

The Benefits of a Bilingual Program in English Language Teaching in Vietnam

Mai Thanh Nguyen

Vietnamese American School System

Abstract

The paper summarizes the situation of English Language Teaching (ELT) at a general education level in Vietnam and briefly reviews bilingual education, its advantages and its disadvantages. The implementation of a bilingual program in the Vietnamese American School System (VASS) is also described. To compare the English proficiency of pupils studying bilingual program at VASS with those who study English as a foreign language (EFL) as in most cases in Vietnam, a study using standard Cambridge English examinations for all Grade 5 pupils in District 2 of Ho Chi Minh City as well as Grade 5 pupils of VASS has been conducted. The results of the study show big differences in the levels of English competency of bilingual pupils at VASS and those of pupils attending a normal Vietnamese program. This is clear evidence of the advantages of a bilingual education, and maybe a solution for teaching foreign languages in Vietnam's general education system.

Introduction

To promote the study of English further and to better the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam and to meet the increasing trends of globalization and international interdependency in the global village. On September 30th 2008 the Vietnamese Prime Minister issued Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg on Approving the National Plan for “*Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the Formal National Educational System for the Period of 2008 – 2020*”, which is said to be worth 9 trillion 378 billion VND (currently equivalent to about 5 billion USD). According to the Decision, the plan consists of three phases. The first phase extends from 2008 to 2010; the second phase, from 2011 to 2015; and the third phase, from 2016 to 2020.

In the first phase, top priority is given to developing and perfecting the 10-year foreign language curriculum and focusing particularly on English, writing foreign language textbooks and preparing necessary conditions for exercising the pilot 10-year foreign language (English) program (from Grade 3).

In the second phase, the focus is on introducing the 10-year foreign language program throughout the whole general educational system.

In the third phase, the focus is on perfecting the 10-year foreign language program throughout the whole general educational system and on developing intensive foreign language programs for vocational schools, colleges and universities.

In terms of English standards, the Plan explicitly accepts the 6-level testing system as developed by the Common European Framework of Refer-

ence for Language (CEFR) as the standard for assessing the quality of English learning in Vietnam and encourages Vietnamese educational institutions to actively develop and carry out bilingual programs.

In this project, the Government also encourages educational institutions to actively build, implement, and grow bilingual programs in their establishments. However, bilingual programs have not been legalized and standardized yet, causing difficulties for institutions which want to implement them. Therefore, schools have to build their own programs and apply them in different ways. In this paper, a bilingual program which has been implemented very successfully at the Vietnamese American School System (VASS) is presented as an example. Some difficulties and drawbacks of the program are also addressed.

English Language Teaching (ELT) at General Education Level in Vietnam

Vietnamese general education consists of three levels with 12 grades:

- Primary level (from Grade 1 – 5 for children aged 6 to 11).
- Lower secondary level (from Grade 6 – 9 for children aged 11 – 15).
- Upper secondary level (from Grade 10 – 12 for children aged 15 – 18).

From 1982 to 2002, English was introduced nationally as a compulsory subject at upper secondary level and as an elective subject at lower secondary level. In this period, two sets of English textbooks were concurrently used in Vietnamese schools:

- The 3-year set (for students who started learning English from Grade 10 – 12).
- The 7-year set (for students who started learning English from Grade 6 – 12).

The final upper secondary school exam, however, was based on the knowledge and skills required in the 3-year set. Both sets of textbooks, although differing in orientation, are mainly grammar-based. Taking the view that grammar can be taught systematically as a set of rules to be mastered and transferred by the learner into proficient language use. While they take cognizance of the significant place of reading comprehension and oral skills, the grammar sections in each unit tend to dominate.

Since the early 1990s, due to the impact of English as a global language, the teaching of English in Vietnam has tended towards the view which places the learner at a focal point, with the teacher seen in the role of a facilitator who provides creative contexts for language learning. With this new philosophy of foreign language teaching, the two sets of textbooks which had been in use in the Vietnamese general education for nearly two decades have proved to be inadequate. In the face of this situation, the Vietnamese Government issued Decree 14/2001 TC-TTg on the Renovation of the Vietnamese General Education Curriculum, specifying the requirements and tasks of the Ministry of Education and the concerned ministries and governmental departments. In im-

plementing the Government's Decree, at the beginning of 2002, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) organized the design of the new curriculum and the writing of new textbooks for all school subjects. This national project finished in early 2008 when the new textbooks of all school subjects were put into use across the whole general educational system of Vietnam, and in the case of English teaching, there are two types of book, one is a set of English textbooks for lower secondary schools and the other is two sets of English textbooks for upper secondary schools to be used across the country:

- Standard set which serves around 96% of the students (lower secondary).
- Advanced set which serves around 4% of the students (upper secondary).

