

Teaching English to young learners in Vietnam: From policy to implementation

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This paper analyses and evaluates the current national language policy adopted at the Vietnamese primary education level and its implementation in classroom practice. The study was conducted as an exploratory case study with data from three viewpoints to explore how well the language policy is enacted in state schools in Vietnam. The findings reveal that the policy has brought considerable benefits to Vietnamese educational stakeholders. Vietnam has witnessed a lot of responses to this national language policy such as restructuring the English programmes, writing a new series of textbooks; and training and retraining English primary school teachers. However, the policy also shows a lack of alignment with its implementation due to poor planning.

Key Words: language policy; teaching English to young learners; primary English teaching

Introduction

Like many other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Vietnam has sought to boost the teaching of English at the primary school level through implementing educational reforms. In the case of Vietnam, the latest reform is the *National Foreign Languages Project 2008–2020*. As part of this language reform, a language policy has been officially released which has aroused considerable public concern. This paper analyses and evaluates that policy as well as the current situation of primary English language teaching in Vietnam and makes some recommendations for improvements in teaching English to young learners (TEYL).

Literature review

Language policy implementation in teaching English at the primary school level has been researched in numerous contexts such as Japan (Butler, 2007), Turkey (Kırkgöz, 2008), China (Li, 2007), and Vietnam (H. T. M. Nguyen, 2011) and other non-English speaking contexts (Moon, 2011). These studies have mostly looked at:

1. how language policy is interpreted and implemented
2. how teachers have implemented a particular language policy
3. how contextual factors support or hinder successful policy implementation.

However, in the Vietnamese context, there is still little evidence in the literature about how well the latest language policy at the primary level is implemented. Using the theoretical framework of principles in TEYL suggested by Shin and Crandall (2014), this study explores the implementation of the recent English programme for primary school level in Vietnam as a way of evaluating its appropriateness for the specific context.

Numerous researchers (see, for example, Fullan, 1991; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005; Kirkgöz, 2008; McLachlan, 2009) present pertinent issues in need of examination in policy-based implementations of educational programmes. For instance, Hoy (cited in McLachlan, 2009) suggests conditions for successful implementation of a national educational policy such as clarity of long-term goals and short-term objectives, quality of English teachers and school facilities and finance. Fullan (1991) suggests at least three dimensions that need to be examined and considered for any current educational policy: (1) the introduction of new or revised teaching materials; (2) the possible introduction of pedagogical practices; and (3) the possible alteration of teachers' beliefs.

This study looks at three dimensions of the policy implementation by posing the following research questions:

1. To what extent are Vietnamese primary curriculum and textbooks appropriate for the implementation of TEYL?
2. To what extent are Vietnamese classroom factors appropriate for the implementation of TEYL?
3. To what extent are Vietnamese contextual factors appropriate for the implementation of TEYL?

Research design

The study was conducted as an exploratory case study. Specifically, the data collection and analysis are based on three sources namely interviews, observations, and document analysis. The interviews and observations provide insights into the situation of TEYL within the context in which it is practiced. The analysis of the observations and interviews alongside the policy documents provides different perspectives on how the new education policy is being adopted in Vietnam in the teaching of primary school English language.

Research setting and participants

The context of this study is a primary school in a suburb of Hanoi. It is considered a prestigious school. English is part of the curriculum. There are 27 teachers of different subjects including three teachers of English language. This public school was established in 1980 and currently enrolls 1050 students (age 6 to 10) in 20 classes, with approximately 55 students in each class. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the students are mixed, with about one-third of the students coming from lower middle-class families who are unable to support their children to take extra evening classes of English as is common for children from more affluent families.

The participants in the study are Le, Nguyen, and Dao (pseudonyms). All three participants hold bachelor's degrees in English. Their expertise is to teach general English without any specialization in TEYL. They have been working for this public primary school for more than ten years. Their ages range from 35 to 42 years of age.

Data collection and analysis

The researcher observed three lessons (one conducted by each of the participants) and took notes on the main features of relevance to the study that occurred during those lessons. The researcher also interviewed the three participants regarding their classrooms, their students and their pedagogical practices. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese as the participants felt more confident to speak in their mother tongue. Documentation was collected which reflects the current education policy implementation.

Data analysis in this study drew on thematic analysis. Although the analysis was concerned with three sources of data, the initial codes were formed mostly from the classroom observations and the document analysis. Data collected from interviews were concurrently analysed to supplement those initial codes.

Ethical considerations

The three participants in this study participated voluntarily following an invitation by the researcher. There was no power relationship between the researcher and the participants which could have been exploited to coerce the participants. It is, thus, unlikely that the data were skewed by the way in which participants were selected, recruited or handled during the research.

