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HOW VIETNAMESE STUDENTS ARE READY FOR ENGLISH MEDIUM EDUCATION: A BRIEF REVIEW ON STUDENT ATTAINMENT

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Abstract: The year 2025 marks the beginning of a new phase in Vietnam's education system, particularly in English language education. Following Conclusion No. 91 by the Politburo, which stresses the importance of improving students' foreign language proficiency and aims to gradually establish English as a second language in schools - a goal described as both challenging and necessary (Vietnamnet, 2024), multiple policy dialogues, reviews, and reports have been conducted to lay the legal groundwork for this significant reform. Given the current state of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam and the expectations for English Medium Education (EME), it is essential for education stakeholders to assess how teachers and students are prepared for their roles in this reform. Their readiness will be crucial in achieving the goals of international integration and economic growth. This systematic review examines Vietnam's foreign language policies, student achievement, and the opportunities and challenges in English language education. The findings aim to provide insights into students' current capabilities, serving as a foundation for future policy developments in EME.

Keywords: English Medium Education (EME), assess, student achievement, opportunities, challenges

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HỌC SINH VIỆT NAM SẴN SÀNG CHO GIÁO DỤC BẰNG TIẾNG ANH NHƯ THỂ NÀO: TỔNG QUAN NGẮN VỀ THÀNH TÍCH HỌC TẬP CỦA HỌC SINH

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Tóm tắt: Năm 2025 đánh dấu một giai đoạn mới trong hệ thống giáo dục Việt Nam, đặc biệt là với giáo dục tiếng Anh. Kết luận số 91 của Bộ Chính trị nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc nâng cao năng lực ngoại ngữ của học sinh và hướng tới việc dần đưa tiếng Anh trở thành ngôn ngữ thứ hai trong trường học - một mục tiêu được coi là vừa thách thức vừa cần thiết (Vietnamnet, 2024). Để chuẩn bị cho cuộc cải cách quan trọng này, nhiều cuộc đối thoại chính sách, các chương trình đánh giá và báo cáo đã được thực hiện nhằm xây dựng nền tảng pháp lý vững chắc. Từ thực trạng giảng dạy và học tập tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam hiện nay cùng với những kỳ vọng đối với giáo dục bằng tiếng Anh (EME), chúng ta, gồm tất cả các bên liên quan tới chính sách, cần đánh giá mức độ sẵn sàng của giáo viên và học sinh trong việc đảm nhận vai trò của mình để thực hiện công cuộc cải cách này. Việc học sinh được chuẩn bị kỹ lưỡng sẽ đóng vai trò quyết định trong việc đạt được mục tiêu hội nhập quốc tế và phát triển kinh tế. Bài tổng quan này sẽ xem xét một cách hệ thống các chính sách ngoại ngữ của Việt Nam, thành tích học tập của học sinh, cũng như các cơ hội và thách thức trong giáo dục tiếng Anh; qua đó, cung cấp những hiểu biết sâu sắc về năng lực hiện tại của học sinh, làm cơ sở cho các bước phát triển chính sách EME trong tương lai.

Từ khóa: giáo dục bằng tiếng Anh, đánh giá, cơ hội, thách thức, thành tích học tập của học sinh

1. Background Information

The year 2025 has marked the beginning of a new era in Vietnamese education in general and English language education in particular. Following Conclusion No. 91 of the Politburo that emphasized the need to enhance students' foreign language proficiency and "gradually make English the second language in schools"- "a challenging but necessary task" (Vietnamnet, 2024) several policy dialogues supported by reviews and reports have been held to prepare the legal foundation for this high impact initiative.

One common concern emerging from the recent policy dialogue jointly organised in February by the Vietnam National Institute of Education Studies, the National Foreign Language Project and the British Council regarding English Medium Education (EME or EMI - English Medium Instruction) is that it may take several decades for EME to establish and develop in Vietnamese schools, and decisions should be made in due course on the role of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. Another concern is whether EFL teachers and their students are ready for this transitional phase to EME.

Given the current context of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam and the expectation for EME, it is necessary for all stakeholders in education to have an overview of the key human factors - EFL teachers and learners on how ready they are to effectively play the role in this education reform towards international integration and economic development.

This systematic review will provide data and statistics on Vietnam's foreign language policies, student attainment, and opportunities versus challenges for English language teaching and learning.

