

## How English Has Displaced Russian and Other Foreign Languages in Vietnam Since “Doi Moi”

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### Abstract

*This paper seeks to help understand the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam by examining the history of foreign language education in the country since the mid-twentieth century. Due to historical backgrounds, English did not become popular in Vietnam until the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implementation of Doi Moi (economic reforms) and the normalization of US-Vietnam relations. English once lost its place in the foreign language curriculum when the Vietnam War ended, now has been back and proved its role in the course of foreign cooperation, international integration, modernization and socio-economic enhancement of the nation. Vietnam has taken various approaches to help the country adapt to the present English dominant world, yet there are factors to consider as new economic powerful are growing and entailing the power of languages other than English.*

**Keywords:** English, foreign language, international language, EFL, Vietnam, Doi-Moi, Education, Asia

### Introduction

In the modern world, English has been the major language that rolls the wheel of international communication. Colonization, the industrial revolution, the emergence of American economic and technological power, and the force of globalization, among others, have created the necessity of English in international interactions (Crystal, 1997a; McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil, 1986; Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992). In Vietnam, the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the enforcement of economic reforms (Doi Moi) entailing the increase of multilateral international cooperation have made way for English to move into the position that Russian had occupied for several decades as the most desirable foreign language in Vietnamese society (Denham, 1992; Do Huy Thinh, 1999, 2006; Shapiro, 1995). Ever since the 1990s, the “bait” of most foreign language centers and schools in Vietnam has been English. The phrase *foreign language* automatically means “English” for many Vietnamese people. “I’m going to the foreign language class” is equal to “I’m going to the English class.” English has become the principal foreign language specified in most programs of universities, junior colleges and vocational schools. English competence is desired and a required qualification in many scholarship programs. It is the passport to advance not only in the intellectual world but also in many other walks of life. Many English learners around the world believe speaking English is having the passport to “interact with the wider world community”, to “take advantage of what the present-day world has to offer” (Savage, 1997, p. 314), to gain social power and capital (Smitherman, 2004), or just simply to “dream of better worlds” (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996, p. 200). Today, Vietnamese English learners are no exception even though - due to historical and political circumstances - English has been referred to as the language of Westerners who were locked out of Vietnam for decades after the Vietnam War. It did not take long for English to grow its popularity in Vietnam after the open-door policies, yet the story is not short.

### Vietnamese and the battle with Chinese and French in Vietnam’s history

According to Pham Minh Hac (1995), Vietnam education is linked tightly with the nation’s history of development. For centuries, the neighbor to the north, China, had always considered Vietnam as its southern district. Chinese feudal emperors successively vanquished and imposed Chinese rules over Vietnam territory.

It was not until 938 AD when Ngo Quyen claimed the victory over the Han Dynasty that Vietnam entered the first era of independence after 1000 years under Chinese domination. Successive leaders after the Ngo continued battling with northern invasions in order to protect national independence. The place of Vietnamese - the native language of the majority of Vietnamese people – in history, therefore, is deeply influenced by these historical upheavals. To rule the Vietnamese people, Chinese rulers established schools, with Chinese as the instruction language, but mostly for the administrators' children or to train functionaries for the administrative system. The goal of education was not the enhancement of Vietnamese people's lives, but for the reinforcement of the ruling machine (Nguyen Quang Thang, 1994; Nguyen Thien Giap, 2006; Pham Minh Hac, 1995). Students were taught only basic subjects, enough for them to know how to read and write so they could do clerical works in mandarins' offices.

When the French took Vietnam in the mid 19th century, they implemented a language policy that minimized Chinese influence. Vietnamese, the language spoken by the Kinh peoples, was recognized as "Quoc Ngu" (the national language). However, French was also proclaimed an official language in the nation. The colonizer obviously prioritized French and focused on the education of the French language. Higher education was offered in French. Speaking French, thinking in the French way, adopting French lifestyles were part of the French colonization plans set for the Vietnamese people (Nguyen Thien Giap, 2006). French became the language used in government correspondence, business documents, and higher education. Quoc Ngu, even though taught in early levels of education, was not given any significance. French was the tool to access social capital which also meant serving for the colonial government.