Unlike the period of 1982-2002, the new current general curriculum, English is a compulsory subject at both lower and upper secondary levels and an elective subject at primary level. At primary level, English is introduced from Grade 3 – 5, 2 periods per week with 35 weeks/year, making the total of 210 periods. At lower secondary level, English is studied for 3 periods a week in Grades 6, 7, and 8, and for 2 periods in Grade 9, making the total of 385 periods a year. And at upper secondary level, English is studied for 3 periods a week/35 weeks/year, making the total of 315 periods. The number of periods studied at each level and the total number of periods studied in the whole formal general education system in Vietnam can be summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1

The number of periods of ELT for each level of education

Level of Education (Grades)	Number of Periods each Week	Total periods
Primary (Grades 3 - 5)	2 periods/week/35 weeks	210
Lower secondary (Grades 6 - 8)	3 periods/week/35 weeks	210
Lower secondary (Grade 9)	2 periods/week/35 weeks	70
Upper secondary (Grades 10 -12)	3 periods/week/35 weeks	315
	Total	805

The aims of Vietnam's English language teaching (ELT) at general educational level at the end of the upper secondary level, students will be able:

- To use English as a means of communication at a certain level of proficiency in four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, be able to read materials at the same level as their textbook, and use a dictionary.
- To have mastered basic English phonetics and grammar, to have acquired the minimum of around 2500 vocabulary words.
- To attain a certain level of understanding of English speaking cultures, to become aware of cross-cultural differences in order to be better overall com-

municators, to better inform the world of the Vietnamese people, their history and culture, and to take pride in Vietnam, its language and culture. (MOET 2007)

However, the biggest problem of ELT in Vietnam is that pupils who graduating from schools cannot use English for communication (speaking), even for very basic conversations. The reasons of this failure have been discussed and analyzed in many types of research (Le, 2011; Moon, 2005; Ngoc, 2015; Nguyen, 2005; Trinh, 2007). This paper does not come back to this issue but provides a solution to solve this problem with the application of a bilingual program in the general education system of Vietnam.

Bilingual education

A successful bilingual education program is defined as a program leading to the development and maintenance of language skills, achieving better academic performance and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. It is determined by three important principles:

- Taking it step by step, learning bilingual through monolingual and bilingual as a reward (Cumming, 2012).
- Hamers and Blanc (2000) describes the general goal of bilingual education is the use of two languages to educate generally, meaningfully, and equitably,
- For tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

According to McCarty (2012), there are four ways to classify bilingual programs:

- (i) language use (i.e., first or second language used to present subject matters).
- (ii) amount of each language used (both languages used equally or in different portions).
- (iii) type of ESL (e.g., audio-lingual system, repetition and memorization of sentences and phrases, etc).
- (iv) purpose of programs (i.e., the bilingual program will help to maintain students' mother language or ultimately replace it with second language).

Naturally, bilingual programs usually try to resolve the desire of participants to become bilingual, bi-literate and to have cross-cultural understanding. The definition and classification of bilingual commonly recognized as complex, in part because bilingualism is multidimensional. The definition of bilingualism can range from the proficiency in both languages as native speakers to simply as the ability to communicate in a second language at basic level (Garcia, 2009). Native speakers could be referred to people in the Inner Circle in the Kachru's Three-circle Model (Kachru, 1985; Pandey, 2012).

Although it is recognized that the development of bilingual children depends on family, environmental and socio-cultural factors, many researchers (Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006) all demonstrate

that there is little evidence to suggest that learning more than one language in childhood is a problem for children. There is also no evidence that suggests learning two languages can have a negative effect in the development of children's language as well as the cognitive and academic development.

The benefits of bilingual programs have been documented and supported favorably in numerous studies. Cummins (2003) suggests that the bilingual program brings a positive effect on language development and education ability of children, while Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) explains that the bilingual program increases economic opportunities in business and society, and maintains superiority of learners. Cummins (2003) also believes in the benefits of a deeper understanding of the language and how to use it effectively and supporting children in developing more flexibility in their thinking by the habits of processing information through two different languages. Empirical evidence also support the broad advantages of bilingual education, recognized by many researchers proving that these programs are needed to develop resources of languages and cultures.

