or a resource?*

This is an important question about the role of materials in the classroom event. Materials are used as a *script* when they dictate the order and content of what is to be covered. The teacher typically works through one activity after another in the textbook and although some variations from the script may occur, the result is nevertheless a linear coverage of the agenda set by the book. Materials are used as a *resource* when a
teacher follows a different agenda, perhaps working towards the goals of a syllabus, or
goals deriving from difficulties experienced by learners. In doing that, the teacher
draws on whatever parts of the materials are likely to help achieve the goals in hand.

It is the experience of one of the authors of this paper that the dominant model of
materials use in Vietnam is a materials-as-script model. This is partly a result of MOET
directives that do not officially allow deviation from the materials. Using the materials
as a script is a way of ensuring minimal standards and decreasing the burden on teacher
decision-making.

Whether materials are used as a script or a resource is obviously important for a
materials designer or teacher trainer. The limitation of working from a script is that the
activity can easily become divorced from the process of learning. One outcome may
be, therefore, that script-like materials include a considerable amount of advice (for
teachers and learners) on how to exploit the activities fully for learning. Teacher notes
might include greater information on how the order of a unit might be modified, or
what might be left out, and why.

*What are the dominant teacher/learner preferences amongst given learning activities?*
An understanding of teacher and learner preferences for learning activity within the
current range of activities in the materials is likely to indicate which activities work
smoothly within the cultural context of Vietnamese secondary classrooms, whether
teacher and learner preferences are similar or not. Obviously this information does not
directly inform materials writers what types of activities should predominate in
materials — this kind of decision has to be made with reference to current research on
language learning and the activity that appears to promote it.

Nonetheless, it is useful to know which activities are the most popular and why. Such
information tells us something about beliefs and motivation: what type of activities
appear to contribute to a sense of self-efficacy or enjoyment in the learners, what
activities fall within the teacher’s perception of his or her role and expertise, which
activities match teachers’ beliefs about language learning. It would reveal whether or
not there is a dominant ‘learning style’ (Reid, 1995; Willing, 1988). A broad
understanding of participants’ preferred activity in the teaching-learning process is
essential before introducing new components in the process.

*In what ways do teachers select from, modify or supplement the current materials?*
The ways in which teachers voluntarily modify or supplement materials is a further
indicator of their own preferences and, if their choices are not simply based on
tradition and routine, their own beliefs about language learning. Any deviation from the
norm is likely to reveal something of these beliefs or of the cultural and social
imperatives of managing a group of up to 50 learners, of the teachers’ own confidence
level, of the learners’ response and commitment and a range of other dimensions of
learning in groups.

This information is likely to reveal how materials can serve or be made to serve a
purpose and what that purpose is. Once again, this is useful initial information in
writing new materials. One of the most frequently cited reasons for projects not
working is that the participants are working at cross-purposes. For teaching materials
to work effectively, they must carry the users along in working towards a shared and
transparent purpose. The reasons for modifications give some insight into the current
purposes.
What is the role of materials in setting work to be done individually — at home and at school?

The relationship between work done in lock-step classroom activity and work done individually in the classroom or at home is likely to indicate something of the teaching-learning dynamic from a teacher's perspective. It is possible that the shift between individual or lockstep activity is somewhat random, or occurs when a change of pace or social dynamic in the classroom is called for. Similarly, homework can simply be work that is not finished in the classroom. On the other hand, it is possible that the teacher believes that some work is better done individually for some good pedagogical or cultural reason.

Whether the choice is random or based on specific beliefs about learning, materials writers and teacher trainers are in a stronger position when they understand the processes better. The link between collaborative learning and the cognitive outcomes for individuals is a key factor in institutional learning. Materials can influence how this is done.

Conclusion

What is outlined above is an initial set of questions for collecting field information about the role of materials in a specific teaching context. The answers to the questions are intended to provide valuable perspectives for materials designers and in-service teacher trainers. The framework will be used in collecting data from two schools in Hue, using observations, questionnaires and interviews. There are, of course, limitations in generalising from a small sample to Vietnamese secondary schools in general. This is not the intention, although a wider follow-up study by questionnaire would be an interesting second stage. The outcome is intended to be a small window on practice in two representative provincial schools. The information gathered should provide a useful vignette of the culture of Vietnamese classrooms: the beliefs, preferences and practices of teachers and students in relation to language learning and what the role of materials is, and could be, in supporting learning within or beyond the status quo.