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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM'S GENERAL EDUCATION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

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Abstract: This paper presents a brief historical survey of English Language Teaching (ELT) in general education in Vietnam from 1954 to the present. The main purpose of the survey is to explore the progress achieved and the shortcomings that need to be addressed in ELT at this extremely important level of education. Using an adaptation and supplement of the prominent British applied linguist Peter Strevens's "theoretical model of language learning and teaching process" as the analytical framework, the survey focuses on exploring ELT in general education in Vietnam across four periods: (1) 1954 to 1975, (2) 1975 to 2002, (3) 2002 to 2018, and (4) 2018 to the present. The findings show that, over time, ELT in general education in Vietnam has achieved remarkable success. However, there are still some problems that need to be solved at both policy and implementation levels to further improve the quality of ELT at the general level of education in Vietnam in the years to come.

Keywords: ELT, general education, grammar-translation-oriented teaching, communication-oriented teaching

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GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH TRONG GIÁO DỤC PHỔ THÔNG VIỆT NAM: MỘT KHẢO SÁT LỊCH SỬ VẮN TẮT

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết này trình bày một khảo sát lịch sử vắn tắt về giảng dạy tiếng Anh trong giáo dục phổ thông ở Việt Nam từ năm 1954 đến nay. Mục đích chính của khảo sát là khám phá những tiến bộ đã đạt được và những hạn chế cần được giải quyết trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở cấp giáo dục cực kỳ quan trọng này. Sử dụng một phiên bản điều chỉnh và bổ sung của “mô hình lý thuyết về quá trình học và dạy ngôn ngữ” của nhà ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng nổi tiếng người Anh Peter Strevens làm khung phân tích, khảo sát tập trung vào nghiên cứu giảng dạy tiếng Anh trong giáo dục phổ thông ở Việt Nam qua bốn giai đoạn: (1) 1954 đến 1975, (2) 1975 đến 2002, (3) 2002 đến 2018, và (4) 2018 đến nay. Các kết quả cho thấy, qua thời gian, giảng dạy tiếng Anh trong giáo dục phổ thông ở Việt Nam đã đạt được những thành tựu đáng kể. Tuy nhiên, vẫn còn một số vấn đề cần phải giải quyết ở cả cấp độ chính sách và thực thi để tiếp tục cải thiện chất lượng giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở cấp giáo dục phổ thông ở Việt Nam trong những năm tới.

Từ khóa: giảng dạy tiếng Anh, giáo dục phổ thông, phương pháp giảng dạy hướng tới ngữ pháp-dịch, phương pháp giảng dạy hướng tới giao tiếp

1. Introduction

General education spans the compulsory schooling period for students typically aged 6 to 17. At this foundational level, students acquire the general and basic knowledge prescribed by the national curriculum. Successfully completing upper secondary school enables them to confidently transition into life, pursue vocational training at technical colleges, or continue their studies in higher education at universities. In any national system, general education holds an extremely important position: it serves as the foundation of the entire education system and acts as the crucial bridge between fundamental and advanced knowledge, ultimately fostering innovation. Consequently, the quality of general education profoundly impacts the quality of all subsequent higher levels of study.

It is not the ambition of this paper to explore the entire general education system in Vietnam. As the title indicates, our focus is specifically on examining the status of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Vietnam's general education from 1954 to the present. To make the task manageable, we organize the paper into five main sections. Section One introduces the study's topic. Section Two provides a tentative historical division of ELT in Vietnamese general education. Section Three briefly presents the theoretical orientations and the analytical framework of the study. Section Four offers a detailed survey of the ELT situation in Vietnam's general education from 1954 to the present. Finally, Section Five summarizes the progress made in ELT over the surveyed periods, highlights the drawbacks that require overcoming for future improvement, identifies limitations, and offers suggestions for further research.

2. The History of ELT Within Vietnam's General Education: A Tentative Division

Unlike the longer histories of ELT found in former British colonies such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, the history of ELT in Vietnam is relatively short. Extant studies by scholars and government documents indicate that ELT was officially introduced in Vietnamese schools in the mid-1950s (Do, 2007; Hoang, 2010; Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012; Tran, 2014).