The successful August Revolution gave birth to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 and also made way for Quoc Ngu or Vietnamese to gain power in the new system. As mentioned above, Vietnamese is the language spoken by the Kinh peoples who account for 85% of the population and are among the 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam who spoke about 108 different languages (Lewis, 2009). Even though it was not documented that Vietnamese was proclaimed the national language, it was declared the language of education of independent Vietnam and was used in governmental, administrative correspondence, and business documents, etc. The Independence Declaration of Vietnam was also written in Vietnamese, and the first universities established by the new government gave instruction in Vietnamese. Vietnamese was referred to as the "common language" in most legal documents of the government (Nguyen Thien Giap, 2006). French and Chinese were quickly marginalized and became foreign languages with very few learners, especially when Russian moved in, together with growing political support from the former Soviet Union.

When the Vietnam 2005 Education Law was passed, Vietnamese was specified as the official language of the country and was the language used in schools and other educational institutions. In terms of foreign languages, this law did not define which ones should be taught in schools, but stipulated that schools should consider to teach foreign languages which were used commonly in international communication.

### **Pre-Doi Moi and Russian**

Vuong Toan (2010) documents that when American businessmen came to Vietnam in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had to rely on at least four steps of translation: from Vietnamese to French, and then from French to English and vice versa. The media documents Kenneth Filshie as the first official English teacher who was sent to Saigon, Vietnam in 1955 by the government of Australia. *The Age* - an Australian newspaper - on Friday December 30, 1955 reported that Mr. Filshie was among three English teachers sent to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as part of the Colombo Plan. The missions of the teachers were to teach English to government officials and trainee officers of the nations in the Indo-China peninsula since increasing dealings with English-speaking countries had triggered the need for English learning ("Australians to teach in Asia," 1955).

After the Americans withdrew from South Vietnam in 1975, English began to lose importance and the number of people studying English declined sharply, even though the government of Vietnam had never promulgated against the language (Do Huy Thinh, 2006). As noted by Shapiro (1995), the American Trade Embargo had isolated Vietnam from the rest of the world since countries feared political punishments from the US and dared not cooperate with Vietnam. People shifted to study Russian to move with the influx of Russian language and Russian culture via various forms of assistance from the former Soviet Union.

English, as well as French, were regarded as the remnants of the colonial and neo-colonial cultures and therefore were not embraced, if not discriminated against. English teachers had to look for other jobs. Do Huy Thinh (2006) reports a university in Ho Chi Minh City in 1985 only had about a dozen students registered for English training, while that number was six times as much just about ten years before in 1975.

Russian had been the most important foreign language in Vietnam's schools for several decades after independence (1945) and reunification (1975) as the languages of the westerners (English and French) lost privileges in Vietnamese society. As reported by Denham (1992), the National Institute for Educational Research had planned for foreign language learning in Vietnamese high schools to reflect 60% studying Russian, 25% studying English, and 15% studying French (shortly after 1975). It was remarked that the goals were never achieved as planned, even though Russian did become the most favored and privileged foreign language until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **Doi Moi and English**

During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called open-door policy or Doi Moi, an implementation of a dynamic diplomacy, and the normalization of diplomatic relation with the US created an immense impact on every aspect of Vietnam's society including education (Azuba, 1996). English has become an "unquestionable asset" (Shapiro, 1995, p. 4) for Vietnamese. Hundreds of English centers have been established everywhere – Ho Chi Minh City alone has around 300 language centers (Do Huy Thinh, 2006), attracting both children and adult learners aiming to secure a better future or employment with international affiliations that are booming in the country.

In 1994, the Prime Minister of The Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed Instructions 422-TTg calling attention to improving foreign language competence, especially for state administrators and state officers. The Instructions emphasized the need for state cadres to be able to speak a foreign language, as the country increased interactions and developed relations with foreign countries. Command of a foreign language was described as the major tool to facilitate international relations, access advanced science and technology, acquire modern economic administration experiences and master market-driven economy. With this policy, the government created favorable conditions for cadres (officials) to attend language classes. Many were even excused from work to go to language classes. Cadres even got paid to learn a foreign language. In society, people also rushed to foreign languages centers. English classes in particular had always been full or over-sized. Ever since the mid 1990s, there has been spectacular increase in demand for English training.

A study conducted by Do Huy Thinh (1999) revealed that in Vietnamese high schools in 1995, 73.3% of the students studied English, 16.1% studied Russian, 3.1% studied French, 0.5% studied Chinese, and 7% did not study any foreign languages. Do Huy Thinh (1999) also surveyed 641 undergraduates across 15 colleges and universities in the same year and found that 621 out of the 641 in the survey studied English, 176 studied French, and only 24 studied Russian.

