1 The linguistic landscape of Vietnam

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country and a multilingual society, with 54 different ethnic groups who speak more than 100 different languages (Ethnologue: Languages of the world 2015). Among them, ethnic Viet (or Kinh) constitute 85.8% of the population, or nearly 73.6 million people, while the 53 other ethnic minority groups represent 14.2%, or nearly 11 million people (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2009). Some of the largest minority groups have a population of 1–1.5 million people, including the Tày, Thội, Muong, Khmer, and H’mong. Relatively smaller groups are the Nùng, Hoa, and Dao, with between 700,000–900,000 people. The rest display considerably smaller numbers, with some as few as around 300 people, such as the Bràu and Ođu. The majority of the dominant Kinh reside in inland deltas and coastal areas and speak Vietnamese. Ethnic minorities, in contrast, mostly live in mountainous or highland areas and speak a variety of languages. Among them, 47 are categorised as ‘vigorous’ (used sustainably for face-to-face communication by all generations), including Brao, Caolan, Coong, etc.; 15 are ‘developing’ (used vigorously with some literature formed but not yet widespread), such as Khmer, Lao, Banar, Bru, H’mong Daw; 32 are ‘threatened’ (used widely by all generations but losing their users), including Cham, Tay, Chinese (as later generations of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam tend to speak Vietnamese as their first language), among others; five are ‘shifting’ (used among child-bearing generations but not transmitting to their children); and five are ‘dying’, including Arem, Gelao Green/Red/White, and Tay Boi.

Despite this linguistic diversity, the Vietnamese language has no rival and is the dominant and most widely spoken language in modern Vietnam. This may be because it is the language of the majority Kinh people who are ethnically homogenous and have significant political and economic influence over the country (Imai, Gaiha, & Kang 2011; L. H. Phan, Vu, & Bao 2014). Other explanations for the current strength of Vietnamese, according to M. H. Le and O’Harrow (2007), are (i) the resistance of Vietnamese people to a reliance on colonial languages such as Chinese or French in earlier historical periods, and (ii) the successful embedding of the language in all formal domains of contemporary life, such as education, technology, and law.

Ethnic minority languages, though acknowledged, play a much less important role. They are mainly spoken within confined ethnic minority communities. Some of the characteristics of these
languages that have rendered teaching and learning them difficult are the non-proportionate numbers of speakers among different languages and the lack of written scripts for several languages (T. G. Nguyen 2006).

In terms of foreign languages, due to the increasing involvement of Vietnam in regional and international economic and sociocultural activities, English has today become the most popular foreign language in Vietnam. Other languages are learnt and used to a lesser extent. Apart from many long-established European languages such as French, Russian, German, and Spanish, Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are also receiving growing interest.

2 Early language education policies

2.1 Language education policy in the early history

For a long time in its early history, Vietnam was seen as having no language of its own (Do 1996). The history of constant conflicts with colonial powers deprived the country of the right condition for its national language to emerge and develop (Do 1996: 31). With almost one millennium under Chinese domination from 179 B.C. to 938 A.D., Chinese language and its ideographic writing system was adopted as the official language of the country (Pham 1994). Nevertheless, the Vietnamese people were able to devise their own written form for their language using Chinese characters and called it chữ Nôm, which means the language of the South [of China], implying Vietnam (K. Phan 1932). Although chữ Nôm was based on Chinese characters to represent Vietnamese, it was not intelligible to the Chinese. Thus, it was considered as an instance of the people’s resistance to the hegemony of Chinese language to protect its indigenous culture from Chinese influence (Lo Bianco 1994: 112). However, with the growing influence from European priests and from the French in the late 19th century, chữ Nôm as well as the Chinese characters were finally abolished and replaced by Quốc ngữ (literally means national language), a Roman alphabetic writing system with diacritic markers to mark tones and pronunciation. It was invented by European missionaries led by Alexandre d’Rhodes, and is still in use today to represent the modern Vietnamese language.

2.2 Language education policy during French colonisation

Beginning as early as 1858, French soldiers advanced into Vietnam and one hundred years later, Vietnam remained under the rule of the French colonialists. The French colonialists made French the official language in Vietnam, the medium of instruction at all school levels (Lo Bianco 1994). They also promoted Quốc ngữ as the official written form of Vietnamese, and used Quốc ngữ to get rid of the Chinese legacy and to facilitate access to French language (Do 2006; Lam 2011). Nevertheless, the main aim of the language education policy in this period was to train the native Vietnamese to work for the French colonial government and to transmit French values into the Vietnamese society. School curricula designed and set up by French administrators were “not focused on learning about France, but on learning Vietnamese history, geography, and society from a French perspective” (Sullivan, 1996: 54). Therefore, compared to French, Quốc ngữ had secondary status. It was only taught at school, ironically, as “a foreign language” (Lo Bianco 1994: 113) because it was not used for official documents or classroom instruction. Any attempt to emphasise the teaching of Quốc ngữ in place of French, like in the case of Đông Kinh Nghia Thục (Tonkin Free School), an institution established by Vietnamese intellectuals that emphasised Quốc ngữ and represented Vietnamese resistance to French rule, was considered as an act of rebellion (Buttinger 1969). As remarked by Lo Bianco (1994: 113), this colonial
language education policy resulted in a social division between those who spoke French at the top echelon of the society and the laypersons who spoke Vietnamese.