2. Policy and Practice Overview

English has always been given a privileged place in the general school education curriculum in Vietnam and English language teaching (ELT) is a key agenda in Vietnam's education policies (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Hoang, 2020). Practically, Vietnamese Prime Minister issued Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg approving the Project "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System for the Period 2008-2020" (hereafter Project 2020) with the purpose of improving the instruction of foreign language and through foreign languages within the nation's educational system.

In 2017, taking into notice the students' low proficiency, inability to communicate in English in lower secondary and especially upper secondary schools (Le, 2017) and other problems that hinder the achievement of the Project goal (Hoang, 2020), the Government reviewed and adapted the Project's goals, and the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg on the "Approval, Adjustment and Supplementation of the Project 'Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System' for the Period 2017-2025".

On December 26, 2018, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) issued the *General English Education Curriculum* (GEEC), which is the first of its kind to implement MoET's "one curriculum, multiple textbooks policy", and the *General School Education Introductory English Curriculum for Grade 1 and Grade 2* to allow a two-year option to English learning for students of Grades 1 and 2. In addition to this, since the issuance of the Circular 50/2020/TT-BGDĐT, English has also been introduced to kindergartens in several big cities and provinces. In tandem with the introduction of English programs, many implementation activities have been carried out such as training and retraining teachers to meet new English language proficiency requirements, updating and upskilling pedagogy for teachers, writing new textbooks and supplementary materials, renovating schools' infrastructure, improving teaching and learning equipment, and introducing new modes of testing and examination (Hoang, 2020; 2022).

Accordingly, it has been established that: (1) English is a compulsory subject taught for school children from Grade 3 to Grade 12 in 63 provinces with a total of 1155 periods, which is 455 periods more than allocated in the 2006 General School Education English Curriculum (Hoang, 2020); (2) The specific time allocation is 4 hours/week for primary level and 3 hours/week for lower and upper secondary schools; (3) Clear benchmarks for basic education levels have been set with Level 1/A1 for primary school, Level 2/A2 for lower secondary school and level 3/B1 for upper secondary school, as specified in the 6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam (MOET, 2014); (4) Attempts will have to be made to have 100% of 3rd and 6th graders access to the 10-year foreign language curriculum by 2025; (5) CLIL (teaching English using CLIL)/STEAM/STEM is gradually integrated in the school program; and (6) Students having international English proficiency certificates are accepted to certain schools/universities or given priorities in enrolment procedures.

2.1. General Education

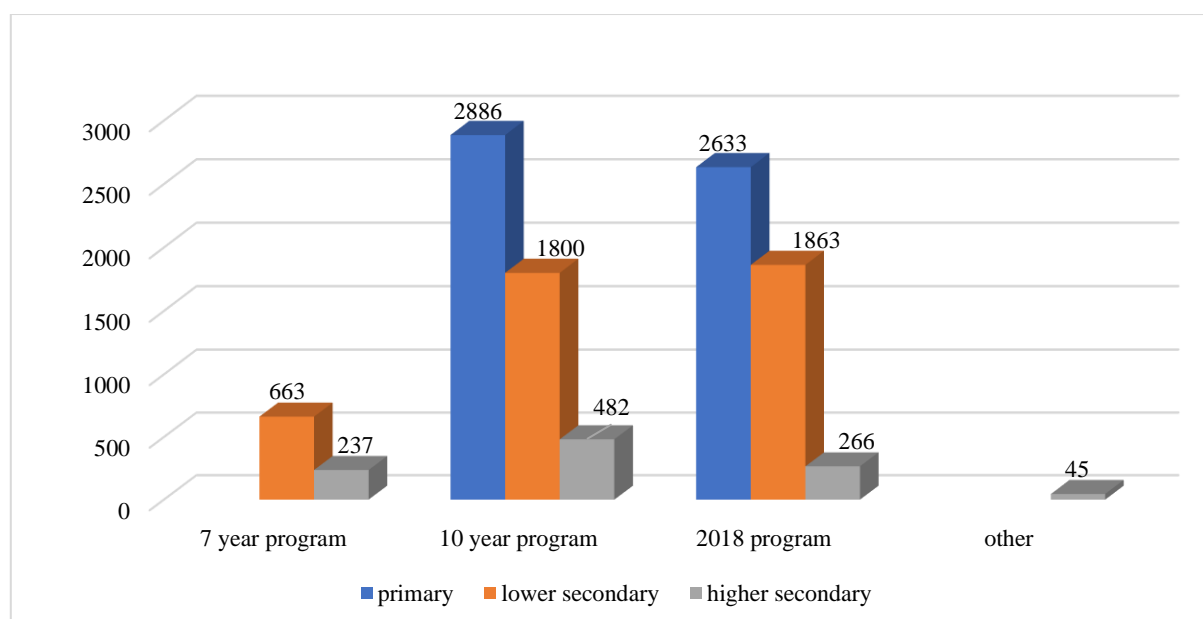
Reports by Viện Khoa học Giáo dục Việt Nam (VNIES) (2023) show that, following