Dang Thi Huong and Nguyen Quang Tien (2008) research on students' perception of choosing a foreign language in nine major universities in Vietnam (National University of Hanoi, Hanoi University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Da Nang University, Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics, and Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy). The study examined 270 students who were majoring in foreign language bachelor programs and 242 students who did not specialize in foreign language majors. It found that 85.8% of the foreign language majors agreed that English should be taught in college. Similarly, 87% of the non-foreign language majors shared the same opinion. The students chose a foreign language mostly based on the practicality and popularity of the language. Some other common motivations were political and cultural reasons. 83% of students agreed that English was important for international communication. 75.5% agreed that English would help them find a good job. 71% agreed that English was the most popular foreign language in Vietnam. 39% learned English in order to study in an English-speaking country. According to the researchers, students' perception is influenced by what they experience in daily life, trends of socioeconomic development, occupational opportunities, and desires to study overseas.

Vuong Toan (2010) says that English has penetrated every aspect of Vietnamese society. English words are flooding the linguistic life of Vietnamese people. Words such as “computer,” “internet,” “fast food,” “shop,” “hot girls/boys,” “fan,” etc. have become so familiar that I wonder if people ever use their Vietnamese equivalents. English words are fashionably used to name places, buildings, companies, pets, or to nick-name kids. Tourist spots have instruction signs in English. There are different competitions in English in the media, in the communities, at schools and so on. At different levels of schools, not just students learn English. Teachers and staffs are also required to have a certain competence in English. Employers use English as a condition for employment or promotion. English dominates the scientific database and materials. Thus people in the academic world have to know English if they want to be on the cutting edge of modern knowledge. English has become the trendy foreign language in Vietnam society.

Mydans (1995) calls the emergence of English in Vietnam another “linguistic wave of history,” telling the story of Quoc Khoi, a Vietnamese who had learned French, then Japanese, then Russian and now is making his living as an English teacher in Sai Gon (formerly Ho Chi Minh City). Quoc Khoi was quoted, “Now I forget my Russian and my Japanese. Even French I almost forget. But English everybody in Vietnam must know because English is the language of commerce” (para. 2).

### **Has English been prioritized?**

In 1968, when the Prime Minister of the then Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong signed Instructions 43-TTg/VG about teaching foreign languages in schools, colleges and institutions, it was maintained that Russian and Chinese should be the priority languages taught in most levels of education. Other western languages (i.e. English and French) were to be “considered” to be taught as minor foreign languages at certain selected levels. Obviously at that time, English was not taught officially at any levels of education. Denham (1992) notes the popularity of English in Vietnamese society today is not purposefully planned. Vietnam’s government has not stated in any official documents to advocate English at the expense of other foreign languages. The expansion of English in the country goes along with the global trend towards English and the people’s changing attitude toward the language itself. Denham (1992) reasons that while many developing countries adopted English as the first foreign language sometime in the mid-twentieth century, Vietnamese found it was hard to shift from Russian to English “because of its wartime associations, English was not initially regarded as politically neutral” (p. 64).

The project “Language Strategies in Vietnam’s Schools” - drafted by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in the early 2000s - proclaimed English the principal foreign language taught in schools. It has never been ratified (Ha Anh, 2007). Vietnamese scholars have not been able to agree whether to advocate English as the first and most important foreign language or to maintain equal emphasis on several foreign languages (Lyna & Thu Hang, 2009). Nevertheless, there has been growing support toward English. Le Ngoc Tra (2008) (Chairman of Ho Chi Minh City Institute of Development Studies – Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy) strongly recommends that English should be made compulsory beginning with the elementary education level so that students will be able to explore the source of knowledge in English when they enter higher education schools. In his opinion, a strong command of English is a “must-have” in order to integrate in the global environment to approach modern knowledge, and to attain philosophical intellectual development.

Despite the fact that there is no official governmental commitment to prioritize English, it seems that Vietnamese society has been unable to resist the temptation. English is dominating newly built curricula or educational development plans. Many recent curricula of colleges and universities - for example, MOET, 2010a - specified English as the required foreign language and English is a graduation requirement. In 2010, MOET granted 98 undergraduate scholarships to overseas programs where English is the instruction language. The first eligibility to qualify for the scholarship was, of course, English competence (MOET, 2010b). English was also listed first among six languages announced in the 2010 high school graduation examination (MOET, 2010c). Since 2003, MOET has placed English in the elementary education curriculum. English is introduced from the Third Grade with 70 hours a year. By the time pupils come out of elementary school, they are expected to be able to communicate in English at the novice level, knowing the basic linguistic properties of the language and introductory information about the cultures and people of some English speaking countries (MOET, 2003b). Since English was downgraded for decades after the Vietnam War, there was a break in the training continuum.