The history of ELT in a country or community can be divided in various ways. For instance, Darus (2010) divides the history of ELT in Malaysia into two periods – “ELT in Malaysia during Pre-independence” and “ELT in Malaysia during Post-independence” – based on the year of independence from Britain (1957). Similarly, Hoang (2010) divides the history of ELT in Vietnam into “ELT in Vietnam before 1986” and “ELT in Vietnam after 1986”, using the turning point of Vietnam's “Đổi mới” (Renovation) policy in 1986. For the purposes of this study, we will divide the history of ELT in Vietnamese general education into four main periods: the first period extends from 1954 to 1975; the second period, from 1975 to 2002; the third period, from 2002 to 2018; and the fourth period, from 2018 to the present.

3. Theoretical Orientations and Analytical Framework

3.1. *Stevens's Theoretical Model of the Language Learning and Teaching Process*

While a great number of studies have focused on the factors or variables that contribute to the success or failure of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) learner (e.g., Skehan, 1989; Ellis, 1997; Sterns, 2001; Lighbown & Spada, 2006, 2013), far fewer studies exist on the variables that promote or hinder an entire ELT system within a country or community. To date, the only study directly relevant to this topic is arguably the theoretical work developed by the eminent British applied linguist Peter Stevens. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of this important theoretical study.

In a lucid, succinct and penetrating little book, *New Orientations in the Teaching of English* (Oxford University Press, 1985), Peter Stevens devotes the whole Chapter 2 to outlining a model of ELT called “Theoretical Model of the Language Learning and Teaching Process” (hereafter referred to as Stevens's ELT Model). This model offers numerous insights that can be used and adapted to develop the analytical framework for this study.

Stevens's ELT model consists of twelve elements: (1) Policy and Aims; (2) Administration and Organization; (3) Relevant Professional Disciplines; (4) Choice of LL/LT (language learning/language teaching) Types; (5) Teacher Training; (6) Approach; (7) Pedagogy, Methodology, Instruction, Teaching; (8) Syllabus Design; (9) Material Construction; (10) Constraints on LL/LT Achievement; (11) The Learner; and (12) Evaluation.

1. The “Policy and Aims” element reflects what Stevens (1985, p. 14, 1987, p. 12) calls the “public will,” which, in the Vietnamese context, corresponds to conclusions or directive documents from the Communist Party of Vietnam, resolutions from the National Assembly, or decisions from the Government. “Policy and Aims” serves as the social sanction for the organized provision of language instruction and represents the nations' response to public need. “Policy and Aims”, according to Stevens, takes account of the fact that different countries adopt different approaches to foreign languages: some make only minor gestures toward inclusion, while others integrate foreign language teaching from the start of primary education, or even use a foreign language as the medium of instruction in parts or all of their school systems. Crucially, “Policy and Aims” also indicates the “essential motive power”

driving the entire teaching and learning process. Two examples illustrate the function of the “Policy and Aims” element: (1) in the United States in the 1960s, after the launching of the first Russian satellite into orbit the country reacted by deciding that more Americans needed to have a better command of Russian; and (2) in Vietnam before 1986 when the economic relationship between Vietnam and the former Soviet Union was close, the learning of Russian was highly promoted, but after 1986 when Vietnam exercised “Đổi mới” policy known in English as “Renovation”, opening its door to the wider world, English became a number one foreign language to be taught and learned in the country’s education system.

2. The “Administration and Organization” element follows and implements the “Policy and Aims.” It represents the highest scale in the ladder of the implementation level. This component encompasses the financial and administrative provision for foreign language teaching within the education system (including schools, colleges, and universities). Specifically, it covers: funding and managing teacher training and salaries; building and expanding educational facilities; providing necessary books and equipment; running public examinations; organizing inspectorates; and supporting research and development. In a country like Vietnam, where the social and educational systems are heavily centralized, this element is often directly led and governed by the higher-level “Policy and Aims” element.

3. The “Relevant Professional Disciplines” element is concerned with putting the public will into operation. Its function is to support the large body of English language teachers in the country by providing access to a vast array of professional knowledge and experience. This knowledge, in turn, draws its theoretical roots from major disciplines such as: Education, Linguistics, Psychology, Social Theory, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, etc. The implication is that, to be effective, the ELT profession must seek assistance from various intellectual sources, “each with its own individual justification, yet each with its relevance for, and contribution to, the learning and teaching” (Strevens, 1985, p. 16). Similar to the “Policy and Aims” and “Administration and Organization” elements, this third element contributes to the “motive power” that sets the entire teaching and learning process in motion (Strevens, 1985, p. 17).