Ethnic minority languages underwent a similar kind of policy during this period. The French were reported to have created Latinised scripts to facilitate the teaching of some minority languages in the Central Highlands of Vietnam such as Êđê, Ba Na, and Jarai, while depriving ethnic minority people of the right to learn Vietnamese (T. G. Nguyen 2006). Their aim was to expand French influence and impede inter-ethnic solidarity by limiting communication between the different ethnic groups in the country.

### 2.3 Language education policy during a divided Vietnam

Although it has been the most commonly spoken language in Vietnam for centuries, Vietnamese did not become the medium of instruction until after 1945, when Vietnam claimed independence from the French (Denham 1992; Do 2006; Wright 2002). The first President of an independent Vietnam at that time – Ho Chi Minh – sought to fight illiteracy by investing in education. It was at this point that Vietnamese, represented by the Romanised Quốc ngữ, officially became the national language for Vietnam and the medium of instruction at all school levels (Ministry of Education 1990), in lieu of French. However, French was still taught as an additional language by Vietnamese teachers, using French texts (Lo Bianco 1994). In fact, during the fight with the French colonialists from 1945 to 1954, French was still used officially in French-controlled urban areas whereas Vietnamese was promoted in Vietnam-led rural regions (Do 2006). After the Geneva Accords in 1954, the French war ended. Vietnam was divided into the Communist North and the Nationalist South, making the landscape of language education policy more complex. As a result of aid and influence from communist countries in the North, Russian and Chinese became popular foreign languages. The first foreign language school in Vietnam was established in 1958 to teach these languages (Tran 2008 cited in Lam 2011: 43). The North government also issued Order 43 TTg in 1968 to stipulate that either Russian or Chinese was to be learnt intensively at university level.

Meanwhile in the South, with the involvement of American troops after the French were defeated in the battle of Dien Bien Phu (which began in the middle of March and ended in May, 1954), English was required to be taught as an obligatory foreign language at school and university levels (T. L. Nguyen 2006). As early as 1955, many US advisers were sent to the South to train soldiers as part of US involvement in southern Vietnam during the war. From 1957, English education started to develop as continuous assistance was supplied to South Vietnam through one of the earliest government-supported agencies in Vietnam, the USAID (Wright 2002). The presence of American specialists, soldiers, business people, missionaries, and the free supply of textbooks and teaching materials helped to bring about the mushrooming of English language schools in the South. One noticeable feature of language education policy during this time is the contrasting nature of teaching and learning foreign language in a divided Vietnam. In the South, English was taught as a living language with a high integration of the cultural and political aspects of the language. A bilingual use of both English and Vietnamese was mandatory for all government documents in the South during this period. However, in the North, foreign languages were mainly taught for instrumental purposes and with a limited scope. The most widely taught foreign language, Russian, was mostly taught as a school subject, whereas Quốc ngữ, or Vietnamese, was strongly upheld to strengthen national independence and identity (L. H. Phan et al. 2014).

Regarding language education for ethnic minorities, from the first years of gaining independence, the Communist North government had astutely attached importance to promoting
equal language rights among all ethnic groups, considering this a crucial principle for establishing national unification and prosperity. The 1946 Constitution stated that ethnic minority people had the right to study in their native languages. In contrast, the Southern government continued to employ colonial policies towards ethnic minority languages. They either forced ethnic minorities to learn Vietnamese only, as in the case of the Ngo Dinh Diem’s administration (1955–1963), or allowed education in ethnic minority languages, as documented during Nguyen Van Thieu’s presidency (1965–1975), but mainly to disseminate Catholic doctrines and propagandise against the Communist government (T. G. Nguyen 2006).

In summary, this period of time witnesses a major shift in the country’s language education as Vietnamese became the national language and French was side-lined after Vietnam claimed its independence. In 1954, the French colonialists were defeated and then French was reduced to minimal presence, especially in the North. However, in South Vietnam, although English quickly gained its popularity, French remained an influential language. The reason was that French political and economic aid to the South still continued and many French-educated people held important government positions (Do 2006).