the policies, gradual improvements have been made in terms of: (1) the number of students learning English, (2) the number of schools teaching 10-year English program and the 2018 English program, (3) the students' achievements in school exit tests, (4) the number of students having international certificate in language proficiency, (5) the students' and teachers' positive attitudes to English language teaching and learning, (6) the evaluation on students' improvement from teachers and students' perspectives, (7) the improvements in language skills, (8) the number of English centers and extra English classes provided by schools, and (9) the enhancement of the bilingual and dual-language programs as follows:

(1) The number of students learning English at school increased year after year. According to annual reports (VNIES, 2023), by 2023, 663 lower secondary schools (with 195,512 students) and 237 higher secondary schools (with 147,091 students) in Vietnam follow the 7-year English program; while 2886 primary schools (751,894 students), 1800 other lower secondary schools (382,201 students), and 482 other higher secondary schools (301,399 students) follow the 10-year English program. Another impressive number of 2633 primary schools (925,480 students), 1863 lower secondary schools (477,577 students) and 266 higher secondary schools (87,467 students) have implemented GEEC, leaving 45 other high secondary schools (253 students) following other programs (Table 1).

Table 1

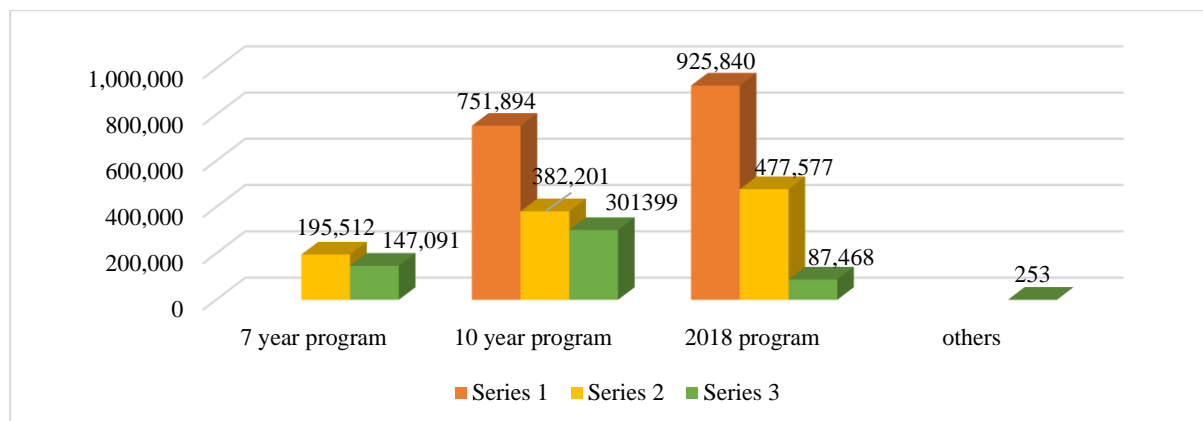
Number of Schools Teaching English in School Year 2022-2023 in Each Program (VNIES, 2023)



The number of students following each of the English program in school year can be seen from table 2 below:

Table 2

Number of Students Following Each of the English Program in School Year 2022-2023 (VNIES, 2023)