4. The “Choice of Language Learning/Language Teaching Types” element defines the parameters for instruction based on six key factors:

(i) *Pupil age*. This factor concerns generally the learner’s age group – specifically whether they are young children, adolescent, or adults.

(ii) *Stage of proficiency*. This factor relates to the learner’s current mastery of the foreign language, typically classified as elementary, intermediate, or advanced proficiency levels.

(iii) *Educational aims*. This factor addresses the purpose of the language instruction, distinguishing whether the focus is on general education, practical communication/command, special or vocational purposes.

(iv) *Learner involvement*. This factor relates to the learner’s motivation and status – specifically, whether foreign language learners are volunteers or non-volunteers (i.e., required to take the course).

(v) *Language of instruction*. This factor concerns the medium of instruction used in the education system, i.e. whether the language of instruction is the mother tongue (e.g., Vietnamese) or the target language (e.g., English), or another foreign language.

(vi) *Target language status*. This factor addresses the functional status of the target language within the country or the community, differentiating whether it is an English as a second language or English as a foreign language context.

5. The “Teacher Training” element is concerned with whether differentiated teacher training programs are offered to teachers of different educational levels (i.e., 3-year college-level programmes for primary and lower secondary teachers, and 4-year university-level programmes for upper secondary teachers) or if a single teacher training programme is offered to teachers of all general education levels (i.e., 4-year programmes for all primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels).

6. The “Approach” element refers to a commitment to specific, identifiable points of view or philosophies regarding foreign language teaching. For example, an ELT system might adhere to a set of ideas characterizing the Audio-lingual Method, the Direct Method, Task-based Teaching, or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Strevens notes that there is often significant confusion in ELT terminology over terms such as *approach*, *theory*, *method*, and *technique*.

7. The “Pedagogy, Methodology, Instruction, Teaching” element concerns the teacher’s presentation to learners of the materials they are learning with different techniques, tips, hints, gimmicks, systems, instructions, etc. for doing this, for organizing it and for describing the process. In Strevens’s formulation, this element is defined by the following features: it is the element that takes account of the full range of classroom presentations; it is the heart and art of teaching, the component that is the most extensively written about but the least analyzed and systematized; it is the element where the teacher interacts and deliberately guides his/her learners; it is the element where practical psychology in action, where the single class teacher may be subjected to separate or concerted action by a group of learners. Strevens claims that “Pedagogy, Methodology, Instruction, Teaching” defines not only the existing range of teaching techniques but also methods still being conceived and others not yet dreamed of. It is, he maintains, open-ended and forward-looking. (For detail of this element, see Strevens, 1985, pp. 24-25).

8. The “Syllabus Design” (or “curriculum design”, in the current context) element is interpreted differently by different researchers (see, for example, Yalden, 1984; Candlin, 1984; Breen, 1984; Nunan, 1991, 1999; Richards, 2001, 2017; Stern, 2001; Hoang, 2022; and many others). In Strevens’s conceptualization, syllabus is an essential element in the foreign language learning and teaching process, designed according to professional thought and educational philosophy. He views it as a multifaceted document: partly an administrative document, partly a day-to-day guide to teachers, and partly a statement of what is to be taught and how. More generally, a syllabus is often considered a statement of an overall approach. It typically provides a detailed list of items to be taught in a specific course to a defined group of learners, specifying the number of sessions, the intended sequence, and the ultimate interim or final objectives.

9. The “Materials Construction” element is an element closely related to the “Pedagogy, Methodology, Instruction, Teaching” and “Syllabus Design” elements. It is a requirement that all learners should have available to them an extensive range of materials and the teacher should be able to choose which material is the best suited to his/her students. Strevens suggests five characteristics for choosing a good teaching material which are still valid in current ELT:

(i) *realistic* (i.e. capable of being used by the teachers and learners, cheap enough to be available);

(ii) *relevant* (to a particular point or stage in learner’s progress, to his aim and age group);

(iii) *interesting* (i.e. varied, on topics of interest to the learner and intellectually satisfying);

(iv) *encouraging* (i.e. having the quality of making the learner feel he is making progress with the material, or at least enjoying his learning); and

(v) *compatible* (with the approach/method to be followed, with the teacher’s attitude).