In addition, the sharp difference in language education policy in Vietnam during this time reflects political division and hostility within a divided Vietnam, making the country an interesting instance of “language learning as a barometer of ideological identification” (Wright 2012: 115). It also reflects the global chasm in educational, cultural activities, and communicative need between the Soviet Union-led communist bloc and the US-led capitalist bloc. Language education policy was thus governed by political worldviews and the relationship between the country and its allies.

### 2.4 Language education policy after reunification and Đổi Mới

In 1975, the two opposing parts of Vietnam were reunified as the South Vietnamese administration was overthrown by North Vietnamese forces. The unified central government of Vietnam aimed to renovate the country’s economy by implementing the open-door market-oriented policy in 1986 (known as Đổi Mới). At the same time, an emphasis was placed on strengthening national sovereignty and solidarity. One of the measures for this was to promote Vietnamese and its written form Quốc ngữ as an indispensable means of communication among different ethnic groups across the country (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1980 cited in T. G. Nguyen 2006a). Vietnamese continued to be used as the medium of instruction starting from primary education. Moreover, to ensure ethnic equality rights, language education policy in this period stressed the importance of educating ethnic minority people, especially in their native languages. In 1980, seven ethnic minority languages were selected to be taught in general education nationwide, based on the availability of a written script and teacher and textbook resources (Truong 2011). Ethnic minority language education, however, experienced a downturn in the following ten or 15 years due to insufficient resources (ibid.: 7).

The shifting political landscape also brought about changes in foreign language education policy. The thrill of victory over the American imperialists was reflected in the extreme policy of burning and binning English and French textbooks and other related materials in an effort to get rid of colonialist and imperialist legacies in the early 1980s (Long & Kendall 1981). As a result, both of these languages were removed from the curriculum, and “those who learnt them clandestinely could be punished and were immediately suspected of preparing to leave the country” (Wright 2002: 115). After that, “as part of political and educational alliances with the Soviet Union, Russian was required to be the main foreign language” (Do 2006: 5). According to Denham (1992), the targets set for foreign language education at high school at that time
were: 60% studying Russian, 25% studying English, and 15% studying French. It was also noted that Chinese almost disappeared from the language education landscape during this time, after Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia and a border clash between Vietnam and China in 1979 (Wright 2002). Russian became the most widely taught foreign language in the country. Many teachers and students were annually sent to the former Soviet Union to study Russian, both at undergraduate and graduate level. A New York journalist, Seth Mydans, reported in 1995 that “more than 100,000 Vietnamese workers and 3,000 students were in the Soviet Union at any one time.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Vietnam turned outward and Russian quickly became a ‘dead language’ for most Vietnamese. The replacement of Russian by English was triggered by a substantial withdrawal of Soviet support and greater public interest in English as a result of accumulating foreign investments (Do 2006). A generation of Russian teachers were suddenly left with hardly any students to teach. Many of them were retrained to teach English.

In the meantime, English worked its way to fill in the gap left by Russian. It was true that after the country unification, along with the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, English gave way to Russian. But soon afterwards, following Đổi Mới, English re-emerged as the most widely used language, even though Russian was still strongly promoted by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Do 2006: 7). English was said to be “triumphantly re-incarnated” (T. N. T. Bui & T. M. H. Nguyen 2015: 364) from the language of enmity (i.e. spoken by the Americans during Vietnam War) into the language of amity, hope, and aspiration for the vast majority of Vietnamese people. In the early 1990s, the government was believed to adopt the policy to have no policy on foreign language learning, leaving space for market driving force and learners’ right to choose the language(s) they wanted to study. And English became the top choice. This resulted in the ascendancy of English learning movement in nation-wide level and the government’s official acknowledgement of English.

3 Language education policies in the 21st century

Language education policies in contemporary Vietnam reflect the current status of the languages spoken in the country. They can be categorised according to three main areas: (i) policies for Vietnamese – the national language, (ii) rules and regulations regarding language education for ethnic minority people, and (iii) policies pertaining to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, among which English takes a primary position.

3.1 Language education policies for Vietnamese

As the de facto national language and the language of the majority Kinh, Vietnamese assumes utmost importance in the country’s education. According to the Vietnam Education Law, “Vietnamese is the official medium of instruction in the public school system and other educational organisations in the country” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2005). At school level, Vietnamese is used to teach all science and social science courses. Vietnamese Studies subjects are also core components of the national curriculum, some examples of which include Vietnamese, Vietnamese literature, and Vietnamese composition. In these courses, students learn about the phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary of Vietnamese; they also work with well-written Vietnamese poetry and prose, as well as learn to write fluently in the language.

