
TRAO ĐỔI/DISCUSSION

The role of English in the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam

Hoang Van Van*

*School of Graduate Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi,
144 Xuan Thuy, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of English in the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam. The paper begins with exploring the concepts of “internationalization” and “globalisation” and discussing their impacts on higher education. Then it attempts to point out the opportunities internationalisation and globalization bring to the Vietnamese higher education and the challenges the Vietnamese higher education may experience as a result of internationalisation and globalisation. Having explored the above issues, the paper turns to a discussion of the roles of English in the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam. Then it takes a brief look at the current state of English language teaching and learning at Vietnamese tertiary level, presenting some false expectations concerning the required output level of English as a subject. In the concluding section, the paper argues that as internationalisation of higher education is becoming an inevitable tendency, English will have more roles to play in Vietnam. This will call for a new vision for teaching and research, creating real needs for researchers, educational administrators, foreign language planners and English teachers to rethink of the roles of English in the development of higher education in Vietnam so that English will become our real window to the world of science, technology and human intellectual essence.

Keywords: internationalization, globalization, higher education, global language, false expectation

1. Introduction

This paper is based mainly on the contents of the paper I addressed at the plenary session of the international conference organized in November, 2008 by VNU-Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies entitled

“Rethinking English Language Education for Today’s Vietnam” to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the English Department.

As a way of start, I will first look at the concepts of internationalization and globalisation and discuss their impacts on higher education. Then I will present the opportunities internationalization and globalization bring to the Vietnamese higher

* Tel.: +84-946296999.

E-mail: vanhv@vnu.edu.vn

education and the challenges the Vietnamese higher education may experience during the process of internationalisation. This will be followed by a section in which I will discuss of the roles of English in the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam. Having discussed the roles of English in the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam, I will take a brief look at the current state of English language teaching and learning at Vietnamese tertiary level, presenting some false expectations concerning the required output level of English as a subject. In the concluding section, I will argue that as internationalisation of higher education is increasing, English will have more roles to play in Vietnam. This will call for a new vision for teaching and research, creating real needs for researchers, educational administrators, foreign language planners and English teachers to rethink of its roles in the development of higher education in Vietnam. Details of these will be addressed in the sections that follow.

2. Internationalisation and Globalisation and their Impacts on Higher Education

Nowadays, internationalization is a concept which is widely used in various contexts and for diverse purposes. In one sense, it refers to the process of making something international. It is the process of exchange and mutual influence, where the actors involved are presumably “nations”. In another sense, internationalisation refers to an ideology or policy of some sort. As far as higher education is concerned, the internationalisation of higher education can be defined as the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and

service functions of the institution.(Ratananukul [1]: 208)

Seen from the point of view of the above definition, internationalisation is a process, a response to globalisation which, according to Ratananukul (ibid.), is the flow of technology, economy, people, values, ideas ... across borders. Globalisation affects each country in a different way due to the nation’s individual history, traditions, culture and priority. Globalisation increases and reflects a greater interdependency and interconnectedness in the world.(Ratananukul [1]: 209)

Internationalization and globalization have strong impacts on higher education. This is because higher education is both an **actor** of and a **reactor** to these processes. It is an actor in the sense that it is the agent of internationalization and globalization, and it is a reactor in the sense that it responds to the impact of internationalization and globalization. Vietnam has become a member of WTO. This suggests that many of its economic sectors will have to be internationalised and globalized, and higher education is of no exception. We are living in a global village in which people, capitals, ideologies, media images and cultural impulses travel around the world very rapidly. The Internet connects people of different backgrounds across large distances. With this superb channel of communication, there are almost no national boundaries. The Internet links together people who otherwise would be strangers to one another by a common interest that has nothing to do with nationality. And as Friedman, cited in Ratananukul [1: 210] has aptly put it, “virtual reality” has become a significant factor in many people’s identity construction; “territorial” identities have presumably been substituted for “mobile” identities, making them more fragile, dispersed

or dislocated. This calls for the construction of a new identity – **the identity of a global man whose prominent feature should be to know at least one or two foreign languages.**¹

3. Opportunities and Challenges

Internationalization presents higher education with both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, it creates opportunities for developing education and training, helping it to get access quickly to the world's diverse knowledge, better serving the building of a learning culture. Further, the formation of the transnational educational system in the forms of joint programmes provides great opportunities for Vietnamese colleges and universities to improve and update their curricula in the direction of standardisation, modernisation, and diversification, giving students more opportunities to study and to access international standards. The internationalisation of higher education also promotes activities such as cultural exchanges, knowledge exchanges, and research cooperation. And at the same time it promotes understanding, mutual reliance and friendships among colleges and universities around the world.