Findings

The primary English language policy in Vietnam (based on an analysis of the curriculum documentation)

A review of policy documents shows that the government launch of a nationwide standardized language project for the improvement of teaching and learning foreign languages (Decision No. 1400, issued in September 2008), had been expected to revolutionize the English teaching and learning environment in Vietnam. Its intention was to make the English language a competitive advantage for Vietnamese citizens in the global market (V. C. Le & Do, 2012). One initiative to arise from this Decision is the implementation of TEYL.

According to the Decision, students should study English as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 12, that is, from the age of eight, students are officially exposed to the English language and continue studying English throughout primary and secondary schooling as a mandatory subject for ten years until the end of Grade 12. The Decision also states the intention to increase the students' exposure to English, thereby better preparing them to live, study and work effectively in the context of the economic integration of the ASEAN countries.

A pilot programme for the implementation of primary English from Grade 3 to Grade 5 was conducted at selected schools in urban areas from 2010 to 2011 after which it was expected that primary level English would become mandated for third graders to fifth graders throughout Vietnam (Bui & Nguyen, 2016) by the year 2020. In fact, and somewhat contrary to the innovation encapsulated in this Decision, V. C. Le and Do (2012) suggest that the teaching of primary English as a subject started long before the issue of the Decision. Large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh have been teaching English to primary students at Grade 1 since 1998, when it was first permitted by the local Department of Education. This means that the majority of Vietnamese citizens are already well aware of the impacts of this language on their children's lives.

The ambition of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2010) of the Vietnamese government for primary English learning is aligned with the research of Shin and Crandall (2014) who see the implementation of TEYL as an outcome of the combined critical role of English as an international language and the advantages it brings to its users. This growing demand for English in Vietnam is also probably due to what Enever and Moon (2009) and Gimenez (cited in Shin & Crandall, 2014), see as parents' beliefs in the educational and employment opportunities that English can bring to their children. These reasons seem to most accurately reflect the increasing trend of TEYL in urban areas throughout Vietnam. However, in many mountainous areas of Vietnam, primary school

students still have no access to English, due to the lack of facilities, teaching equipment and teachers (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). This situation shows a mismatch between the language education policy and its implementation, which is primarily because the policy does not reflect thorough consideration of contextual factors and local needs and socioeconomic differences between areas.

The objectives of primary school English education in Vietnam (which was defined by Decision No. 3321/QĐ-BGDĐT in 2008) focus on:

1. inculcating essential English communicative skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing to enable students to communicate in English at school, at home, and in familiar social contexts;
2. providing students with a fundamental knowledge of English, which enables them to gain a significant understanding of the country, the people, and the culture of some English-speaking countries; and
3. building students' positive attitudes towards the English language, therefore nourishing their love for their mother tongue (Vietnamese).

It is expected that after finishing primary schools, students will reach Level A1 of proficiency in the European Common Framework (MOET, 2010).

In line with the national objectives, an exploratory programme adopting a communicative language teaching approach has been implemented nationwide since 2010. This curriculum states that the methods of teaching should conform to three guiding principles relating to: communication, tasks and meaningfulness (MOET, 2010). A series of *New English Textbooks* (Hoang, Phan, Do, Dao, & Nguyen, 2012a), which are mandated to carry this new curriculum into the Grade 3, 4 and 5 classrooms, are each comprised of 20 units covering four themes. The four themes are: *Me and my Friends*, *Me and School*, *Me and my Family*, *Me and my Community* and are considered to be relevant to the children's lives (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Through these familiar topics, students can draw on their prior knowledge of relevant stories occurring in their life which can help create a meaningful context where the focus is on students' interests, rather than the language itself (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Another useful feature of the new curriculum is that the themes are repeated in three grades, allowing students to recycle the vocabulary items, to keep using the language that they acquire and to build on it (Shin & Crandall, 2014). While adopting a theme-based approach, teachers can select a theme of their choice which is suitable for their students' contexts and learning needs. However, teachers in Vietnam are expected to follow the curriculum closely, which may hinder their creativity (Bui & Nguyen, 2016) in conducting suitable activities for young learners.

Two sets of textbooks have been employed concurrently in different schools nationwide. The old textbook versions, *Let's Learn English* books 1, 2, 3 written by local textbook authors and the *New English Textbook* series. The former versions are still taught in almost every province in Vietnam, whereas the *New English Textbook* series is applied in selected schools, which according to MOET (2010) can satisfy certain criteria such as suitably qualified teachers and suitable facilities. Although the curriculum indicates that it is designed using the communicative approach to language teaching, the activities in the former textbook series mainly focus on form, drilling, and repetition (H. T. M. Nguyen, 2011). This does not represent effective instruction for a TEYL programme, which should provide engaging activities, encourage students' interaction and build a positive attitude towards English learning (Shin & Crandall, 2014). While the activities in the *Let's Learn English* books are mainly form-focused, the *New English Textbook* series claims to adopt communicative language teaching as a guiding pedagogy. Each unit is comprised of three lessons with each lesson typically taught over 45 minutes.