In recent years, the status of the Vietnamese language has, however, been challenged due to the increasing prevalence and expanding influence of foreign languages. A rising number of privately and foreign owned educational organisations are currently in operation in Vietnam,
most of whom have chosen English as a medium of instruction (EMI) over Vietnamese (D. M. Le 2012; Vu & Burns 2014). While this helps to improve students’ English competence and enhance their competitiveness in the global job market, it threatens the role of the Vietnamese language. The reason is a number of EMI students have been reported to identify less with their native language and culture due to the lack of contact with Vietnamese in their learning environment (D. M. Le 2012). To tackle this, the Vietnamese government rules, in an administrative document on international cooperation in education, that Vietnamese students attending international schools at all levels must take Vietnamese and Vietnamese Studies as part of their compulsory subjects (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) 2012). The weekly amount of time dedicated to these subjects varies between 70 minutes to 140 minutes depending on the level of schooling. The goals are to establish and develop students’ Vietnamese language skills, as well as nurture their understanding and love for the language and culture of their motherland.

While the prioritisation of Vietnamese comes as given to a majority of the country’s population who belong to the dominant ethnic group, this is not the case for ethnic minority people whose native language is not Vietnamese. Along with preserving their right to conduct education in their native languages (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2013), the government strongly encourages ethnic minorities to learn Vietnamese from primary education. Such practice is instrumental in facilitating communication between different ethnic groups, thus strengthening the linguistic and cultural connection and bridging the long-held economic gap between minority people and the majority Kinh (B. C. Tran 2014; World Bank 2009). Nevertheless, the centralised implementation of this policy, in which most minority learners are taught in Vietnamese from Grade 1 of primary school, and learn their mother tongue only as a supplementary subject, has to a great extent overshadowed non-dominant minority languages. Consequently, some ethnic minority children in Vietnam might be found to be more literate in Vietnamese than in their mother tongues, as in the case of the ethnic Hoa, Muong, and Tay (Kosonen 2009). Also, the early enforcement of Vietnamese as the medium of instruction appears to disadvantage minority students as they have to acquire scientific knowledge in a language they are not yet proficient in. This has been reported to cause high dropout and failure rates among ethnic minority school-goers (Kosonen 2006; World Bank 2009).

Clearly, the language education policy of Vietnam places pronounced emphasis on the role of Vietnamese in both public and private educational sectors nationwide, even to the extent that it has threatened the status of minority languages. This could be attributed to the developmental history of the Vietnamese language, as delineated in earlier sections of the chapter. Despite occupying a lower status than Chinese and French during colonial times, Vietnamese was still considered to have developed and flourished as “the vehicle of local culture” (Goh & B. Nguyen 2004: 344). This identity-building characteristic played a crucial role in sustaining the country through foreign invasion and maintaining its sovereignty (L. H. Phan et al. 2014). Continuing reinforcement of Vietnamese as a medium of instruction therefore reflects the government’s vision regarding the power of the Vietnamese language in maintaining and strengthening the country’s national identity and security.

### 3.2 Language education policies for ethnic minority languages

As a continuation of ethnic minority language policy in the period after Đôi Mới, in the current era ethnic minority people in Vietnam are also given the choice to undergo formal education in their native languages. The aims are to “preserve and enhance cultural identity, and assist ethnic minority students in better acquiring scientific knowledge” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2005). These policies are judicious and appropriate as they are in line with current radical
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principles of language instruction, which embrace linguistic diversity and support the legitimacy of mother tongue-based education (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas 2011; Kirkpatrick 2012; Panda & Mohanty 2015). Also, in the context of Vietnam, they serve to encourage the preservation and development of less dominant languages, thus securing the country’s linguistic and cultural diversity and enhancing the socioeconomic status of ethnic minority Vietnamese.

Nevertheless, at the level of implementation, government policies on ethnic minority language education are liable to criticism. The few studies and reports on this topic (see Kosonen 2009, 2013; T. D. Tran 2002) have noted that although support for minority languages is evident in policy documents, it fails to be fully implemented in practice. Specifically, N.Y. Nguyen (1993) points out that “the Party and the state policies mostly remained in the form of ideologies or principles, and lacked detailed action plans that work specifically for each area and ethnicity” (p. 30). This lack of adequate and practical plans is further intensified given that ethnic minority Vietnamese tend to live in mixed communities where different native languages are spoken, making it difficult to select one minority language as the medium of education (Kosonen 2005; V. K. Nguyen 2009). Additionally, some minority languages do not have their own scripts, and thus cannot be taught formally. All of this has led to the disappearance of mother tongue education in some provinces such as Nghe An, Son La, and Tuyen Quang, where the minority languages of the Thai, Nung, and Tay people used to be taught (T. D. Tran 2002).