10. The “Constraints on Language Learning/Language Teaching Achievement” element concerns a number of factors which may either act as constraints upon the effectiveness of the teaching and learning effort or as facilitators to increase that effectiveness. Stevens suggests four factors:

(i) *total quantity of instruction*. This factor concerns the total amount of time allocated to the foreign language as a subject in the school curriculum (Is it 300 class hours, 400 class hours or 600 hundred class hours?);

(ii) *intensity of instruction*. This factor concerns how intense a given total quantity of time allocated to a foreign language can be concentrated (Is the given amount of the total quantity of instruction spread thickly over a short period of time, say, 6 or 8 class hours per week for three successive school years of 35 weeks or thinly over a long period of time, say, 2 or 3 class hours per week for seven or ten successive school years of 35 weeks?);

(iii) *various impediments to learning and teaching*. This factor refers to such psychological factors that can interfere the quality of foreign language teaching and learning such as [class] *overcrowding*, *noise* [coming from inside and outside the classroom], *distraction* [made by learners themselves and by outside factors], and *examination-neurosis*; and

(iv) *quality of the teacher*. This factor is an extremely important element in Stevens’s ELT model, comprising of a number of qualities that constitute a good foreign language (FL) teacher, among which two particularly stand out: (1) a good FL teacher must have an adequate command of the foreign language he or she is teaching, and (2) a good FL teacher must rely little upon materials or textbooks he or she is teaching, often making their own improvements or replacement and using the prescribed textbooks only as a general guide. Stevens (p. 31) emphasizes the significance of this element, noting that a teacher of inadequate quality can be a substantial impediment to the learning process. Conversely, a teacher of exceptionally good quality can significantly improve a learner’s progress and compensate for deficiencies found elsewhere in the total teaching and learning system.

11. The “The Learner” element is the focus, the end-point of all the elements of Stevens’s ELT Model. Learners are extremely complex human beings. They all possess the wonderful human creativity that allows them to learn a new language, but they also possess idiosyncrasies and distinctions that mark off one from another. In terms of foreign language learning, they learn it for different purposes: some learn it for communication, others learn it just for the sake of learning – for passing the examinations; some learn it at home, others learn it during their stay abroad; some like to learn it, others hate learning it; some like to learn the foreign language by themselves, others like to learn it with others; and so forth. Stevens maintains that generally all learners have the potentiality to learn a foreign language, but there exist variations as between one learner and another and from time to time in the learning career of any individuals. He recommends that “[i]t is essential part of the teacher’s task to be aware of this and to have the professional knowledge and skill to enable him to help the individual learner in any given point of time, to maximize his rate of learning” (p. 33).

12. The “Evaluation” element refers to feedback systems that assess the progress of the change and supply information to the teacher about how the learning is coming along, so that changes in the teaching can be made for the purpose of improving the learning (p. 33). Based on the British language test and examination system, Stevens makes a useful distinction between tests and examinations: tests primarily provide information about the learner’s progress for the purpose of adjusting the teaching and thus improving the learning, while examinations (p. 34) are often used for broader social administration purposes, such as selection

for or against further education; certification of time served as a learner; providing admission to a range of jobs; and categorizing the individual for future events. Strevens points out that this shift in the function of examinations – moving beyond pedagogical feedback – can have negative consequences for the success of foreign language learning and teaching.

3.2. *The Analytical Framework of This Study*

Strevens's theoretical model of the language learning and teaching process, although sketchy, is a comprehensive framework whose insights can be used to explore the development of ELT as in the present study. However, since Strevens developed his model for general use, its application to a specific ELT context – such as the survey of ELT in Vietnam's general education – requires that the model must be adapted and supplemented to accurately reflect the local conditions and realities. Adaptation and supplementation of Strevens's model involves a strategic modification process: retaining elements relevant to the current study; excluding elements that are not relevant; adding necessary elements that are missing from the original model; and rewording terminologies or concepts that are inappropriate for the present study.

Bearing these ideas in mind, we will next propose a 10-element framework for analyzing ELT in Vietnam's general education context. To facilitate both analysis and discussion, each element in the proposed framework will be accompanied by one or more guiding questions.