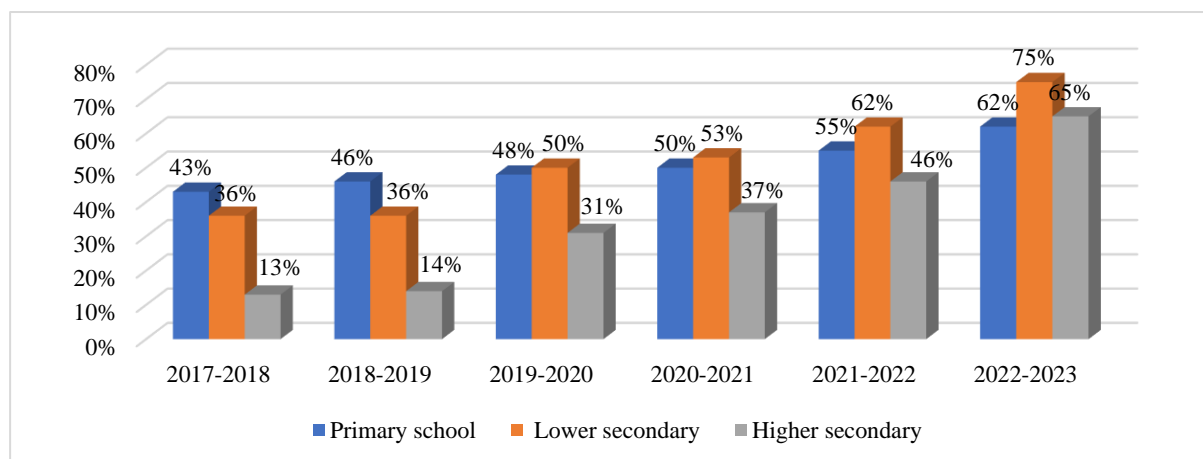


(2) VNIES's statistics (2023) also show that the number of students following 10-year program in both pilot and GEEC (the 2018 program) increased from 43% to 62% for primary schools, 36% to 75% for lower secondary schools and 13% to 65% for higher secondary schools between school year 2017-2018 and school year 2022-2023 as seen in table 3. The number of children from kindergartens that implemented the English introductory program also kept rising. However, it should be noted that the aims of the 2018 GEEC program is to provide students with a tool for international communication, exchanging information, enhancing scientific and technical knowledge, and other cultures, thereby contributing to understanding between peoples, forming in students a sense of global citizenship, contributing to the development of their personal qualities and capacities. Through learning English and learning about different world cultures, students can better understand and love the language and culture of Vietnam, rather than to serve as EMI (Hoang, 2022).

Added to the increasing number of students following the 2018 GEEC, until April 2022, 64 education institutions in Vietnam have been certified by Cambridge International Education (CIE); and the students in these institutions follow dual-education programs.

Table 3

Number of Students Following 10-Year English Program in Both Pilot and 2018 Programs (VNIES, 2023)



(3) Regarding the numbers of students attending School Exit English Test, the figures were 866993 (in 2021), 866196 (in 2022) and increased to 876102 in 2023. The average score gained is 6/10. The positive sign is that the number of students scoring under 5/10 decreased from 51.56% in 2022 to 44.83% in 2023 (VNIES, 2023).

(4) Another index that shows the improvements in English language teaching and learning in Vietnam is the number of students having International Language Proficiency Certificate (ILPC) increased from 28,620 in 2021 to 46,670 in 2023. Thus, around 47,000 students were exempted from English school exit test due to having ILPC (VNIES, 2023). British Council (2023) also reported that the average IELTS band score gained by Vietnamese test takers in 2022 was 6.2, ranking 23 out of 40 countries having the IELTS organised. Test-taking age becomes younger after 5 years, with 62% of IELTS takers aged 16 to 22 compared to 15.1% in 2018.

(5) Concerning the students' interest in learning English after the 2018 English program has been introduced, 88.4% students felt they had interest (31.4% at average level, 27.1% above average and 29.9% highly interested) in learning English (VNIES, 2023).

(6) In terms of teachers' evaluation on students' improvement after 1 year of learning the new English program (GEEC 2018), 61.6% perceived that their students' English proficiency has improved, and 34.3% felt their students' reading and writing skills had improved much more than listening and speaking. When it came to students' self-assessment on their improvements following this program, 52.9% agreed that their English had been highly improved; 30.7% agreed that their English had been extremely highly improved, making a total of 83.6% perceived to have English improvements.

(7) Regarding language skills, the GEEC 2018 has proved to result in higher general language skill improvement for 83.6 % of the students, with the highest improvement observed in reading (85.4%), followed by that in writing (84%), listening (82.6%) and speaking (82.2%). These improvements were also recorded higher in the Central part compared to those by students from other North and South parts (VNIES, 2023).