In provinces where minority language education has taken place, the three models that have been implemented include (i) simultaneous introduction of Vietnamese and ethnic minority languages as media of instruction; (ii) Vietnamese as the core language of instruction, ethnic minority languages as supplementary; and (iii) ethnic minority languages as core, and Vietnamese introduced from Grade 3 (T. N. D. Bui & V. T. Bui 2009). Critically speaking, the first two models have not been effective in enhancing the language proficiency of minority students (see Kosonen 2004), as in these models they have to either struggle to operate with two languages at the same time (model one), or lack exposure and practice with their mother tongues (model two).

A recent pilot programme conducted by MOET in collaboration with UNICEF in the three provinces of Lao Cai, Gia Lai, and Tra Vinh, which describes itself as following a mother tongue-based bilingual education (model three), was more progressive in that minority languages are the medium of instruction at preschool, Grade 1, and Grade 2 levels. From Grades 3 to 5, Vietnamese is introduced and becomes the language of instruction alongside the mother tongues. The goal is that after completing Grade 5, students will obtain basic reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills in both languages and overcome the language barrier. This is what Skutnabb-Kangas (2009: 4) terms an “early-exit transitional program.” Following this model, students’ initial learning results in the period from 2008 to 2010 were considerably positive. Particularly, 89% of students reached or exceeded the benchmark grade for Vietnamese proficiency, and 85% reached that for their mother tongues, which are Mong, Jarai, and Khmer (MOET & UNICEF 2010). MOET therefore has planned to modify and expand this model to other ethnic minority communities. However, experience from other multilingual contexts suggests that in due course these early-exit transitional programmes might not be the most beneficial for minority children. Research conducted in India, Nepal, and the US has shown that participants of these programmes were rarely able to achieve native-like proficiency in the dominant language, nor have an adequate command of their native language (see Collier & Thomas 2002; Ajit K. Mohanty 2008; A. K. Mohanty 2009). Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) therefore advocates that minority children be educated in their mother tongues for at least the first six to eight years of schooling, as this will result in better general study achievements and long-term commitment to learning. This argument will be revisited in the conclusion of this chapter.
3.3 Foreign language education policies in Vietnam

Vietnam currently maintains diplomatic relationships with more than 180 countries in the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015), and has established economic partnerships with over 220 foreign markets. The Education Law clearly specifies, “compulsory foreign languages included in the national curriculum are those commonly used in international transactions” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2005). This policy demonstrates proper awareness of the close-knit connection between language learning demands and national economic and social development. Since 1994, English, French, Russian, and Chinese have been considered by the government as the four main foreign languages to be taught at primary and secondary levels (H. Bui 2005). The following section provides a brief overview of the education policies for these languages.

English is promoted as the most important foreign language across all levels of Vietnamese education. A recently launched national project entitled “Teaching and learning foreign languages in the public education system from 2008 to 2020” (henceforth Project 2020) specifies that “English is the foreign language to be taught and learnt in public educational organisations, among others” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2008). English is a mandatory subject across the Vietnamese public school system from Grades 6 to 12 of secondary education. At primary level, since 1996 it has been introduced as a subject from Grade 3 in many provinces, and is expected to become compulsory for all third-graders nationwide in the near future (T. N. T. Bui & T. M. H. Nguyen 2015). At tertiary level, English can be learnt as a major or a subject (see Hoang 2010). English major students can study for a bachelor, master, or doctoral degree in English linguistics or English teaching. As a subject, English is learnt by non-English major students for a few hours weekly, accounting for 10% to 12% of their total credit hours. This broadening adoption of English contributes to increasing public awareness of the importance of English competence in the current globalised era, as well as improving the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam. Nonetheless, it entails issues concerning the inadequacy of policy implementation, such as the lack of learning facilities and materials, shortage of qualified teachers, out-dated methods of assessments, or improper implementation of EMI. Detailed discussion of these key issues concerning English education policy in Vietnam will be provided in subsequent sections of this chapter.

French is the second most widely taught foreign language in Vietnam, starting from primary school level. This results from the country’s historical and cultural involvement with France, and its membership in the International Organisation of La Francophonie (IOF) since 1970. The language has an estimated number of learners totalling 120,000 (Embassy of France in Hanoi 2009), among which around 52,000 study French as their first foreign language, 45,000 as their second foreign language (together with English), nearly 15,000 use French as a medium of instruction in science and technology courses, while the remaining 1,600 are estimated to specialise in French (kèp chuyên Pháp). Although much more modest in terms of popularity in comparison with English learning, French is expected to receive continuous support from education policy makers and will continue to be taught in the formal school system of Vietnam in the near future.