1. Policy and Aims (Similar to Strevens's Element 1): Is/Was/Are/Were there explicit policy(ies) and aims for ELT in the surveyed period?

2. Curriculum Design (Similar to Strevens's Element 8): Is/Was/Are/Were there curriculum/curricula designed for ELT in the surveyed period?

3. Teaching Goal(s): Is/Was/Are/Were there teaching goal(s) in the surveyed period? If yes, How is/are/was/were it/they stated?

4. Status of English in the Education System: Is/Was English an obligatory or optional subject in the surveyed period?

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity (Similar to Strevens's Element 10, points (i) and (ii)): How long is/was the English course (in terms of total quantity of instruction and number of school years) and how intense is/was the course (in terms of number of teaching hours per week and per school year) in the surveyed period?

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development (Somewhat similar to Strevens's Element 5) includes:

- **Pre-service Teacher Training**: Are/Were there different levels of pre-service teacher training programmes for learners of different levels of the general education or is/was there one single teacher training programme for learners of all levels of the general education?
- **In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development**: Is/Was/Are/Were there course(s) to train teachers in the curriculum, the teaching method(s), and the materials/textbooks used in the surveyed period? If yes, Is/Was/Are/Were it/they organized centrally (i.e. by the Ministry of Education and Training) or decentrally (i.e. by provincial departments of education)?

7. Teaching Methodology (Similar to Strevens's Elements 6 and 7) includes:

Teaching Method: Is/Was/Are/Were there teaching method(s) used in the surveyed period? If yes, Is/Was/Are/Were it/they grammar-oriented or communication-oriented?

Teaching Approach: Is/Was the teaching approach used in the surveyed period teacher-centred or learner-centred?

8. Textbook (Similar to Strevens's Element 9) includes:

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** Are/Were textbooks written by Vietnamese authors, adopted or adapted from foreign-made textbooks?" If they are/were written by Vietnamese authors, Are/Were they produced centrally (by the Ministry of Education and Training) or decentrally (by different publishers)?"
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** Is/Was the approach to the (written/adopted/adapted) textbooks grammar-oriented or communication-oriented?

9. Test/Examination (Similar to Strevens's Element 12) includes:

- **Test/Examination Mode:** Is/Was test/examination in the surveyed period of subjective or objective mode?
- **Test/Examination Approach:** Is/Was test/examination construction in the surveyed period of grammar-oriented or communication-oriented approach?
- **Test/Examination Format:** What is/was the typical format of a test or an examination paper in the surveyed period?
- **Status of the Final Upper Secondary (Senior High) School Examination:** Is/Was the final upper secondary school examination obligatory or optional?

10. Learning Outcomes: Are/Were there learning outcomes stated in the surveyed period? If yes, How are/were they stated?

3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research method employed in this study is primarily qualitative. The data sources include official documents concerning ELT in Vietnamese general education, issued by key state bodies such as the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the National Assembly of Vietnam (NAV), the Government of Vietnam (GV), and the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). Additional data sources consist of published studies by educational research institutions and ELT scholars, as well as personal communications with teachers directly involved in English instruction during the periods under review, given the scarcity of studies on ELT in Vietnam's general education – especially prior to the twentieth century. All data sources will be reviewed, annotated, and systematically analyzed according to the ten elements outlined in our analytical framework.

4. ELT in Vietnam's General Education from 1954 to the Present

4.1. The First Period (1954–1975)

In the 1954–1975 period, Vietnam was divided into two parts; each part operated a different system of general education: a 10-year system in the North and a 12-year system in the South. Information about ELT in this period was extremely scarce, patchy and piecemeal in both parts of the country. According to extant studies and documents, four foreign languages were recognized in the North: Russian, Chinese, English, and French (Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012; see also Do, 2007; Hoang, 2010), of which Russian was the most widely taught foreign language, followed by Chinese and French. English was not introduced to the upper secondary level (grade 8) until around 1971 with no curriculum and very rudimentary teacher-made materials. In contrast, ELT in the general education in the South, is said to have developed rigorously during this period. "Foreign language was an important subject nearly on par with Literature (Vietnamese). Students started to choose to learn a first foreign language from grade 6; at grade 10, they could choose to learn a second foreign language. The two most widely learnt

foreign languages were French and English, there were also Chinese and German but few people studied them” (Tran, 2014, p. 44). English language textbooks were a mix of locally produced and imported materials, with the latter being predominant. Personal communications on various occasions with Ms Phan Ha, a student of English and then a teacher directly involved in teaching English in this period, reveal that English language teaching was primarily conducted by American instructors. Apart from these, no other information is available.