Baker (2006) points out of nine major advantages of bilingual education (not including the aspects of social, ethnic or community):

- 1) High level of proficiency in both languages allows effective communication.
- 2) Multi-cultural understanding.
- 3) Knowing two languages increases a person's chance to discover literature, to give a deeper understanding of the history, traditions and perspectives.
- 4) Increasing achievements in the classroom.
- 5) Better cognitive development.
- 6) Increasing self-esteem, especially for ethnic minority children.
- 7) Having strong sense of pride in their own cultural backgrounds.

Economic advantages by increasing employment opportunities.

This is the desired education system in many countries by educators, parents and policy makers.

Specifically in cognitive development, Baker (2006) refers to the information processing skills and educational qualifications that can be developed through the two languages, as well as through the four skills of listening - speaking - reading - writing, the whole system helps to develop awareness to the extent that when one or both languages are not fully implemented, cognitive functioning and academic performance may be affected badly. Many researchers (Bialystok, 2001; Bialystok, 2011; Garcia, 2009) found many other benefits brought by a bilingual education, such as superior skills in their first language, to raise awareness about languages, higher IQ and increased cognitive flexibility and development.

As briefly introduced above, a successful bilingual education program is a strong form, in which both languages are maintained and developed. According to Baker (2006), they generally have economic value resulting in a highly skilled, trained and recruited workforce. The immersion program is an

example, with no matter to when it is applied during, early, middle or old ages, and including the majority language children with both languages used in classrooms or social purposes, resulting in progress to a high level for both bilingual and bi-cultures.

Although there are different definitions, Genesee (1987) states that at least 50 percent of instruction in a given school year must be provided through a second language for the program to be regarded as immersion. The program in which a subject and language arts are taught in a second language is often identified as an enhanced second language program.

Despite general concerns to whether the students of an immersion program can manage learning in terms of language, Garcia (2009) confirmed that immersion students can learn just as well as the groups of English language learners used to compare. Baker (2006) also demonstrates that immersion programs tend to raise achievements across the curriculum and improve the standards and activities of the children. In order for immersion programs to have a high successful rate, some of these essential characteristics must be used. With immersion schools existing in many countries today, the study shows the ideal time must be between 4 and 6 years, with a curriculum that is similar to 1st language curriculum, with at least 50% taught in a second language. The enthusiasm of the teachers and the parents' commitment is also a big help. The enthusiasm of teachers is essential as it is a model, and to perform tasks in the classroom focusing on authentic communication, the availability of communication is then multiplied.

Implementing a bilingual program at the Vietnamese American School System in Vietnam

Vietnamese American School System (VASS) was established 2005. Located in Ho Chi Minh City, it is a private school offering a bilingual program from grade 1 to grade 12. Most of the pupils at VASS are Vietnamese who want to take higher education in English speaking countries, such as the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand or study at International universities in Vietnam or Asian countries. Besides a minority of pupils whose parents are English natives or who were born in English speaking countries, the majority do not speak English at home. At VASS, in the mornings from Monday to Friday, all pupils learn the Vietnamese program regulated by the Ministry Of Education and Training, (MOET). In the afternoon, they study the English program designed by the School's Department of International Programs and Curriculum (DIPAC). The English programs are based on the Cambridge International Examinations' programs and qualifications (CIE, 2016). With the motto "brighten your future", VASS has standardized its international programs with the outcomes of primary (after Grade 5), junior secondary (after Grade 9) and senior secondary (after Grade 12) are Cambridge Primary, IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) and Cambridge A Level, respectively.

As mentioned above, in order to be regarded as a bilingual or immersion program, "at least 50 percent of the academic year must be provided in the second lan-

guage for the program” (Genesee, 1987, p. X). In the case of VASS, half of the program (morning lessons) is taught in Vietnamese and the other half (afternoon lessons) is conducted in English (as the second language).

Primary pupils study four periods in mornings and four periods in afternoons (45 minutes per period). Therefore, in total every week, primary pupils will study 20 periods in Vietnamese and 20 periods in English. See example of a timetable of a grade in Table 2.