The current and future status of Russian, in contrast, is less secure. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian has gradually been replaced by English in public education. As of 2015, only one secondary school and 11 high schools nationwide offer Russian as a subject; seven foreign language colleges and universities have Russian as a major, and 22 offer Russian as a foreign language (compared to 93 in previous years) (Branch of Pushkin State Russian Language Institute 2015). A recent national conference on “Innovating the teaching and learning of Russian at educational and training organisations in Vietnam”, held as part of Project
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2020, has pointed out several drawbacks of Russian teaching in Vietnam in the last 20 years, such as limited contact hours, out-dated learning materials, and the lack of well-qualified teachers. Suggestions have also been made regarding innovations, including reintroducing Russian from secondary school level, redesigning textbooks, or increasing the number of Russian language teachers. These initial measures reflect the government’s desire to re-establish the role of Russian in the landscape of foreign language education in Vietnam. The aim is to keep pace with increasingly stronger economic cooperation between the nation and Russian-speaking countries in recent years.

Finally, Chinese receives major policy attention mainly because of the closeness between the Vietnamese and Chinese languages and cultures, as well as strengthening economic, cultural, and educational relations with China. Many tertiary institutions specialising in foreign language education in Vietnam have Chinese language and cultural studies as a major. However, at lower levels, the teaching of Chinese has only been delivered in a limited number of schools, mostly in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and suffers largely from the lack of a systematically designed syllabus (Ho Chi Minh City University of Education 2015). Under the enactment of Project 2020, MOET proposed a national Chinese curriculum for secondary and high school students (MOET 2013b); nevertheless, to date the programme has not yet been implemented. Most recently, Chinese and Russian have been proposed to become one of the compulsory foreign languages for school students as part of Project 2020 (MOET 2016).

A relatively similar case applies to Japanese and Korean, two other Asian languages that have recently appealed to Vietnamese learners. They have only been sporadically taught in the public-school system (MOET 2013a). Also, the teaching and learning of other foreign languages such as Arabic, German, Italian, Spanish, or Thai are rare and generally limited to university level, due to a lower learner demand for them.

In summary, state policies on foreign language education in Vietnam foreground the primary status of English and demonstrate the government’s determination in encouraging their citizens to learn and speak an additional foreign language to meet the communicative demands of a highly integrated global economy. This signifies a sensible approach toward reinforcing multilingualism and strengthening the competitiveness of Vietnamese people in the global job market in terms of language competence, and resisting an over-reliance on English (H. Bui 2005; V. K. Nguyen 2009).

4 Current issues with English education policy in Vietnam

As previously stated, in Vietnamese education English is currently taught as a subject at school level; it is also increasingly used as a medium of instruction at privately owned international schools and in selected study programmes at a number of public universities. For both of these functions, the adoption of English is guided by corresponding government policies. This discussion focuses on current English education policy in Vietnam under the enactment of the National Foreign Language Project and identifies major emerging issues with regard to primary English education, teacher qualifications, assessment practices, and the implementation of English as a medium of instruction.

Project 2020, which was derived from rising societal and governmental concerns about the low English proficiency level of Vietnamese learners (see T. N. Nguyen 2011; Nunan 2003), is to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system. With an estimated total cost of approximately US$500 million, the ultimate goal of the project is to impact human resource development and professional skills through an emphasis on foreign language proficiency so that by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth who graduate
from vocational schools, colleges, and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently, to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multicultural environment with a variety of languages, serving the cause of industrialisation and modernisation for the country (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2008).

Specifically, the project aims to implement a ten-year education programme in which students begin learning foreign languages, particularly English, from Grade 3 of primary school. This started as a pilot programme in academic year 2010–2011 for 20% of third-graders nationwide, and targets toward reaching 100% in 2018–2019. Foreign languages are also expected to be included in all vocational and university curricula by the end of 2020.

To realise these objectives, stronger state investments in the teaching and learning of English are underway. Teachers and students have been equipped with better facilities for learning English; new textbook series that cater better to students’ learning needs are being developed; individualised frameworks of competency have been devised to better reflect the teaching and learning abilities of Vietnamese teachers and learners of English; and English teachers have been given more opportunities to take part in language proficiency enhancement and professional development activities (see Dudzik & T. N. Q. Nguyen 2015; Mai 2014; MOET 2014). Given its long-term vision and initial achievements, the project is unequivocally a timely major reform effort by the government to improve its citizens’ foreign language competence. Its enactment has also prompted English teachers and learners and Vietnamese people in general to face and seek solutions to several long-standing problems related to English language teaching in the country.