Based on the available, albeit scarce, information and knowledge of global ELT teaching materials and methodology during the 1954–1975 period, we can provide an overview of the ELT situation in Vietnam’s general education as follows.

1. Policy and Aims: explicitly stated in both North and South Vietnam.

2. Curriculum Design: no formal curriculum design for English instruction in the North; no specific information on curriculum design for English instruction is currently available in the South.

3. Teaching Goal: not stated in both North and South Vietnam.

4. Status of English in the Education System: unspecified in the North; compulsory and optional alternately in the South (i.e. among the four foreign languages taught: English, French, Chinese, and German, if English was selected as the obligatory subject, the other three were treated as optional. Conversely, if any of the other three languages were made obligatory, English assumed an optional status).

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity:

- **Course Duration:** six years, running from grade 5 to grade 10 (Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012), and seven years in the South, running from grade 6 to grade 12 (Tran, 2014).
- **Course Intensity:** no information available for both North and South Vietnam during this period.

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

- **Pre-service Teacher Training:** no information available in North Vietnam, Bachelor of Arts (BA) in TESOL in South Vietnam.
- **In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development:** no information available in both North and South Vietnam.

7. Teaching Methodology

- **Teaching Method:** grammar- and translation-based.
- **Teaching Approach:** teacher-centred.

8. Textbook

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** rudimentary teacher-made materials in North Vietnam, a mix of locally produced and adopted materials in South Vietnam with the latter being predominant.
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** unspecified in North Vietnam, (structural) grammar- and-translation-based with reading passages as a component of the textbooks in South Vietnam.

9. Test/Examination

- **Test/Examination Mode:** subjective in both North and South Vietnam.

- ***Test/Examination Approach:*** grammar-, essay- and translation-oriented in both North and South Vietnam.
- ***Test/Examination Format:*** no information available in both North and South Vietnam.
- ***Status of the Final Upper Secondary School Examination:*** no information available in North Vietnam, obligatory in South Vietnam.

10. Learning Outcomes: no information available in any extant documents in both North and South Vietnam.

4.2. The Second Period (1975–2002)

In the period of 1975–2002 Vietnam exercised the Third Education Reform which unified the general education system nationwide into a 12-year structure. This unification necessitated the development of a new, comprehensive general education curriculum that formally included English as a subject (Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012). Extant documents reveal that some remarkable achievements were made in ELT in Vietnam's general education in this period. At policy level, English was introduced as an optional subject from grade 6 to grade 9, and as a compulsory subject from grade 10 to grade 12. As regards curriculum design, there were various curriculum documents developed specifically for different categories of students of grade 10 to 12 (see Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 1989a, 1989b, 1992a, 1992b; Ministry of Education and Training, 1993a, 1993b), but there were no curriculum documents for grade 6 to 9. There were two sets of textbooks, one was for grade 10 to 12 (commonly known in Vietnamese ELT as “the 3-year set of textbooks”) and the other for grade 6 to 12 (commonly known in Vietnamese ELT as “the 7-year set of textbooks”). They were both written by Vietnamese textbook writers. Inspection of these two sets of textbooks show that despite some discrepancies in terms of scope and sequence, they were both heavily grammar-based. In terms of pre-service teacher training, there were two different teacher-training programmes: a 3-year college programme (chương trình cao đẳng) for lower secondary level and a 4-year university programme (chương trình đại học) for upper secondary level. There are no existing documents on in-service teacher training. Tests/Examinations were of subjective mode and grammar-, reading- and translation-based; specifically, a test or an examination normally consisted of lexicogrammatical items with small components of reading, writing and translation. Learning outcomes were not specified, making it unclear what level of English proficiency students were expected to attain at each grade, each educational level, or upon completing upper secondary school. ELT in Vietnamese general education during the 1975–2002 period can therefore be summarized as follows.

1. Policy and Aims: explicitly articulated.

2. Curriculum Design: not properly designed and explicated: there were curricula for upper secondary level (from grade 10 to 12) developed specifically for students of general, natural science and social science categories; but there were no curricula for the 7-year programme (from grade 6 to 12).

