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Learning and teaching English in Vietnam: problems and solutions

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Abstract

English is the official language of 53 countries and territories, the official language of the EU and the third language, which is most widely used all over the world after Chinese and Spanish. In the trend of world economic integration, learning English is concerned in a lot of countries, so today more and more people can use English as a second mother language. However, learning and teaching English is still a problem, which has not found the solution in some developing countries, such as Vietnam.

Thus, this article is written to explore the concern of government in learning English and its learning and teaching methods in Vietnam. The article also points out opportunities and difficulties, which Vietnamese students need to overcome to develop English skills. Therefrom, some solutions of these problems are recommended in this paper.

Keywords: English, learning, teaching, methods, problem, solution;

1. Introduction

In today's global world, the importance of English cannot be denied and ignored since English is the most common language spoken everywhere. With the help of developing technology, English has been playing a major role in many sectors including medicine, engineering, and education. Particularly, as a developing country, Vietnam needs to make use of this world-wide spoken language in order to improve its economy. However, in Vietnam, there are still some problems in learning and teaching English. This article was designed to consider these problems.

The methods of the study includes the following items:

- Survey and assess the importance of learning English in Vietnam.
- List and describe the types of English examinations in Vietnam and their disadvantages.
- List and analyze problems in learning and teaching English in Vietnam.
- Recommend some solutions for these problems.

2. Discussion

The actual situation of learning and teaching English in Vietnam

Thanks to the attention and support from the government and the development of information technology, Vietnamese have a lot of opportunities to learn English.

Firstly, pupils can study English in their school, because English is a compulsory subject in schools and universities in Vietnam for the following three reasons: finding a high-quality job, communicating with the international world, accessing scientific sources in the student's major field, etc.

Nowadays, students start studying English at the age of 6. However, there are usually two English lessons a week for primary students and three English lessons for secondary and high students. Students have to sit the English exam every year. An English grade can affect the study result of a student. In addition, English is known as one of the university entrance exams for students who choose group D (Math, Literature, English).

Secondly, the number of English lessons at school is not enough for students to practice English skills, so students need to join another English course after school. Therefore, various English language centers, both public and private, have been established to serve the demands of learners. Courses of all types are offered in English language centers, including elementary or beginner, immersion programs for rapid learning, business language and conversation, and all levels of basic conversation and comprehension, with schedules designed to fit the individual needs of the students. As estimated by local educational administrators and researchers, there have been nearly 300 language centers with a teaching staff of ten thousand and over 900,000 learners attending different classes.

In addition, due to the development of information technology and the popularity of the network, students can take part in English online courses, communicate and make friends with English native speakers, listen to the radio, read newspapers, watch films in English, etc.

Vietnam is famous for its beautiful scenic, quiet and clean resorts. Therefore, Vietnam annually attracts millions of foreign tourists, and most of them are friendly tourists from Europe or America. That is a great opportunity for Vietnamese students to communicate and practice English speaking and listening skills. Students often "hunt" an English native speaker in the parks, on the beach or they can take a part-time job at restaurants, which only serve foreign visitors to have the opportunity to communicate with foreigners.

English always plays an important role in one's career. Thus, both the people and the Vietnamese government are trying to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of teaching and learning English.

English examination system in Vietnam

To check the quality of teaching and learning English, in Vietnam there are a lot of English qualified tests both for students and teachers.

For students, an English test appears in exams of each grade including the exam to graduate from school in grade 12. Traditionally, English national certificates are required for students who want to apply for a good job. The level of requirements (A, B, or C) depends on the company you want to apply for. However, bosses of companies sometimes require applicants with a higher English standard. People who want to have a good job or dream to go abroad for studying, need to pass the international exams, for example, TOEIC, TOEFL, or IELTS. These exams are annually held in the British Council.

“Western authors allocate three functions of the system evaluation of teachers: informational, motivational and inspiring. Information function is collecting and processing of data that characterizes the quality of teaching courses” [1]. Realizing the the importance of teachers in the teaching and retransmission information to students, in Vietnam, English teachers have to take an exam to check their qualification. Thousands of teachers in 30 provinces and cities are required to sit for a test prepared by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), which used guidelines from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to check their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

MoET demands that high school teachers reach the framework's second-highest skill level (C1), while elementary school teachers must achieve the fourth-highest level (B1) and middle school educators the third-highest (B2) [4].

3. Findings

- *Problems in learning and teaching English in Vietnam*

As a result, today in Vietnam more and more people get to English and use English as the second language in their job or in their lives. However, the number of people who can speak English fluently, is very small. What is the main difficulty for Vietnamese people who failed in English studying?