The project’s execution, however, reveals several limitations. Empirical studies on English education in Vietnam in the duration of Project 2020 have unveiled several policy-related issues, firstly with primary English teaching. Specifically, the switch to the early teaching of English has found the education system unprepared. Many primary English teachers were not trained to teach English to young learners. Thus, they were observed to use teaching methods that were adult-oriented, predominantly form-focused, and heavily reliant on choral drilling and repetition techniques (see Mai 2014; T. M. H. Nguyen 2001a). This was because most teacher colleges in Vietnam had previously focused exclusively on training English teachers for adolescent and adult levels, as there was no demand for primary English then.

The same situation applies for primary English materials. While the early introduction of English receives strong support from teachers, students, and their parents (T. M. H. Nguyen 2011a), a lack of proper and systematic preparation of resources appears to impact negatively on policy outcomes. Particularly, locally designed textbooks do not improve much over time in terms of teaching approach, and lack attractiveness. Commercial materials designed for international audience such as Let’s go, a textbook published by Oxford University Press, is still a preferred choice in many schools (see T. M. H. Nguyen 2011). These problems arguably derive from the gap between a policy shift and resources available to accommodate this shift, reflecting a well-known circumstance in language planning, that “the education sector is often under-resourced for the tasks it fulfils” (Kaplan & Baldauf 2009: 609).

Another important policy issue is the “massive retraining” of English teachers to enhance their proficiency levels. In an English proficiency test delivered by MOET to English teachers in 30 provinces in Vietnam in 2011, 97% of high school English teachers and 93% of those teaching English at secondary and primary level failed to achieve the desired proficiency benchmarks set by MOET, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Dudzik & T. N. Q. Nguyen 2015). The CEFR is a six-level framework commonly used to describe achievements of foreign language learners across Europe, and has recently been adopted to assess the English abilities of Vietnamese teachers and learners of English. Accordingly, Vietnamese high school English teachers are required to be at the C1 level (‘effective operational proficiency or
advanced’), and secondary and primary teachers at B2 (‘vantage or upper-intermediate’). Due to their low initial test results, since 2012 English teachers at school levels across the country have been required to take English language enhancement courses provided by MOET. Five universities are assigned as flagship regional language centres to take charge of teacher ‘re-education’ (Dudzik & T. N. Q. Nguyen 2015; V. C. Le 2015). After these intensive short courses, which normally last from four to six weeks, teachers are expected to pass CEFR-based tests corresponding to the levels required of them.

The government’s decision to invest in enhancing the language competence of English teachers is a judicious step toward improving the quality of its English education in general. Nonetheless, both teachers under training and educational observers have been reported to express apprehension toward the CEFR-based levels prescribed for English teachers, claiming that these benchmarks are likely beyond teachers’ ability, especially for those in rural areas (V. C. Le 2015; V. C. Le & Do 2012). Additionally, a number of teachers have stated that the language enhancement courses they took were mostly geared toward getting them to pass CEFR tests, rather than providing what they needed for their job (e.g. improving pronunciation in the case of primary teachers) (see Mai 2014). There is thus little guarantee that teachers’ language proficiency will significantly improve after the retraining programmes, even when they have passed the tests to reach required competency levels.

Evaluation policy in English education in Vietnam also deserves discussion. English is a compulsory subject in the national examination for high school graduation, which gives it high priority in comparison with other subjects in the curriculum. However, many English tests, from classroom level to national English proficiency standardised ones, have excessively focused on gauging students’ competence on grammar, vocabulary, and mastery of reading and writing skills, leaving out assessment of important communicative skills such as listening and speaking. H. P. Tran (2014) studied the validity of the Vietnam national university entrance examination English test (UEE), and found that, while the test was reliable, the lack of items measuring productive skills has led to negative washback. Particularly, many teachers and learners at secondary and upper-secondary levels decided to skip the practice of listening and speaking skills even though they were part of the curriculum, as these skills would not be tested. Such test design complies with the under-resourced condition of Vietnam, where there are often insufficient human resources and facilities to administer large-scale language tests. However, this is no excuse for not aiming toward more comprehensive tests that better reflect the current communicative approach toward teaching and learning English, especially those used at national level such as the UEE and the high school graduation test. Such a shift in assessment practice will have a positive influence on the teaching and learning of English in the school system (T. M. H. Nguyen 2011; H. P. Tran 2014).

