



Factors affecting teaching and learning English in Vietnamese universities

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Abstract

By conducting qualitative research inviting the voice of university students and recent graduates regarding the teaching and learning of English at tertiary level in Vietnam, this research aims to investigate the factors affecting the English teaching practices in Vietnamese universities. It is suggested that developing foreign language skills, especially English skills has become one of the key factors helping Vietnamese higher education accelerate its internationalisation process and integration into the international academic community. However, with the current English teaching practices, the task of enhancing English development for university students does not seem to be implemented successfully. There is a need to re-design English classes, to reconsider the aim and the focus of English teaching in English non-specialised programs, to create more culturally oriented and interactive language activities, and to allocate more time and resources to better address various needs in English teaching and learning at tertiary level.

Key words: *foreign language, English teaching and learning, higher education, Vietnam*

Introduction

English has gained its predominant role in the foreign language teaching program at tertiary level in Vietnam for the last few decades (Hoang Van Van, 2008). After Vietnam opened its door to reintegrate to the world in 1986, under the impact of globalisation and internationalisation in higher education, the need to enhance English language teaching and learning has become one of the most important aims of the higher education reform process in Vietnam. With the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA)¹, Vietnamese government aims to 'formulate a strategy on international integration, raise the cooperation capacity and competitiveness of Vietnamese tertiary education' (p. 7). In order to do this, first and foremost, universities in the system have to 'organise teaching and learning in foreign languages, especially English for the immediate futures' (p. 7). University students are expected to be able to understand and communicate well in English.

The Vietnamese government also seems to prioritise this goal when it has signed numerous agreements with foreign partners and also spent its own budget to send English language teachers overseas for training. Many teachers have been back bringing with them new teaching methods and different research perspectives which all potentially contribute to the process of enhancing English language teaching and learning at tertiary level in Vietnam. Different language teaching theories, approaches, and methods have been introduced into the system. Communicative language teaching, computer assisted language learning, cooperative language learning, autonomous language learning, task-based language teaching are to name some of them. These theories and approaches all seem to support the ideas of making use of technology to increase the effectiveness of teaching (Le Thao & Le Quynh, 2012; Nguyen Van Long, 2010), of empowering students in their learning process (Dang Tin

¹ Government Resolution No 14/2005/NQ-CP



Tan, 2010), of bringing interactive, communicative and authentic tasks into the language classroom (Pham Hoa Hiep, 2007; Sullivan, 2000).

Successfully implementing these approaches will also potentially compensate for the existent deficits and problems in language teaching in Vietnam. Language educators have noted several problems affecting English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, such as: too large class size (Hoang Van Van, 2008), lack of authentic context for language study (To Thi Thu Huong, 2010), traditional form-focus instruction rather than interactive teaching approaches, hierarchy relationship between teachers and students (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013a), low English levels of the majority students when entering university (Nguyen Thanh Van, 2007). These were all reported to badly affect the quality of English teaching in the Vietnamese HES. With the new language teaching and learning theories, these seem to be solutions for all of these problems. Large or even extra-large foreign language classes could be managed successfully thanks to the computer based activities (McCarthy, 2004), to the carefully class structure design with interactive and communicative activities and the high motivation of the student (Giauque, 1984). These all based on the rich teaching resources that the teacher and student can get access to assist their teaching and learning (Knight, 2000; McCarthy, 2004). In addition to this, globalisation has turned the whole world into a global village. It is easy for Vietnamese students to get access to the English speaking world through internet or Cable TV, and indeed, more and more English speakers are coming to Vietnam. These could be rich resources to be used in different teaching approaches to assist students in English learning.

However, after more than a decade of effort, with much investment for human resources to increase the qualifications of English language teachers in the HES, with many new teaching methods and approaches being introduced and implemented in the system, with much support from foreign partners, positive results are rare. The English proficiency of the majority of university students and graduates are quite disappointing - They do not appear to be confident with their English. Many of them cannot communicate in a simple English interaction. There is also a popular claim among researchers and employers about the weak English skills of the majority university graduates (Nunan, 2003; Stephen, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft, & Silvera, 2006; Stevens, 2005; Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006). There still exist many complaints about the teaching and learning of English at tertiary level in Vietnam.

The research

This research aims to investigate the factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in the HES in Vietnam. It aims to find some possible answers for the question why the efforts to enhance English teaching in the system has failed and to suggest some possible solutions to improve the current situation.