On the other hand, internationalisation also presents Vietnamese higher education with a number of challenges. The first of these may be its incapability of competing with other advanced higher educational systems in the region and in the world. It will be unable to resist against the attraction and domination of these higher educational systems, particularly when they are given permits to establish their

campuses in Vietnam. The fear many people have expressed is that in some days, many Vietnamese colleges and universities will be collapsed or impoverished as a result of the process of internationalisation. Nowadays, science and technology have been developing at unprecedented speed and they have strong impacts on various activities of education and training in Vietnam. In an internationalised, knowledge-based economy, the number of highly qualified and knowledgeable workers working in the fields of intellectual services, information processing, and those that require high technology are in great demand. So what should be done to meet these demands is another challenge for Vietnamese higher education.

4. The Roles of English in the Internationalisation of Higher Education in Vietnam

In an open world, there are a lot of academic exchanges and transfers across borders which require an open educational system. In the higher education sector, the process of integration and internationalisation takes on various forms. At the state level, the Vietnamese Government has been carrying out a number of projects (such as MOET's Projects 322 and 911 and VCP's Project 165) to send young scientists and young leaders to study in the countries which have more advanced higher educational systems; has granted permits to overseas tertiary institutions to establish their campuses in Vietnam; has allowed Vietnamese tertiary institutions to cooperate with their foreign partners to train human resources which are needed by the country's labour market; and has facilitated Vietnamese tertiary institutions to attract more and more overseas students to

¹ Emphasis is mine

come and study in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese universities have actively responded to the internationalisation process. They have modified their curricula to meet the international standards; they have adapted their courses to create credit equivalence so that those courses can be transferred to those existing in the curricula of other tertiary institutions in the world; they have carried out joint education programmes, joint research programmes, and faculty and student exchange programmes; they have been actively involved in sandwich programmes with their foreign partners in various countries of the world; and many Vietnamese universities have even attempted to use English as the medium of instruction for some of their courses. **All the aforementioned activities of Vietnamese universities cannot be carried out successfully without the help of English – the most important global language of today** (cf. Crystal [2]). At this point, it would be appropriate to ask the question: “What are the roles of English in the internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education?” To attempt an answer, I propose we ask another question: “What is the place of English in relation to other foreign languages which are currently taught in the Vietnamese educational system?”

As can be seen, the teaching of foreign languages is one of Vietnam’s major occupations. In Vietnam, educational theory and practice require that a secondary school pupil and a tertiary student should learn one foreign language (cf. Đỗ Huy Thịnh [3]). Among the hundreds of languages existing in the world, four are recognised as the official foreign languages to be taught in the Vietnamese formal educational system: English, Chinese, Russian and French. According to recent statistics of MOET, the

number of school pupils who study English as compared to the other three remaining official foreign languages accounts for 98,5%. And according to the research conducted by Hoàng Văn Vân [4], the number of undergraduates who study English at Vietnam National University, Hanoi accounts for 94%, and that of graduates, 92%. The fact that the number of pupils and students learning English far exceeds the number of those learning the other foreign languages is a clear indication of its unique position in the formal educational system of Vietnam. Moving a bit beyond the formal educational system, the unique position of English can be seen in the fact that it has become a compulsory requirement for middle-ranking government officials, a criterion for promotion and personal advancement, and even a gate keeper for many job seekers whose actual workplaces do not need to use English at all.

Turning to the question “What are the roles of English in the internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education?”, no one could deny the fact that in this rapidly changing world – The world of integration and internationalisation, English helps Vietnam to develop. In higher education, English has numerous roles to play, some of them can be enumerated below:

- To create understanding among universities in the world;
- To promote intercultural interactions in the academic world;
- To facilitate student and faculty exchange programmes;
- To carry out joint education and research programmes;
- To create course equivalence and course transfers;
- To prepare for students to study abroad;

- To be the medium of instruction; and above all
- To provide a window on the world's science and technology.

5. English Language Teaching at Vietnamese Tertiary Level

English language teaching in Vietnam during the past few decades has witnessed the utilization of various teaching models which were originally developed in Western Europe and North America and were then transferred either wholesale or in piecemeal to Vietnam: the grammar-translation method in the 1950s, the audio-lingual methods in the 1960s, the structural approach in the 1970s, and the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT) since the early 1980s up till now. When applied to the teaching of English as a discipline, these foreign-designed teaching models, particularly CLT have proved to be of some success. This is due to the fact that English in this EFL classroom (context) is said to operate on all three levels: metalinguistics, pedagogy and communication. **Metalinguistically it is a means of instruction; pedagogically it is the content of instruction, and communicatively it is a means of communication** (cf. Phillips & Shettlesworth [5]). However, when applied to the teaching of English as a subject at tertiary level, these foreign-designed teaching models, particularly CLT do not seem to work properly. This may be due to the following reasons.