Regarding the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), the government has granted permission for the operation of several EMI schools and institutions. It is also part of Project 2020 that English will be used for teaching Mathematics at high school level in well-resourced areas. EMI will also be implemented in teaching final year students at some national and regional universities. This endorsement of EMI could be considered forward-looking. It contributes to improving the status of English, meeting the demand for an international education of Vietnamese students, as well as creating more opportunities for cooperation between Vietnamese institutions and other universities in the region and the world (H. T. Nguyen, Walkinshaw, & Pham 2017). However, it further demonstrates the inadequacy and unpreparedness of the Vietnamese education system. D. M. Le (2012), Vu and Burns (2014), and Nguyen et al. (2017) pointed out several difficulties faced by EMI lecturers and students in higher education in Vietnam. The first one is teachers’ insufficient language ability to teach content subjects in English as well as students’ low
English proficiency, which diminishes the effectiveness of English instruction. Second, differences between the Asian-oriented learning styles and the Western-based curricula used in EMI programmes make it challenging for Vietnamese students to make the best use of teaching and learning. Third, the high tuition fees for EMI programmes inadvertently create a socioeconomic gap between EMI students and those enrolled in traditional programmes. Finally, at the cultural level is the threat to national identity; students who have more contact with English than Vietnamese in their academic environment are likely to gradually identify less with the culture of their motherland.

At school level, despite not yet having been executed, the plan to teach Mathematics in English likely faces similar challenges regarding teachers’ and learners’ language proficiency and availability of teaching resources. The case of Malaysia, who switched to using English to teach science subjects from primary level in 2002, and reversed back to Bahasa Malaysia in 2009 (see Gill 2004, 2012), can be a good reference for Vietnam. The Malaysian government’s decision to switch back to the local language was based on empirical research that revealed discouraging study results of students learning science subjects in English, especially those from rural areas. Language policy in Malaysia is largely dictated by political interests of the ruling party (Gill 2012), which might not be entirely the case for Vietnam. Nonetheless, careful study of EMI implementation in a developing country that shares some commonalities in educational conditions such as Malaysia will be helpful in providing useful insights into the feasibility of EMI implementation at school level in Vietnam.

It is apparent that current English language education planning in Vietnam reflects a top-down approach toward language-in-education policy. Reform policies at macro level have not been translated well to practice at institutional and classroom levels (H. T. Nguyen et al. 2017). These centralised policies, which fail to take into consideration feedback from the community, such as teachers, students, parents, or administrators (T. M. H. Nguyen 2011), have resulted in mismatches between decisions made by policy-makers and what teachers and students actually need for improved teaching and learning performance. There is also the issue of resources, whereby policy goals are hard to reach within the intended time frame (by 2020) due to inadequate evaluation of the country’s physical and human resources.

5 Possible development and implications

Given the predominant emphasis on promoting Vietnamese as a medium of instruction and a subject in the public education system, it is highly likely that, in the future, the Vietnamese language will continue to be the country’s major language of instruction and communication. The main concern, however, is that the weight attached to the importance of Vietnamese in education policy might negatively affect the status of minority languages, as discussed previously in the chapter. More balanced language-in-education policies are thus needed so that Vietnamese will not thrive at the expense of less dominant languages. In the context of Vietnam, better language education for ethnic minority Vietnamese can be achieved if the government takes a more active role in individualising plans for promoting mother tongue-based education for minority children, taking into account geographical and cultural differences across ethnic groups. Among the key strategies are increasing the number of properly trained teachers who are fluent in both Vietnamese and a minority language, and developing sufficient materials for teaching school subjects in the students’ mother tongues, at least until the final year of primary education (Grade 5). This should be implemented in accordance with careful considerations of the linguistic characteristics and local use of different minority languages (V. K. Nguyen 2009).
With regard to foreign language education, English will likely continue to maintain its role as the key foreign language to be taught and learnt nationwide. Support for the early introduction of English from primary level is expected to increase, due to evidence of previous generations of learners failing to obtain an adequate level of English proficiency. This calls for the need to thoroughly revise the English curriculum, especially the primary English textbook series, in order to better accommodate the learning needs of a more demanding student population. To meet the rising demand for quality English teaching, teacher education programmes aimed toward training primary English teachers should be established in departments of English of state universities and colleges. Also, as the national foreign language project progresses to the later stages of its enactment, it is hoped that constructive criticisms from the public and educational researchers will be adequately considered, so that proper adjustments can be made. Moreover, it is crucial that continuous attention be paid toward enhancing the quality of English education, even after the lifespan of Project 2020.

Alongside English, demands for other foreign languages, especially Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are projected to rise, owing to increasingly stronger economic relations between these countries and Vietnam. The demand for French and Russian might remain stable, as these languages have long played an important part in the language education of Vietnam. In particular, the number of Russian learners might increase as a result of the government’s effort of re-establishing its importance in the public-school system. For all these languages, a larger amount of effort and more consistent, detailed plans are continually needed to enhance access to the teaching and learning of a wide range of foreign languages in the public education system apart from English, focusing centrally on areas of curriculum development, textbook design, and teacher training.

References

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Language education policy in Vietnam


Further reading


Further reading

Language & Culture Publications. (This book chapter offers some preliminary but meaningful observations on the early landscape of language education policy and its related problems in Vietnam.)