It is also worth mentioning that this study excluded the teaching and learning of English in English specialised programs in some foreign language universities and departments.

This paper represents part of the findings from a larger study, which looks at the ways to enhance graduate employability in Vietnam. The study adopted a qualitative approach and wanted to look at the problem from the students' and graduates' perspectives. These participants have been considered the 'centre of the study' in the Vietnamese HES (Pham Minh Hien & Pham Mai Huong, 2011; Tran Quynh Le, Nguyen Thi Hai Ha, & Can Thuy Linh, 2011), they are the ones who receive the services provided by their universities in the process of reforming English teaching and learning. They are also considered as the outcome of all the efforts and the renovation process and the indicator for the success or failure of the foreign language strategy implementation suggested in HERA. These participants are expected to offer an insider perspective which would be valuable for the policy makers to develop solutions to remove student obstacles in English learning and to enhance students' English skills to meet the expectation of the government and of the whole society.

The study employed three focus group interviews of 10 final year university students in each group. Several authors write about the appropriate size of focus groups. According to John (2003), early focus group interview researchers suggested that group sizes of seven to 10 people are the most appropriate for gaining the best data, while Lichman (2009, p. 154) has another conclusion: 'most who write about focus group interviews recommend a group of 10 to 12 people'. Groups of 10 students were organised for this study. Group members were from different universities, so there were representatives from 10 universities in each group. In such a group, it was easy for students to voice their opinions based on



their own experience in their own university context. Students had an opportunity to compare and contrast their experience and knowledge to build a rich picture about their perspectives on the issue of English teaching and learning at Vietnamese universities.

The study employed only three group interviews, as the data may become 'saturated' and little new information emerges after the first few groups (Zeller, 1993). Fern (1982) suggests that two eight-person focus groups would produce as many ideas as ten individual interviews. Thus, the three 10-person focus groups should provide enough data for this study.

In addition to the focus group interviews among university students, individual, face to face, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 20 university graduates who finished university in the last five years.

The research used the purposeful sampling strategy in selecting its participants. Participants were recruited through personal introduction in the researcher's intellectual network. Twenty interviewees who graduated from different universities and disciplines and 30 students from 11 universities were selected for individual interviews and focus group discussions. They were selected as a result of the agreement between them and the researcher, on the basis that they could provide insights into the subject being explored.

The central questions these participants were invited to discuss were:

- Do they think learning English is important?
- How is English taught at their universities?
- Is their English as good as expected and why?

After data were gathered from students and graduates, I used Creswell's (2007) description of data analysis spiral for the sifting, sorting and recursive analysis practices. This analysis circle involves thinking, reflecting, classifying, looking for patterns and then referring back to the data before starting the procedure again. Thematic analysis was employed for the analysing of interview data in this study. In order to ease the inductive analysis (Patton, 2002), Nvivo 9 with its strong data analysis functions were used for data storing, organising and coding. All data were put in one complex file in Nvivo. The file contains filed notes, all audio files recoding the interviews, and the transcriptions of those files. The interface of Nvivo helped me to code the nodes, to look back at the transcriptions, to hear the recordings easily. This sorting stage helped me to identify the emerging key points. Key issues also emerged from the analysing process. Important factors that were reported by students and graduates were also highlighted. Factors affecting the teaching and learning English in the Vietnamese universities then became clearer.

Research findings

English is important

English was considered by the majority of the participants as important. Especially since Vietnam opened its door to the world, English was suggested to be an advantage for any Vietnamese who wanted to understand and communicate with the outside world. For most participating students and graduates, English was important both for their study and for their future at work. One student suggested:

English is very important for us, not only because employers always look for the ones who can use English, but most reference books are also in English.

These students and graduates did not seem to care much about the broader aim of the government to enhance their English skills in order to urge the international integration of the country. In the eyes of these participants, English is important because it brings advantages for them in their study and especially for their future at work and in life. English was considered as a key to help them enter the desired working environment in the quickly developing foreign investment sector which offered much higher quality of work and salaries. Moreover, as a result of Vietnam's integration with the outside world, strong English proficiency also brings advantages for job seekers in other sectors of the economy. According to the students, good English skills were a great advantage for any of them in



their future, to find a good job and to explore the world outside. Graduates, who have been looking for jobs and who have been in the labour market for a while even considered English as vital for them as 'all jobs require English'. According to these graduates, all jobs in the market (including the ones offered by local companies) require them to know English. So without good English, it was hard for them to find a sound job. Thus, one graduate decided to stay at home for six months after graduation just to improve his English before applying for jobs. All graduates who were working for international companies or joint ventures claimed that they had to use English at work even when they were working for Korean or Chinese companies. Most of them suggested that English was essential for any university student who wanted to have a good job and a better future.