The new demand for English after Doi Moi had caused a thirst for English teachers at all levels of education in the country. Actually, the shortage of language teachers, not just English ones, started far earlier as reflected in the Inter-ministries Circular Letter 28/TT-LB, issued in 1973, which flung open the door for people, anyone with a competence of a foreign language, to become language teachers. It was denoted:

Any in-office cadres of any sectors, any levels of administration who are qualified (according to the Ministry of Education standards) in one of the following languages: Russian, English, Chinese, and French, and who have qualified morals can register to teach at secondary schools, education boards or institutions where they work. (Except from the Inter-Ministries Circular Letter 28/TT-LB December 31, 1973)

Since anybody who could speak a language at a certain level could be invited to teach in schools and institutions, many of these “incidental teachers” did not have any formal pedagogical trainings, not to mention a formal college degree. Unfortunately, many of them ended up in the teaching career. A survey of 41 high schools throughout the country several years ago revealed that most English teachers did not have formal training from a pedagogy university. According to the researchers (Hoang Van Van, Nguyen Thi Chi, & Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa, 2006), there were a good number of English teachers who were previously Russian teachers or graduates of junior colleges. It was also found that many teachers were not used to the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach, or did not know about the learner-centered approach. Many older teachers (age 45 up) did not even know about the CLT approach. Most of them had almost no opportunities to train abroad and extremely limited opportunities to communicate in English or to upgrade knowledge in the field (Table 1).

To compensate for the weaknesses of local teachers, many foreign language centers (private) started hiring native speakers. The cost to attend a course taught by an English native speaker teacher is unreasonably high, yet enrollment is always full, and there is always a thirst for native speaker teachers. Due to multiple reasons, most centers end up hiring anybody who is a native speaker of English regardless of the person’s qualification. The assumption is that being a native speaker of English is enough to be entitled teacher and given a group of students to teach (Thu Phuong, 2006). In society, the image of a “Tay Ba Lo” (meaning western backpacker) teacher started emerging and drew public attention. The quality of a class where the teacher has no pedagogical training, or even a degree is highly questionable. This history has caused a stereotype of English teachers as anyone who *speaks* English, and has not been necessarily qualified or trained as “true teachers” – those who come from pedagogical institutes.

In sum, the force of global integration has caused Vietnam to turn attention to English, the common language of the international community. In the nation, English was once considered the language of the enemy and lost its importance due to political prejudice, now it is the first choice of most foreign language learners in Vietnam and the most desirable skill of most employers regardless of government-owned, private, or foreign-invested structures. History has created gaps that are not easy to fill, yet the government of Vietnam is taking necessary steps to facilitate English teaching and learning to meet the needs of the people.

### **The growth of powerful others in Asia and future of English in Vietnam**

Although the Government of Vietnam has always tried to maintain an equal emphasis on a number of major world languages, various geopolitical conditions have caused each language to be treated differently at different times in the country’s history. English was once referred to by Vietnamese people as the language of the Westerners and was only to be learned well enough to read for scientific purposes (Instructions No. 43-TTG/VG, 1968). Now it has become the priority foreign language. The government now wants to see, by the year 2020, a workforce with at least level 4 of English competence on the Common European Framework of Reference’s scale. The ambitious project entitled “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 – 2020” had been ratified and put into force, demonstrating a strong will of Vietnam to make “foreign languages an advantage for Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country” (The Government, Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008). Again, not “English” but the general term “foreign languages” has been used to indicate an unbiased strategy of the government. Obviously, there are factors to consider so as not to come across another unnecessary shift in foreign language policy. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, APEC in 1998, and WTO in 2007; signed the Bilateral Trade Agreement with the U.S. in 2000, the Vietnam-Japan Investment Agreement in 2003; and resumed trade relations with China in 1991.

However, not until when the Trade Embargo was lifted were the doors to the international trading world really opened to Vietnam. The process of normalization of US-Vietnam relations went through many political traumas prolonging through several decades. Nguyen Quang Khai (2006) predicts that the global integration of Vietnam will create both opportunities and challenges. It may facilitate economic growth, but at the same time present risks as international competition become intense. Successful global integration depends largely on the country's capabilities and appropriate policies.