(8) A robust boost in the number of students attending extra English classes has been recorded nationwide in a study by Tran (2024). In this study, of 71,031 students nationwide, 90% have from one to three extra classes, with 53% take classes inside school and another 37% have classes outside school. Others attend online courses or one-on-one coaching, learning with tutors. With this, the students' aim is to communicate better in English, to gain higher score at school, to get higher IELTS band score, or to study abroad in the future. With regard to the number per region, Central part have highest participation in extra classes (52.31%) compared to 51.44% in the North and 49.15% in the South. The implementation of extra English classes is reported to be highest in urban (41.6%) against rural (35%) and mountainous areas (30.4%). This, as explained by Tran (2024), is because of the differences in infrastructure and resources as well as the practical needs for learning. The supplementary English learning has also been evaluated as relatively effective (by 67.7% in big cities, 55.7% in countryside, and 30.4% in mountainous areas).

(9) Moreover, the pilot materials for teaching Maths, Science and Biology in English have also been developed and implemented in a number of schools since 2023. Practically, the programs and materials have been piloted in 5 schools, teaching students of Grade 4, 7, and 10. Both hard and soft materials are integrated in the teaching and learning programs to ensure the achievements of the contents and objectives of the GEEC 2018 (VNIES, 2024).

2.2. Bilingual and Dual-Language Programs

Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP stipulates that integrated programs of Vietnam are the programs that integrate with foreign programs, must not coincide with Vietnam's current education program in both contents and knowledge while ensuring the Vietnam's education goals.

Practically, Vietnam currently has Cambridge, Oxford, IB education program, and dual degree programs. Cambridge education program is implemented in 73 schools (38 in the North, 30 in the South and 5 in the Central part) in 13 international schools, 53 private schools and 7 public schools. Oxford program is implemented in 12 schools (5 primary schools, 1 lower secondary school and 6 inter-level/escalator schools). IB program is implemented in 14 international schools and 6 private schools, and dual degree programs are implemented in 7 public schools in Hanoi including: Hanoi - Amsterdam, Cau Giay, Nghia Tan, Trung Vuong, Ngo Si Lien, Thanh Xuan, and Chu Van An (VNIES, 2024).

Students from these programs have been reported to perform well in national and international competitions. For example, students from dual degree programs have won 62 national prizes, 102 international prizes; 231 students sit IGCSE exams (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) and gain A/A*. More than 70% of the students have reached the outcome standards for Maths and Physics, and nearly 50% for Chemistry and Economics or Business. When it comes to their attitudes toward these dual programs, they consider their language ability useful "baggage" for their future identity, which would enable them to engage with diverse people and communities in the world. Moreover, they believe that they can gain better English proficiency, better skills and knowledge, and benefits from higher quality education compared to their counterparts in public schools (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

3. Opportunities

Vietnam is having a number of opportunities in terms of socio-cultural context, attitudinal readiness, linguistic competence, teacher collaboration, as detailed below.

3.1. Socio-Cultural Context

English has gained its status as the most important foreign language in Vietnam and second-most popular language only after Vietnamese (Hoang, 2020). It owes its current status and the prospect as a second language in school in Vietnam to a number of factors including: (1) the policy support (Hoang, 2020; Tran et al., 2023; Do, 2024; Nguyen, 2024); (2) globalisation and economic integration (Hoang, 2020; Nguyen, 2024; Ho, 2024); (3) open opportunities for personal education (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Le & Tran, 2023); (4) employability and promotion (Hoang, 2011, 2016, 2020; Nguyen, 2024; Tran et al., 2023); (5) integrated curricular (Le, 2024; Do, 2024); (6) parental and societal demand (Ho, 2024; Tran, 2024); and (7) technology integration (Ha, 2024; Tran, 2020). Specifically:

(1) Regarding policy support, Vietnam has strong governmental backing with a number of legal instruments, including: Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2008); Decision No. 72/2012/QĐ-TTg (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2014); Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2017); Circular No. 21/2018 (Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2018); Education Law (Quốc Hội, 2019); Resolution No. 57/2024-NQ/TW (Trung Ương, 2024); Decision No. 1600/QĐ-TTg2020 (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2024); Decision No. 1705/QĐ-TTg (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2024).

(2) Vietnam has also been placing great emphasis on globalisation and economic integration (Hoang, 2020; Nguyen, 2024; Ho, 2024), thus there is growing emphasis on

teaching and learning English for economic development, global communication.

(3) English has been recognised as providing open opportunities for personal education at tertiary level (Le & Tran, 2023), and also at school level (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

(4) English has been realised as enhancing students' employability and promotion (Hoang, 2011, 2016, 2020; Nguyen, 2024; Tran et al., 2023) thus more emphasis is laid on learning English for better employment prospects.