Table 2
Example timetable of a class at VASS

Morning sessions – Vietnamese curriculum					
Period	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	Assembly	Fine Arts	Science & Society	P.E.	Music
2	Phonics	Phonics	Phonics	Phonics	Phonics
Break					
3	Moral	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
4	Script Practice	Script Practice	Craft	Script Practice	Life Skills
Lunch – Taking nap					
Afternoon sessions – English curriculum					
Period	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	Reading & Voc.	English	Science	ICT	Maths
2	Phonics	English	Science	ICT	Maths
Break					
3	English	Science	Grammar & Voc.	Maths	Music
4	English	Science	English	Maths	Phonics

Secondary pupils have similar timetables. However, there are seven subjects at junior grades and five subjects at senior grades in the English program are taught as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Subjects and periods of English program for junior and senior secondary levels

Junior Secondary Level (Grade 6 to 9)		Senior Secondary Level (Grade 10 to 12)	
Subject	Number of period /week	Subject	Number of period /week
Academic English	5	Academic English	6
Maths	4	Maths	4
Science	4	Science	4
Geography	2	Economics	4

ICT	2	ICT	2
French Language	2		
Music	1		

Results and Discussion

After 10 years of implementing the bilingual program at VASS, many positive results have been achieved. In the Vietnamese program, VASS pupils have fulfilled all requirements of MOET at each grade as well as threshold levels in order to receive qualifications of primary, junior secondary and senior secondary. This paper does not go into the details of these achievements. Instead, some positive results/examples of the English program will be presented and discussed. This aims to confirm the benefits of a bilingual or immersion program, including having positive effects on language development and education ability of children, allowing effective communications in both languages at a high level of proficiency, helping children to have a multi-cultural understanding, increasing achievements in the classrooms, better cognitive development through the two languages, as well as through the four skills of listening - speaking - reading – writing, as claimed and reported by Cummins and Swain (1986), Hamers and Blanc (1983), Stafanakis (1991), Cummins (2003), and Baker (2006).

For the English program at Primary level, in order to compare the English proficiency of pupils studying bilingual program (at VASS) with those who study English as a foreign language (EFL) as in most cases in Vietnam, in January 2016, VASS organized a diagnostic survey using standard Cambridge English examinations (Cambridge ESOL, 2016) for all Grade 5 pupils in District 2 of Ho Chi Minh City. Cambridge English Exams are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) as in Table 4.

Table 4

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language

Description	CEFR	Requirement of MOET	IELTS Band	English for Young Learners (YLE)	Main Suite
Mastery	C2		7.5+		CPE
Effective Operation Proficiency	C1		6.5 – 7.0		CAE
Vantage	B2		5.0 – 6.0		FCE
Threshold	B1	Grade 12	3.5 – 4.5		PET
Way stage	A2	Grade 9	3.0	Flyers	KET
Breakthrough	A1	Grade 5		Movers	
				Starters	

There are two English programs offered at most of the public primary schools in Ho Chi Minh, including (i) Intensive English Program (IEP), in which pupils will study eight periods of English per week; and (ii) Elective English Program (EEP), in which pupils study four periods of English every week. In this survey, Cambridge Flyers Exam is used for pupils taking IEP and Cambridge Mover Exam is used for those studying EEP. The number of pupils of each school in District 2 is given in Table 5.

Table 5

Number of Grade 5 pupils of each school taking the diagnostic test

<i>No.</i>	<i>School Name</i>	<i>Exam Level</i>	<i>Number of Candidates</i>	<i>English program</i>
1	An Phu	Flyers	34	Intensive English program
2	An Khanh	Flyers	18	Intensive English program
3	Nguyen Van troi	Flyers	77	Intensive English program
4	Giong Ong To	Flyers	99	Intensive English program
5	Huynh Van Ngoi	Flyers	62	Intensive English program
Total number of candidates taking Flyers Exam			290	
6	Nguyen Van Troi	Movers	131	Elective English program
7	Luong The Vinh	Movers	108	Elective English program
8	My Thuy	Movers	95	Elective English program
9	Thanh My Loi	Movers	202	Elective English program
10	Giong Ong To	Movers	232	Elective English program
11	Nguyen Hien	Movers	73	Elective English program
Total number of candidates taking Movers Exam			841	

In Cambridge YLE, the shield system is used to access the English proficiency of candidates. Five shields are used to mark the proficiency in each skill: Listening, Reading & Writing, Speaking. Therefore, the best candidates can get 15 shields in maximum. In Ho Chi Minh City, Department Of Education and Training (DOET) also uses Cambridge YLE to access primary pupils. This means that pupils who study the

IEP are expected to take Flyers at the end of Grade 5 and must achieve at least 10 shields in total. Similarly, pupils who study the EEP are expected to achieve at least 10 shields in Movers Exam at the end of Grade 5. And the results of the survey conducted by VASS are shown in Table 6

For IEP group, the percentage of the pupils reaching 10 shields or more is 53.8%. This means only half of the pupils in this survey achieved the level required by DOET. In particular, there are substantial deviations with schools: An Phu and An Khanh schools have a high number of pupils with 10 shields or more, 70.6% and 72.2%, respectively. Giong Ong To reached 67.7%. In contrast, the relatively low scores were observed in other cases: Huynh Van Ngoi reached 51.6% and Nguyen Van Troi at 26%.