- All the courses in Vietnamese tertiary institutions are non-English medium. This suggests in part that there is a serious lack of a natural environment for students to practise communicating in English.

- The student's exposure to English is quite limited (only about 210 contact hours per four academic years, and only 3 or 4 hours a week in the first two or three years).

- Many of the tertiary teachers haven't had a chance to study English in an English speaking country, and many of them do not normally communicate in English and cannot sustain teaching that mainly depends on communicative interactions.

- The content of teaching does not seem to meet the needs of the students.

- There is often a serious mismatch between teaching and testing.

- Only a small percentage of the students use English after graduation.

- The main motivation to learn English of many tertiary students is to pass exams.

- The normal English class is large; the acoustic quality is poor. The only sure aids available are the blackboard and a cassette/CD player, and the frequent voice heard is the teacher's based on what s/he makes of the day's textbook lesson (cf. Tickoo [6]).²

- English is taught and learned in a very acquisition-poor environment: there are almost no group works, very little to promote learner- and learning-centred classroom organization, and there is almost no communication in English outside the classroom. (For more detail on these points, see Hoàng Văn Vân *et al.* [7]).

Although much effort has been made, the quality of learning English as a subject is still very poor. Many tertiary students, after graduating from the university are still unable

² There have been some improvements in the use of technical facilities to teach English such as PC, Internet, but the use to which they are put in the normal tertiary English classroom is still limited.

to carry out even a simple conversation in English.

6. Some False Expectations Concerning the Output Level of English as a Subject

The limitations to the teaching of English as a subject are obvious, but there are still false expectations about its required output level. Many educational administrators wrongly believe that with as many as 210 contact hours, all undergraduates should be able to communicate fluently in English in all four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). This wrong expectation of the tertiary students' English output level can also be seen in MOET's stipulation that on graduating from the university, students must have got a TOEFL score of 550 points or an IELTS score of 6.0 points [8]. At present, although the required output level of English as a subject at tertiary level has dropped to a TOEFL score of 400 points for undergraduate level and 450 points for master (graduate) level [9], and 500 points for doctoral level [10], it is doubtful if Vietnamese undergraduates and graduates could achieve these goals if real international tests are applied.³ Further, while the required output

levels are high, the teaching and learning conditions are poor, the need to learn English is not for communication but for passing exams, and the time allocation for class contacts is modest (about 210 periods⁴ for undergraduate level and 60 periods for master level), it is doubtful whether the requirements set for English as a subject in the Vietnamese higher education sector are a reality.

Among the teachers of English, there have been different views on which register of English should be taught at tertiary level: general English, academic English, or a combination of the two. There has even been an extreme view which holds that teaching ESP means teaching the content subjects through the medium of English, the view which seems to drive the Vietnamese ELT education to a deadlock (cf. Hoàng Văn Vân [11]).⁵ To make matters worse, there has been a tendency to apply the method of teaching English as a discipline to that of teaching English as a subject. As a result, students of English as a subject are demotivated as they are unable to understand the teacher and to make themselves understood in an extremely acquisition-poor environment.

It should be emphasized that where English is heard and spoken for no more than 3 or 4 hours a week and at least is used to individually

³Since 2008, Vietnam has been exercising the national project entitled "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008-2020" [12]. The goal of this project is to thoroughly renovate the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the national education system, to implement a new programme on teaching and learning foreign languages at all school and university levels, which aims to achieve by the year 2015 a clear (visible) progress on foreign language knowledge and skills of the Vietnamese human resources, especially those working in some prioritized sectors; and by the year 2020 most Vietnamese young people whoever graduate from secondary schools, vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment, making foreign languages a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese

people in the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country" (P. 4). Four years has passed; works such as curriculum designing, textbook writing, teacher training and retraining have been implemented throughout the educational system, but what has been done still leaves some doubt about whether the project could fulfill its ambitious aims.

⁴ One period equivalent to 50 minutes

⁵ The notion of ESP which has its origin from Western Europe seems to be an illusion. It is argued that one can not teach English for special/specific purposes without teaching its specialization contents in English (cf. Halliday, [13]). For this reason, for about 2 years now, the notion of ESP seems to have been given up and the notion of EAP (English for academic purposes) has been adopted at VNU, Hanoi, a reality that may sadden the ESP advocates.

carry out one-sided tasks, to expect a tertiary student to be able to communicate in all four macro-skills in English appears to be somewhat too optimistic, and that for an acquisition-poor and non-English medium classroom, the theory that supports the communicative approach to English teaching at tertiary level in Vietnam raises some doubts of a serious nature. For this reason, it is suggested that in the present context we accept the view that teaching English as a subject at Vietnamese tertiary level must be satisfied with limited aims so that the teacher of English of average competence is capable of performing his or her legitimate roles in difficult circumstances.