All of these students and graduates seemed to have very good motivation and attitude toward English learning. They all understood the importance of English for their study at university and their future in the workplace. They expected that universities would help them develop their English skills. Good motivation and attitude is considered a positive factor which may lead to the successful process of enhancing English teaching at university (Giauque, 1984).

English is poorly taught at university

The teaching of English in Vietnamese universities received many criticisms from the participants. They all suggested that the current English teaching and learning at universities was ineffective and disappointing. It negated their motivation and made them lose their hope in English learning. Most of them expressed their frustration and confusion about the English teaching at their universities. One student suggested that 'we learn five terms of English at the universities, but our English is even getting worse. The teaching and learning of English in my university is terrible'. Another student shared a similar idea:

It's the same in my university, we learn English passively. Teachers often say that we need to be good at English, but we don't know how. We learn English only at the first and second year. That's it. If we really want to improve our English, we have to spend money and take some courses outside the university.

Most participating students and graduates agreed that they need to be good at English to be confident looking for jobs. However, apart from students with an English major, other students suggested that English was only taught in the first two years of university for a couple of hours a week. In most universities, students who had already learnt three or seven years of English at school were still placed in a class with the students who had not learnt any English before entering university. Thus, they all learnt English from the beginning with the same textbook and the same contents delivered in each lesson. In a mixed class of 50 to 70 or even 150 students, students who had to relearn English felt bored, while the others felt nervous and lacked confidence. Then, for the last few years at universities, English was no longer taught in the curriculum, any student who wanted to maintain and improve their English had to spend their money to improve their English in language centres outside universities.

Students and graduates also pointed out that many of them, after studying five to 12 years of English, had still not been able to communicate in English outside the classroom both in written and spoken forms. They often blamed this situation on the poorly organised English class that they attended. In addition to the large class size, the limited time and the way students with different English proficiency levels were put together in one class, students and graduates also complained about the so called boring text book that they had to learn and the poor learning resources available for them.

According to the majority of the participants, most of the text books used in their universities were poorly edited or imported from English speaking countries, thus many contents were considered culturally irrelevant or unclear for both teachers and students. This together with the popular teaching style which employed form-focus instruction often made them focus on grammar rather than communication skills. Attending English classes at university, even the most hard-working students could only produce some simple sentences based on the provided structures. None of the participants suggested that they could communicate in English if they did not attend extra English classes provided by private English centres outside universities.

There was a debate among students about the teaching style of English teachers in the system. Some students had very negative comments about their English teachers such as 'they just come to class and deliver whatever they are assigned to teach', 'they don't care how many of us understand the



things they teach' or 'they are too busy with something else, so they don't have time to create interesting and interactive activities for us to learn', some even said 'I often skip English lessons, they are so boring, better spend some money and learn it outside'. Nonetheless, some seem to sympathise with the English teachers "it's too hard for them to manage that big class with only a text book, a pen and a board", some explained 'I asked my teacher to skip the boring part, but she said she wouldn't because it maybe in the exam'. Despite sharing different opinions, participants seemed to agree that the popular tendency among English teachers in their universities was to 'teach for the exam'.

A graduate who had become a university English teacher also shared similar thoughts. She suggested that at the beginning, she also wanted to apply interactive teaching methods and create different language games for students to learn English. However she received a warning from the senior colleagues not to do so because the class was too big for such games to be run successfully and also because the time available for class was already too little to deliver the contents for exam, designing more activities would be very risky. She also observed that most of the English teachers in her university were moonlighting somewhere else, so they did not have much time for class preparation. Thus, despite knowing different modern language teaching methods (at least by names), they normally did not bother to use these methods. This was because (1) no one 'forced' them to use these methods, (2) it was too hard to make use of the new methods given the current situation of class size, limited resources and the need to provide enough for-the-exam-knowledge to students and (3) renovate teaching style required time and efforts, but no incentives were given for the teachers who spend their time to make use of new teaching methods.