(5) Vietnam has been adopting and implementing integrated curricular (e.g., Cambridge, IB) that align with international standards, fostering bilingual competencies (Le & Luong, 2024; Do, 2024).

(6) Another opportunity is the increasing parental and societal demand for students' early English education as they have recognised its future benefits (Ho, 2024; Tran, 2024).

(7) Additionally, there is an expanding use of digital learning platforms and electronic learning resources, making English education more accessible to school students in various regions and at various levels (Ha, 2024). Moreover, student's digital experience and proficiency were found to link to their positive learning experience (Tran, 2020).

3.2. Stakeholder Attitudinal Readiness

According to the latest study by VNIES experts (VNIES, 2024), that an increasing number of both students and parents have positive attitudes to English learning can help create a conducive environment for implementing English as a second language. First, the majority of students (more than 70%) express enthusiasm for learning English, more than 70% having formed effective learning habits, seeing it as an essential skill for future academic and career success, as shown in a strong intrinsic motivation to improve English skills with over 50% of the surveyed students in a study participating in supplementary English classes (Tran, 2024). Second, students associate English proficiency with access to global opportunities, including international education and improved career prospects (Tran, 2024; Tran, 2024). Positive attitudes to students' learning English also come from parents, advocating for their children's early and consistent exposure to English. Furthermore, in urban areas, parents actively invest in English education, including private tutoring and extracurricular activities (Nguyen, 2024; Ho, 2024; Tran, 2024).

3.3. Student Linguistic Competence

There have been statistics that demonstrate that Vietnamese students possess strong foundational skills and an active interest in English learning, presenting robust opportunities for educational programs to leverage and further enhance English as a second language nationwide.

(1) Students have early development of core skills: Many students achieve basic competencies in communication through the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), particularly listening and speaking. This indicates a strong foundation to build upon in more advanced levels (Tran, 2024).

(2) An increasing number of students participate in supplementary English classes in and outside schools and universities. Over 50% of students across surveyed schools engage in supplementary English classes, with significant improvements noted in all four skills, particularly reading comprehension. Students report enhanced academic performance and communication skills through these programs (Tran, 2024). Particularly, up to 80 % students of Grade 5, 73.5% students of Grade 9 and 58% students of Grade 12 have A1, A2 and B1 respectively, according to Tran's survey (2024) carried out among 44,541 students in 10 cities

and provinces (41.7% from cities, 44% from rural and 14.3% from mountainous).

(3) There is a broadening exposure to international standards: An increasing number of students participate in internationally recognized exams like IELTS showcasing improved linguistic capabilities and aspirations for global standards (Vu, 2024).

(4) There is a regional engagement in teaching and learning English at schools. Specifically, participation rates in English learning activities are relatively uniform across regions, with the highest being 52.31% in Central Vietnam. This highlights a widespread acceptance of English learning across the nation (Tran, 2024).

(5) The assessment and evaluation system has been gradually improved. Students report positive outcomes from evaluations and assessments, particularly in skills like reading and writing, showing the effectiveness of current teaching strategies. Assessment methods have also been varied and improved (Tran, 2024; Vu, 2024).

3.4. Teacher Collaboration

A number of activities have been implemented to enhance the collaboration among teachers of English.

Practically, forums and meetings for extra activities for teachers from various schools are held by provinces or schools, promoting the exchanges of experience in teaching, lesson planning or using the new text-books, which have been perceived to be effective and beneficial to teachers. Departments of Education and Training (DoETs) and schools also conduct micro-teaching, team lesson-planning, and lesson observing activities (MoET, 2019). Specifically, *Handbook for building and developing networks for learning and using foreign languages* has been introduced to guide the building up of communities of practice for English teachers at various levels, as required by Decision 2478/QĐ-BGDĐT on 22rd August, 2014. Reports on the implementation are to be submitted to the MoET by 30th June annually. Evaluation Report 2019 shows the networks have been established for teachers to share teaching and learning activities and experiences. Extra-curricular activities are reported to be quite diversified and held monthly.

Moreover, Lesson Study model, characterized as an approach in which a group of teachers collaboratively focuses on a specific aspect of students' learning development by collectively designing, teaching, observing, and assessing lessons (Jansen et al., 2021), has also been applied in English classes in schools in Vietnam, though limited due to the exam-centricity of the education system. Studies of Vietnamese teachers' perception of Lesson Study show that this has been perceived as a collaborative enhancement of teaching practices (Le et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Le et al., 2024), an enhancement in understanding of students' learning needs (Le et al., 2024), a means of professional growth and empowerment (Le et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Le et al., 2024). The research also pinpointed the problems in teachers' resistance to change established practices and to engage in collaborative activities that Lesson Study requires in addition to the time constraints Vietnamese teachers face (Le et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Le et al., 2024).