7. Concluding Remarks and Implications for Teaching and Research

In this paper, I have been concerned with the roles of English in the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam. I have presented the notions of internationalisation and globalisation and their impacts on higher education. Realizing that internationalisation and globalisation provide higher education with both opportunities and challenges, I have devoted a section to discussing the opportunities Vietnamese higher education may have and the challenges it may experience. I have also attempted to show that English as a major language of international communication has a predominant role in the internationalisation of higher education in Vietnam. It is gratifying to see that the number of people studying English has been increasing, and that much effort has been made to improve the quality of English teaching and learning at tertiary level. It is, however, disappointing to see that although higher education is an active

actor in the internationalisation process, its main window on the world of science and technology – the English language – has not yet been properly planned and implemented to meet the requirements and standards of internationalisation.

As the most widely used language in the world as well as in Vietnam, English, I guess, will continue to dominate the world's foreign language education. The future of English in this century is assured, whatever one's feeling or attitude may be toward the "linguistic and perhaps cultural imperialism" (Phillipson [14]) of English. As internationalization is becoming a strong tendency, English will have more roles to play in Vietnam. It will certainly continue to act as our major window to the world's science and technology.

The internationalization of higher education in Vietnam presents a new paradigm and calls for a new vision for English language teaching and research. The growth of English as a global language and the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam have created a real need for us to rethink of the roles of English in the development of higher education in Vietnam. The fact which still remains is that English both as a discipline and a subject at Vietnamese tertiary level is learnt for objectives many of which do not seem to meet the real needs of the learner and the requirements of an internationalised higher education. This suggests that in order to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning at tertiary level in Vietnam to meet the requirements of internationalization and globalization, much remains to be done in the fields of foreign language policy-making, curriculum and syllabus design, material development, teaching methodology, learning strategies, testing, teacher training and

retraining, cross-cultural studies, and translation studies. Whether we will continue to import foreign-designed language teaching models as we used to or we ourselves will undertake the task of developing new models for teaching and learning English in our specific context, and whether we are happy with being the users of the available foreign-designed teaching models or we ourselves will try to establish our own identity in the world of foreign language education and research will largely depend on our foreign language development strategy.

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Tiếng Anh trong quá trình quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam

Hoàng Văn Vân

*Khoa Sau Đại học, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,
144 Xuân Thủy, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

Tóm tắt: Mục đích của bài viết này là thảo luận vai trò của tiếng Anh trong quá trình quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam. Bài viết bắt đầu bằng việc trình bày hai khái niệm “quốc tế hóa” và “toàn cầu hóa” và thảo luận những tác động của hai quá trình này đối với giáo dục đại học. Sau đó bài viết chỉ ra những cơ hội mà quốc tế hóa và toàn cầu hóa mang lại cho giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam và những thách thức giáo dục đại học Việt Nam gặp phải do kết quả của quốc tế hóa và toàn cầu hóa. Sau khi thảo luận những vấn đề trên, bài viết chuyển sang thảo luận vai trò của tiếng Anh trong quá trình toàn cầu hóa giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam. Bài viết mô tả vấn đề hiện trạng của việc dạy và học tiếng Anh ở bậc đại học, trình bày một số nhầm tưởng về yêu cầu sản phẩm đầu ra của tiếng Anh như một môn học. Trong phần kết luận, bài viết lập luận rằng do quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học đang trở thành một xu thế tất yếu cho nên tiếng Anh sẽ có nhiều vai trò hơn ở Việt Nam. Thực tế này yêu cầu phải có một tầm nhìn mới đối với giảng dạy và nghiên cứu; nó tạo ra các nhu cầu thực sự để các nhà nghiên cứu, các nhà quản lý giáo dục, các nhà hoạch định chính sách ngoại ngữ và giáo viên tiếng Anh nhận thức lại vai trò của tiếng Anh trong việc phát triển giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam, để tiếng Anh thực sự trở thành cánh cửa cho chúng ta tiếp thu khoa học công nghệ của thế giới và tinh hoa trí tuệ của nhân loại.

Từ khóa: quốc tế hóa, toàn cầu hóa, giáo dục đại học, ngôn ngữ toàn cầu, sự nhầm tưởng.