Our English is far from expected

That was the common comment about students' English skills among students and graduates participating in this study. Some students and graduates claimed that their universities made their English 'worse'. For example, one graduate suggested:

I learnt English for 7 years at school and 2 years at university, but can just speak few simple sentences. I think the way English is taught at schools and universities in Vietnam is not effective. It even makes us hate English.

Although the university teaching in Vietnam, in general, still received much criticism in terms of professional knowledge and skills (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008; Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013b), however, for the majority of the participants, their professional knowledge and skills were poor, but still much better than their English skills. Some students appeared to be quite confident with their professional knowledge, but not with English:

I am confident with my professional knowledge, but please don't ask me about my English, I think my English is hopeless.

Some students who have searched the requirements of employers in the market, felt nervous because their English was too poor:

I've started searching the internet for the employers' requirements. I do not feel confident to send any CV away. All of them require us to know English. Now I just want to improve my English.

Many of them concluded that the English teaching at university was 'hopeless' and wished the time to come back so they could invest time and money to learn English better (from outside language centres).

Discussion

We are living in a globalised era, but it still seems to be too early to discuss modern language teaching approaches in Vietnamese language non-specialised universities. The aim of HERA to organise teaching and learning in English for the immediate future seems to stay as a wish in the majority of the universities in the system. When the majority of the students cannot understand and communicate in general situations, how can they understand the subject matter taught in English?

Some of the reasons suggested by participants in this study leading to the low quality of English teaching at Vietnamese universities are:



- Too large class size
- Students of different English levels are mixed up
- Poor teaching resources
- Limited class time
- Grammar-structure teaching focus
- Teaching for examination
- Limited time and efforts invested in teaching preparation and teaching renovation of English teachers

With the current infrastructure of most universities in the Vietnamese HES, reducing the size of language classes to 15 or 20 students in a class as suggested by Johnson and Arenas (1995) does not seem to be feasible. However, according to Giauque (1984) and McCarthy (2004), large language class size of 60 or 70 students could be managed by carefully designing class activities and with the help of computer based activities. This will allow students to receive as much individualised instruction as they need inside and outside of the classroom. However, this is less likely to be done in the context of the Vietnamese HES where the typical teaching method remains transmitting knowledge from teachers to students to prepare for the exam (To Thi Thu Huong, 2010; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013a). The teaching in a large class with students of different levels of understanding and a white board, sometimes a tape player negate all the efforts to try new teaching methods of the teacher.

English test design is also another problem. Until recently the majority of the English tests in the system have still been designed to recheck the grammar and structures students learnt in the program (Hoang Van Van, 2008), the rigidity of the exam design and the desire to pass as many students as possible tie the teacher to the text book provided. It is also hardly possible for them to bring in more interactive and interesting activities due to the time limitation. In addition to this, the time commitment to the job of the majority of English teachers is often low. They often lack time designing different class activities. Although they realise that the current test design may negate the efforts to renovate teaching methods, they just 'go with the wind' because they all know that changes require time and commitment. The current teaching style and class organisation negates students' effort, and reduces their motivation and hope.

The discussions with students and graduates in this study also reveal that the aim of English teaching at university level was not clearly set. They were not sure whether they learnt English for communicative purposes, for academic purposes or for occupational purposes. Students just followed the teacher and the textbook, and passively learnt for the exam. They all seemed to have quite high motivation and their own aim in learning English, which was learning for a better future, a better job and higher salary. However, the actual teaching and learning at university gradually lowered their motivation and drove their focus on only the contents for the exam. Thus, when leaving universities, many graduates could not communicate in English in some simple situations, they could not understand general news in English either. This finding supports Hoang Van Van's (2008) claim that with the current teaching and learning English in Vietnamese universities, at the point of graduation Vietnamese university students are still at the elementary level of English (p.27).

With the current language teaching practices, the task of enhancing language capability for university students, to ease the internationalisation of the system does not seem to be implemented successfully. In order to improve the situation, first and foremost, there is a need to reduce English class sizes, or at least, to group students with similar English levels in a class and to reconsider the exam focus. There is an urgent need to reconsider the aim and the focus of language teaching in language non-specialized universities, to create more culturally oriented and interactive language activities, and to allocate more time and resources to better address various needs in language teaching and learning at tertiary level.

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