4. Challenges for English Language Education

4.1. Resource Challenges

Regarding the resource and training gaps, there are a number of challenges facing schools. First, facilities including classrooms, materials and equipment for teaching both

general English and English for CLIL/STEAM/STEM are insufficient. Added to that is big class size (Ha, 2024; Le, 2024; Do, 2024; Tran, 2024). Tran et al. (2024), and Ngo and Tran (2023) also list a number of contextual challenges facing Vietnam's English language education namely the big class size, mixed level classes, teachers' heavy teaching workloads, a shortage of class time, the big gap between the ambitious policy goals and the implementation reality, outdated/inappropriate textbooks, the lack of learning facilities and reference materials, traditional teaching and learning for examinations, a lack of environment to practice and use English and learners' low levels of motivation to learn English (Le, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Tran, 2019, cited in Tran et al., 2023; Ngo & Tran, 2023).

A research on the application of digital materials in schools confirms that although digital materials for Maths, Science, Natural Science and Biology are available now, 50 - 60% of the teachers and management staff from 5 schools evaluate that materials need further adjustments and modification, only 20 - 40% think the materials do not need any further improvement. Moreover, English digital materials are perceived to be too difficult, thus not appropriate for Vietnamese school students due to the differences in the programs and contents; meanwhile bilingual materials for CLIL/STEAM/STEM subjects are not available in all basic school levels (Le et al., 2023, cited in Do, 2024).

Secondly, school tests are often discrete-point rather than real competency-based (Ngo, 2022) and are still perceived to have negative washback as perceived by around 20% of teachers and management staff in Vu's (2024) study. That is not to mention the lack of a test bank and a bank of questions for competency-based tests. Assessment system must be reconstructed somehow to combine both summative and formative assessment, and to reflect students' outcomes based on both domestic and international assessment standards (Le & Luong, 2024; Vu, 2024). Another concern is the absence of assessment guideline materials for teachers.

As mentioned above, the school students' English learning motivation is low and though has been improved following series of renovations in curriculum, materials, teaching methods (VNIES, 2023). A disparity in the levels of interest in English learning among public schools (57%), private schools (49.9%) and gifted schools (63.5%) has been observed. These English learning interest differences also occur among students of different education levels, with 67.4% for primary level compared to 59.4% and 47.7% at lower and higher secondary school levels, respectively. Regions and areas also witness the differences in interest levels, with students from the Central part showing higher interest in English learning (61.8%) against 55.4% in the North and 57.8% in the South. Moreover, students' self-regulated learning remains low - under 60% of the students have been developing the competency, out of which under 10% can do this well (Tran, 2024).

Regarding the implementation of bilingual /dual programs, Le and Luong (2024) asserted that a single program is definitely not sufficient. There must be qualified teachers, supporting staff, materials (both paper-based and digital), and other facilities, plus a good system of assessment.

As a result, students' current proficiency level (either by VSTEP or international benchmarks such as IELTS or TOEFL), though generally already improved, remains quite low, especially for learning other subjects in English or for following bilingual education programs (Le & Luong, 2024; Ha, 2024; Do, 2024). Practically, in a study evaluating Vietnam's possibility to have English as a second language, the number of students taking international tests is increasing but is still low, with 85.7% of the students (60,839) having never attended any international English test; only 3.4% (2,417) having already participated in more than 1 tests

including: IELTS - 7.1% (5,051), Cambridge Young Learners' Tests - 6.2% (4,437), TOEFL Primary - 4.1% (2,915), TOEFL Junior - 3.0% (2,159) (Vu, 2024).

4.2. Challenges with Linguistic Competence for Subject-Specific Instruction

Teachers' language skills pose the first problem. Approximately 50% of experienced teachers face challenges with their English proficiency, making it difficult to effectively teach integrated programs, thus, there is a need for specialized training. Up to 81% of surveyed teachers in a research emphasized the need for professional development programs to equip them with skills for subject-specific English instruction (Le & Luong, 2024; Do, 2024).