Firstly, the main difficulty is the Vietnamese language itself. The highly complex Vietnamese vowel system possesses eleven pure vowels and many more diphthongs and triphthongs. Pure vowels are relatively few in English, but Vietnamese will frequently have recourse to the nearest Vietnamese pure vowel in pronouncing which they wrongly perceive to be a pure vowel in English. Certain pairs of Vietnamese diphthongs are distinguished only by the length of the constituent vowels.

There are some problems with pronunciation of Vietnamese students, such as problems with sounds: /i:/ versus /ɪ/ ("seat" and "sit", "sheep" and "ship"); /e/ versus /æ/ ("bed" and "bad"); /θ/ and /ð/ ("the" and "thank"), etc. [2].

The Vietnamese language is a tonal language that means it uses tones. There are 5 tones in Vietnamese language which change the meaning of the word. But an English word has a stress, which is different from Vietnamese. So it is difficult for Vietnamese learners to distinguish stresses of English words.

The second problem in learning English of Vietnamese students is shyness. Traditionally, in class students always have to listen to the teacher, and the teacher is the main person who feeds them with information every day, so Vietnamese students are not self-confident and can not talk in front of lots of people. That is why learners usually feel shy and scare to make mistakes when they speak in class. They seldom start conversations, they are often shy in contact with foreigners.

The next difficulty seems to be bad learning and teaching methods. The main educational goal in Vietnam is improving people's general knowledge. Therefore, in Vietnam all subjects are compulsory for students: Literature, Math, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, Civics, Technology, Information technology, and English. Thus, students have to share their time to study lots of subjects and they do not have enough time to practice English much enough. Moreover, there are too few English lessons a week and too many students in an English class. Furthermore, there are no cassettes for students to practice listening skill. Vietnamese learners are taught very many English grammar rules, some of which are not used in everyday speech.

Besides, the quality of English teachers is not high enough. Because of teachers' poorly paid salary, students who graduated from good universities with honors do not want to become teachers. In this situation it is easier to hire a college teacher. Low-quality teachers are often appointed in primary and secondary schools.

- *Solutions for these problems.*

A foreign teacher, Ken Symkek, who has lived and taught English in Vietnam for five years, gave some advice to Vietnamese learners [3]:

- *Stop studying English words*

According to Ken Symkek, native English speakers do not learn English words by remembering long word lists. They hear and learn phrases that are made up of words that naturally go together. Therefore, if anyone wants to speak English automatically, like an English

speaker, he should learn phrases not just the words. By studying phrases one's speaking and grammar abilities will improve 3 to 4 times faster.

- *Do not teach too many grammar rules*

In most Vietnamese schools, teachers tell the students that grammar is the key to learning English and they need to remember all the rules. They are not really right. In fact, studying too much grammar might be the worst thing. Grammar study can destroy one's English speaking abilities. Because when you want to speak English, you scare to make mistakes. However, it does not mean, that grammar is not important.

In his article, Ken Symkek highlights a few major differences between the the Vietnamese and English languages.

- The English usually place adjectives before the nouns while Vietnamese after the nouns.
- They usually forget to pronounce the last letter of English words. Words like "want" becomes "wan", "student" becomes "studen", "research" becomes "resear"...
- Often the "to be" verb is omitted in most sentences.
- There are no singular or plural nouns in Vietnamese.
- Their verbs show no tense. The tense of a Vietnamese verb is usually derived from the content of the sentence.

- *Hear English everyday*

Vietnamese students seem to be learning English with their eyes. They read textbooks, study word lists and watch the teacher writing grammar rules with examples on the board. But Ken Symkek thinks that they need to learn English with their ears, not just with their eyes. Everyday an English learner needs to hear English even though they may not understand what they hear.

- *Slow, deep learning is the best*

The secret to speaking easily is to learn every phrase and words deeply. One person must put the words deep into one's brain. This is usually accomplished by practicing, having long periods of repetition, associations and testing. Because of the value of repetition, many of the role-play situations and activities that we do in the classroom are designed to give students opportunities to practice using the language in some situations.

4. Conclusion

In general, nowadays, Vietnamese have several opportunities to reach out to English good materials, communication with English native speakers, etc; but Vietnam is also facing some problems in the process of developing English proficiency. Therefore, both teachers and students need to be aware to find the ways to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of learning English. So that English is not just a subject but it is also becoming a way to communicate with other countries, to get to know about their cultures and customs, and to approach the level of economic and scientific development of the world.

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