## **ASEAN**

Not until after nearly 30 years of operation, did ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) grant Vietnam membership status. Due to Vietnam's different ideological and sociopolitical system, there has been suspicion that Vietnam will have a difficult time socializing in the "ASEAN ways," and that siding with Vietnam may pose the threat of "confrontation with great power" (Sigh, 1997, p. 229). Nevertheless, the fact that Vietnam joined ASEAN has promoted the awareness of commonalities and the need for cooperative relations for regional economic well-being as well as political power (Nguyen Vu Tung, 2007). English is recognized as the official language of the organization. Given economic gaps among nations, there are many challenges for English to become a true means of communication among nations in the association. Whereas it may be easier for some countries to create favorable conditions for English training, it may be problematic for others which are less economically advantaged.

## **China**

China's development is accelerating and its influence is increasing globally. Presently, China is among the biggest foreign investors in Vietnam. The booming of Chinese businesses in Vietnam has driven Vietnamese to Chinese language classes. CRIONline (2010) reports that they received hundreds of emails from readers commenting about the movement of studying Chinese in Vietnam recently. In some language centers, Chinese classes are always full. Many English learners even switch to studying Chinese. Hoang Phuong, Thu Hien, and Van Duc (2007) explain that Vietnamese people are rushing to school to study the language of the "awakening giant" (i.e. China) since it will present them better opportunities in the very near future. The reporters also refers to a university in Seoul, Korea which has recently announced that Chinese has replaced the first place of English as the most wanted foreign language by Korean students. Another reporter notes the incredible growth in number of Chinese learners that is "threatening" the monopoly position of English. While researchers still have different opinions if Chinese will replace English as an international language in the future, David Crystal, a famous English linguist, author of *English as a Global Language*, was quoted saying "It all depends on the language users' power, especially economic power. A thousand years ago, nobody could imagine that Latin would no longer be used after 1000 years. It had happened!" (TR.M., 2007).

## **Japan**

The wave of investment from Japan also moves a considerable number of people to learn Japanese. According to the Consulate General of Japan in Ho Chi Minh City, the Japanese Consulate has been involved in different activities to encourage Vietnamese to learn the language (free Japanese courses, Japanese speech contests, Japanese scholarships, etc.) to introduce Japanese culture and facilitate a bilateral relationship between the two countries (Doan Hien, 2009). More and more Vietnamese students are looking for opportunities to study in Japan. In 2007, the number of Vietnamese students in Japan was among the top four biggest international student groups in Japan (the other three groups were from China, Korea, and Taiwan) (Le Vu Hung, 2008).

The emergence of Asian economic powers is changing the balance and getting world politics accustomed to the term "multipolar", or "nonpolar", or "decentered", or even "the new Asian hemisphere" (Foster, 2008). In this new era, Vietnam finds challenges side by side with risks. Every decision should be made with watchfulness so that we do not lag behind but move onward smoothly with the global wheel (Nguyen Trung, 2007). Durand (2006) criticizes Vietnam's inadequate attention to its Asian neighbors' languages as "ignorance about long-term economic development and geopolitical trends affecting this country" (p. 49). Changing global economy and politics should be considered carefully before making foreign language policies. The Vietnamese people nowadays have begun to think hard before they decide which language to learn. English in Vietnamese society nowadays might have to compete with Chinese or Japanese among others, given that the world is no longer pulled towards a single pole.

## Conclusion

As more and more people of the world learn English as a second or foreign language, English has attracted the most numerous number of speakers. English is now considered the official language of many international encounters. In Asia, English has also become an indispensable language for intra-national communication and international communication. Unlike other nations in the area, Vietnam did not place English in the first place of foreign language education for its citizens early. This is due to the historical as well as geopolitical realities of the nation. Not until the 1990s did English become popular in Vietnam. Now seeking international integration and economic and social enhancement in an English dominant environment, Vietnam has to readjust its policy toward foreign languages. However, every decision needs to be made with careful consideration of domestic, regional as well as international social, economic and political conditions.

It is fair to believe that investment in common languages of international communication is the key to trigger the industrialization and modernization of the country. Mastering these languages is the shortest way to benefit from the modern knowledge stored in them, since knowledge is upgraded constantly with new technologies invented every second. This requires every member who wants to survive and flourish in this environment to understand each other and understand instantly. Communication which involves translation will delay technology transfer. Thus, speaking a common language is a must for any individual who wants to be on the cutting edge of the high-tech world.

**Table 1: Qualifications of High Schools English Teachers**

	Number	%
Total number of teachers surveyed (in 41 high schools)	337	
Teachers who have taught for more than 15 years	111	33
Teachers who have had trainings overseas	7	2.2
Teachers who received formal trainings from degree programs of pedagogy universities	82	24

Source: Hoang Van Van, Nguyen Thi Chi, & Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa (2006)

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