Students' proficiency remains low for learning other subjects in English or for following bilingual education programs (Le & Luong, 2024; Ha, 2024; Do, 2024). Their limited vocabulary and conceptual understanding complicate the problems. Practically, students struggle with subject-specific terminology and comprehension when being taught in English. Over 27% reported challenges in listening and speaking skills during assessments, highlighting difficulties in following English medium instruction programs (Vu, 2024). Additionally, students in rural areas and those at lower grades demonstrate uneven readiness for English medium subject-specific contents (Nguyen, 2024; Ha, 2024).

4.3. Challenges for Remote and Rural Areas

Due to the inadequate resources including: the lack of teachers, lack of basic facilities and equipment for teaching and learning, parents' low awareness of the role of English, and students' low motivation for learning, there remain a number of schools and students in rural/mountainous areas following previous English programs. For example, many schools in Bac Lieu, Ben Tre, Cao Bang, Dak Lak, Dien Bien, Gia Lai and Ha Giang are still following the 7-year or 10-year English program (VNIES, 2023).

The cost for materials and learning equipment is unaffordable to students in rural and mountainous areas. For example, a report on the situation from Ba Vi district - an area of about 30 km from Hanoi - shows that many parents cannot afford to pay an extra tuition of 120,000 to 150,000 VND (equivalent to 6-8 US dollars) for 4 periods/month for their children's learning with foreigners (Phung, 2024). This is just a common practice in rural areas in Vietnam.

Students have very limited opportunities to use both spoken and written and communicative English skills, meanwhile school boards have not paid due attention to the improvement of English teaching and learning. To worsen the situation, in rural/mountainous areas, teachers' average age is high and their first foreign language is often Russian, thus when switching to teach English (their second foreign language), they often feel hesitant to change attitudes and to update language knowledge and skills (Phung, 2024).

While students and parents in big cities see English language proficiency as providing an instrumental motivation, a useful tool for projecting their future identity, which would enable them to engage with diverse people and communities in the world (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017), students in mountainous areas find few reasons for learning. For example, as much as 85% of 300 high school students (16-18 years of age) in a study indicated that they used English to listen to music, to play video games, or to surf the web. Many students admitted that, although they often listened to music with English lyrics, they did not necessarily understand them. They also confirmed that the English language policy (English as an important foreign language) was neither effective nor appropriate for students (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). As a result, their motivation and self-study awareness were low (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Phung, 2024).

Parents also have low awareness of the role of English learning, thus providing no support nor encouragement for children's learning. Parents, in fact, want children to leave school as early as possible to join the labour market (Phung, 2024).

Students in mountainous areas face difficulties learning English as Vietnamese is their second language and they have already been struggling with Vietnamese as medium instruction, i.e. using Vietnamese to learn other subjects at school. This makes learning English as the third language even more challenging for both teachers and students (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Le, 2017).

Challenges also lie in the inadequate preparation of teachers for teaching ethnic minority students and the students' language barriers. Beyond the school setting, ethnic minority students' schooling opportunities were hindered by the ethnocentric attitude of the ethnic majority towards their learning capacity. Political and economic constraints in local communities also prevented ethnic minority students from accessing high-level education (Nguyen & Ha, 2023).

Therefore, the teachers were candid about their anxiety that the official language policies can result in disastrous consequences, suffering, and marginalization for remote and minority students. The study revealed that the English language policy specified in Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg seems to threaten students' educational capital on a large scale (Bui & Nguyen, 2016).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Obviously, Vietnam is making progress in its course to boost English teaching and learning at all levels (basic and tertiary) and in various aspects (resources and curriculum, teacher quality, students' linguistic competence and motivation...).

Given the existing problems plus challenges mentioned by Hoang (2020), including: (1) English having no population base in Vietnam like countries which used to be Britain's colonies, (2) English being neither the language of official institutions nor that of the media, (3) the extent to which English is used in workplaces is limited, (4) and the size of the English using population in Vietnam being very small, it seems there is a long way for English to gain a status as a second language in Vietnam.

A national strategic plan is required for the sustainable development of the proposed EME initiative. For the short-term future, several key recommendations include: (1) promoting CLIL/STEM/STEAM teaching at public schools in big cities, and re-structuring the curriculum to allocate a certain amount of time for these components; (2) integrating CLIL/STEAM/STEM components in language teacher education programs at tertiary level; (3) providing CLIL pedagogy for teacher trainees of other content subjects; (4) providing teacher training/upskilling regarding EMI/EME pedagogy for selected groups of school teachers who already have good English proficiency.

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