In EEP group, results showed that test scores of this group are very low, only 20% of candidates qualified according to the average level (from 10 shields upwards). Average points of this group are only from an average of 5.4 to 9.7 out of 15 shields in total.

In comparison, VASS Grade 5 pupils took Cambridge Main Suite Exams, including KET, PET and FCE, and the results are: among the 42 pupils at Grade 5, there are 18 who achieved KET, 15 got PET and 9 passed FCE. Particularly, 2 out of 9 pupils passing FCE tests have reached C1 Level in CEFR. So, if CEFR is used to scale the English proficiency levels of VASS pupils against those do not take bilingual program (i.e., pupils at public schools in District 2), there is a very big difference between them. This result once again shows the big advantage of a bilingual program compared to EFL.

For the bilingual program at secondary level, the results have not completed a full cycle of 12 years yet (i.e., from Grade 1 to Grade 12). Furthermore, as mentioned above, the benefits of bilingual education are not only higher levels of competence in both languages, but also others such as enculturation, increasing learners' opportunities for literature, history, higher levels of cognitive development, increased self-esteem, increased employment opportunities, etc. This is beyond the scope of this paper and will be the objective of further research.

Table 6
The results of the Diagnostic Test

No.	School Name	Exam Level	Number of pupils	Exam results (Using scheme of 15 shields)						
				Average	10-13	%	14	%	15	%
1	An Phu	Flyers	34	10.7	24	70.6%	4	11.8%	0	0%
2	An Khanh	Flyers	18	11.2	13	72.2%	3	16.7%	0	0%
3	Nguyen Van troi	Flyers	77	7.8	20	26.0%	2	2.6%	1	1%
4	Giong Ong To	Flyers	99	10.1	67	67.7%	5	5.1%	0	0%
5	Huynh Van Ngoi	Flyers	62	9.3	32	51.6%	4	6.5%	0	0%
	Total number of candidates taking Flyers Exam		290		156	53.8%	9	3.1%	1	0%
6	Nguyen Van Troi	Movers	131	6.5	24	18.3%	2	1.5%	1	1%
7	Luong The Vinh	Movers	108	5.4	11	10.2%	0	0.0%	1	1%
8	My Thuy	Movers	95	5.6	10	10.5%	1	1.1%	0	0%
9	Thanh My Loi	Movers	202	7.8	56	27.7%	10	5.0%	2	1%
10	Giong Ong To	Movers	232	5.9	30	12.9%	0	0.0%	0	0%
11	Nguyen Hien	Movers	73	9.7	37	50.7%	11	15.1%	6	8%
	Total number of candidates taking Movers Exam		841		168	20.0%	24	2.9%	10	1%

Conclusion

The paper summarized the situation of English Language Teaching (ELT) for the general education system in Vietnam and briefly reviewed bilingual education and its advantages and disadvantages. The implementation of a bilingual program in the Vietnamese American School System was also described. To compare the English proficiency of pupils studying bilingual program (at VASS) with those who study English as a foreign language (EFL) as most cases in Vietnam, a study using standard Cambridge English examinations for all Grade 5 pupils in District 2 of Ho Chi Minh City as well as Grade 5 pupils of VASS has been conducted and the result was shown in this paper. The result of the study showed the big differences in the levels of English competency of bilingual pupils at VASS and those of pupils attending a normal Vietnamese program. This is clear evidence of an advantage of bilingual education, a solution for teaching foreign languages in Vietnam's general education system. Therefore, it is strongly recommended the Vietnamese Government should create legal framework to implement bilingual education in the general education system of Vietnam in order to achieve the targets of the National Plan for "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008 – 2020".

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Note on Contributor

Thanh Mai NGUYEN is currently the Principal of the Vietnamese American School System, an international bilingual school at 242 Cong Hoa, Hochiminh City, Vietnam. She has a Master's Degree in Education Management. Her research interests include second language acquisition, bilingualism and bilingual education. She is looking forward to doing a PhD soon. Email: thanhmai@vass.edu.vn