Lessons 1 and 2 contain speaking and listening activities and tasks; lesson 3 contains a reading-writing task followed by a project task.

The English requirements and environment at Vietnamese public primary schools (based on data from observations and interviews)

English instruction is allocated for 3 hours and 45 minutes per week; each lesson is typically taught in 45-minute class periods. The students are motivated to learn English, and they achieve very high examination results. However, all the three participants revealed three potentially negative factors. The students hardly have any opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. The teachers can access the internet and other teaching equipment such as projectors and cassettes, but there is no library in the school. English lessons are taught in a combination of English and Vietnamese.

Observation revealed that the desks in the classrooms are arranged in four rows, each of which consists of seven desks with two students per desk. The desks all face the blackboard which is raised on a stage to elevate the teacher and allows all students to see the blackboard. The teacher always makes sure that the desks are arranged in perfect order, which means there are no changes in classroom layout during the whole academic year. There is a notice board on the right side of the blackboard where the teacher displays students' work. Students remain in their allocated classrooms with subject teachers moving to those classrooms according to their teaching schedules.

Each participant is in charge of teaching four classes from grade 3 to grade 5 with the *New English Textbook 3* used in the school since 2010. There are between 50 and 55 students in each class. Through observations, it seems that classroom activities are conducted strictly according to the teachers' manual, which focuses on presentation, production and practice sequences (often known as PPP). Pair and group work in speaking and writing lessons is utilised by all three participants. Sometimes students are provided with additional grammar exercises for them to practice before the exams. Supplementary materials are taken from exam practice books written by local authors. Students can watch videos or listen to English songs, which are related to the topics from the textbook. Teachers can attend the annual professional development workshop, which is usually allocated 3 hours per year for local teachers. The participants claimed to be in need of training courses to equip them with updated pedagogical knowledge to teach young learners.

Discussion

This section provides an overall evaluation and discussion of the government language education policy's appropriateness for the implementation of TEYL and suggests some recommendations for the improvement in the TEYL situation in Vietnam.

The appropriateness of the Vietnamese primary curriculum and textbooks for TEYL

The Vietnamese language education policy for primary schools has dramatically transformed the approach to teaching and learning English at primary level. The English language has been increasingly taught in urban areas. The latest version of the primary English curriculum, which aims to develop English learners' competence by deploying learner-centred communicative teaching methods, meaningful themes, and topics, satisfies several criteria for effective TEYL programs (as mentioned by Shin & Crandall, 2014). Specifically, the TEYL activities in the textbooks mainly focus on meaning by using the task-based approach with integrated language instruction (Shin & Crandall, 2014) which provides learners with exposure to the target language from meaning-

focused input (Pinter, 2017). Nevertheless, the curriculum does not establish a full alignment between the teachers' implementation of the textbooks and the textbooks' own suggestions for that implementation which suggest that "the teachers should follow a sequence of presentation, practice, and production to develop English at a basic level" (Hoang, Phan, Do, Dao, & Nguyen, 2012b, p. 7). This means that when students study within the PPP approach (as described by Newton & Trang, 2017), the burden of learning new forms falls on a very first stage of the sequences. Thus, it is inappropriate for TEYL because the essential aspect of a task is that young learners should be focused on the meaning of content rather than on form (Cameron, 2014) and where teaching materials do not allow "children to find meaning in a new language, learning will be stultified" (Cameron, 2003, p. 107).

Overall, the English language policy in Vietnam reflects the revolutionized changes and challenges in the implementation. On the one hand, the policy has transformed many major related areas. According to H. T. M. Nguyen and Bui (2016), the nation has seen an unprecedented increase in activities responding to this national policy. This includes standardizing the English curriculum, restructuring the English programmes and writing a new series of textbooks which explicitly use the communicative approach. The policy further facilitated the training and retraining of English primary teachers. Thus, it can promote TEYL in a range of socioeconomic contexts, which can satisfy the appropriate conditions for TEYL. On the other hand, the policy shows a lack of alignment with its implementation due to its poor planning. As V. C. Le (2007) put it, "ELT policies in Vietnam are too general, too abstract and fail to define explicitly concrete measures to achieve the goals" (p. 178).

The appropriateness of classroom environments for TEYL

Classrooms play an essential role in the success of a TEYL programme and thus should be suitable for conducting relevant activities for young learners. Large class sizes and the rigid set of rows of chairs and desks in Vietnamese primary school contexts may not encourage opportunities for different types of essential interaction for young learners with the goal of developing what Shin and Crandall (2014) refer to as their social and interactional needs. Large class sizes tend to accentuate problems of noise, which may also pose a challenge for teachers to manage the class to create a positive and productive atmosphere for learning to occur. However, the display of students' work on the class corner board stimulates motivation for learning by providing a sense of achievement. Such sharing of students' finished work enables children to establish their success (Shin & Crandall, 2014). In summary, the Vietnamese classroom environment has been able to cope with many challenges in providing an optimum physical and emotional atmosphere for TEYL program to succeed.

The appropriateness of contextual factors in implementing TEYL nationwide

The new policy of introducing English as a mandatory subject in primary schools in Vietnam can, to some extent, meet the nation's demand and enhance the status of Vietnamese children in general. However, as L. C. Nguyen, Hamid, and Renshaw (2016) mentioned, concern has been raised over a significant gap between rural and urban areas in classroom facilities and teacher capabilities for the implementation of TEYL in lower socioeconomic areas.

Students in many remote areas are not provided with opportunities to access primary English instruction due to the lack of teachers or school facilities. Consequently, there

emerges inequality of educational opportunities among Vietnamese young learners depending on the socioeconomic status of their families. As Baldauf (2012) claimed, the individual agency at the local level may “compromise the impact of national language policy” (p. 240), which is essential and meaningful to the language-in-education planning. Thus, it is clear that while the policy itself is not problematic, the outcomes from policy initiatives are unlikely to be fully obtained when practical aspects of policy implementation such as resource provision and teacher supply remain mostly unsolved (L. C. Nguyen et al., 2016). Consequently, the policy has not been fully implemented because of an inadequate supply of facilities and teachers in both numbers and skill levels (Kam, 2002).

In summary, by establishing the national standardized regulations for primary English instruction, the Vietnamese national policy has brought about enormous transformation in TEYL. However, the implementation shows that conditions in Vietnam do not fully satisfy many essential conditions for implementing the English language education policy nationwide such as sufficient English teachers with appropriate professional capacity, appropriate class sizes, and the availability of teaching resources (and this is consistent with the findings of L. C. Nguyen et al., 2016).

Recommendations

There are areas in which the Vietnamese language education policy for primary school level can be improved to maximize the potential for TEYL. First, there is a need for TEYL teachers to be appropriately trained professionally at both pre-service and in-service levels. Teachers should be equipped with “up-to-date knowledge of development in the field” (P. H. H. Le & Yeo, 2016, p. 40) to become more confidently able to “organize students in ways that maximize opportunities for learning” (Moon, 2011, p. 53). Teachers also require the pedagogical knowledge to adopt and adapt the materials to meet young learners’ true needs and to “develop engaging, motivating activities to help young learners in learning English” (Shin & Crandall, 2014, p. 19). By training teachers specifically for TEYL, the Vietnam government can gradually prepare sufficient and well-qualified personnel resources to meet the needs created by the policy.

The second important area is the improvement of classrooms to make them suitable for TEYL. Reducing the number of students in a class would allow the space to be better used for appropriate activities catering to students’ learning needs and provide maximum opportunities for them to participate in learning tasks. Moreover, physical aspects such as reading corners should be created to provide young learners with more opportunities to engage with the target language through reading stories, thus enhancing their linguistic and cultural knowledge. This could also be a way for teachers to help children to build up their vocabulary banks (Cameron, 2014). With this broader range of opportunities, the children can gradually become independent language learners.

To tackle the problems of language learning in resource-poor settings, the government of Vietnam needs to increase its investment (L. C. Nguyen et al., 2016) in public education which will give equal opportunities for children from lower economic backgrounds.

Finally, there is a need to examine the state’s English language education policy critically and reflectively. There is a gap between the stated national policy and its implementation on the ground (Bui & Nguyen, 2016) which should be thoroughly investigated so that the government can adjust the policy to make it feasible and achievable for the ELT situation in general and TEYL in particular.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Vietnamese English language education policy and evaluated its strengths and weaknesses by looking at the stated national policy and its implementation on the ground. The paper has also made several recommendations for the improvement of TEYL in Vietnam. Copland and Garton (2014) have stated that globally, policy is hugely significant in the context of teaching young learners because it will directly exert a profound impact on the lives of millions of children. It is, therefore, crucial for policymakers to be realistic about what can be achieved at the primary school level (Cameron, 2003) and that primary teachers be involved in implementing such action because they are the mediators and agents of change (Van den Branden, 2016) who will optimize children's learning opportunities. The data reported here indicates that Vietnam has made important steps in developing its policy for primary English language education but more needs to be done in training teachers, improving resources and closing the gap between urban areas and the rest of the country.

About the author

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