3. Teaching Goal: unstated.

4. Status of English in the Education System: optional at lower secondary level, and compulsory at upper secondary level.

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity:

- ***Course Duration:*** 3 years compulsory (from grade 10 to grade 12) and 7 years with

4 years optional (from grade 6 to grade 9) and 3 years compulsory.

- **Course Intensity:** 3 teaching hours per week spread over 3 years (with the total of 315 teaching hours) for the compulsory category, and 3 teaching hours per week spread over 7 years (with the total of 735 teaching hours) for the optional and obligatory category.

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Pre-service Teacher Training: explicitly categorized: those EFL teachers graduating from 3-year college programmes would be assigned to teach at lower secondary level and those graduating from 4-year university programmes (or BA degree in TEFL or TESOL) would be assigned to teach at upper secondary level.

In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development: no information available.

7. Teaching Methodology

- **Teaching Method:** predominantly grammar-based.
- **Teaching Approach:** predominantly teacher-centred.

8. Textbook

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** centralized (both sets of textbooks were developed and produced by MoET VEPH [Vietnam Education Publishing House]).
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** mostly grammar-based.

9. Test/Examination

- **Test/Examination Mode:** subjective.
- **Test/Examination Approach:** grammar-, reading- and translation-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Format:** a typical test or an examination paper often consisted of what can be referred to as “glossary translation” (e.g. Translate the following words [from English] into Vietnamese), “grammatical items” (e.g. Supply the correct tense forms of the verbs in brackets), “reading comprehension” (e.g. Read the following passage and answer the questions), and “translation” (e.g. Translate the following extract into English).
- **Status of the Final Secondary School Examination:** compulsory.

10. Learning Outcomes: not stated in any extant documents.

4.3. The Third Period (2002–2018)

2002–2018 was the period when Vietnam carried out the Fourth Education Reform which required the general education to renovate and design a new total general education curriculum (Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012). The reform was said to have been guided by the following key state directive documents.

- The CPV’s *Nghị quyết Hội nghị lần thứ hai số 02-NQ/HNTW BCHTW Đảng (khóa VIII) về định hướng chiến lược phát triển khoa học và công nghệ trong thời kỳ công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa và nhiệm vụ đến năm 2000*, ngày 24/12/1996 (Resolution of the Second Conference No. 02-NQ/HNTW of the Party Central Committee (VIII tenure) on Strategic Orientation for Science and Technology Development in the Period of Industrialization and Modernization and Tasks up to the Year 2000) (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996);
- The CPV’s *Kết luận số 14-KL/TW ngày 26/7/2002, Hội nghị lần thứ sáu Ban Chấp*

hành Trung ương (khoá IX) về tiếp tục thực hiện Nghị quyết Trung ương 2 khoá VIII, phương hướng phát triển giáo dục - đào tạo, khoa học và công nghệ từ nay đến năm 2005 và đến năm 2010 (Conclusion No. 14-KL/TW Dated July 26, 2002, the 6th Conference of the Central Executive Committee (9th tenure) on Continuing to Implement Resolution of the 8th Central Committee, Orientations for the Development of Education, Training, Science and Technology from now until 2005 and 2010) (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2002);

- The NAV's *Nghị quyết số 40/2000/NQ-QH10 của Quốc hội: về đổi mới chương trình giáo dục phổ thông* (Resolution No. 40/2000/NQ-GH10 on Renovation of the General Education Curriculum) (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000); and
- The GV's *Chỉ thị về việc đổi mới chương trình giáo dục phổ thông thực hiện Nghị quyết số 40/2000/QH10 của Quốc hội* (Directive on the Renovation of the General School Education Curriculum to Implement Resolution No. 40/2000/QH10 of the National Assembly) (Prime Minister, 2001).

4.3.1. The 2006 General Education English Curriculum

With regard to ELT, 2002–2018 can be said to be the most vibrant period of Vietnam's ELT in general and Vietnam's ELT in general education in particular. It was the period during which the boom of ELT was fueled by two favorable factors, one internal and the other external. Internally, the Six National Congress of the CPV initiated an overall economic reform known as “Đổi mới” in 1986, opening the door of Vietnam to the world. Externally, the USA lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam and officially established diplomatic relation with the country in 1995. These significant events created countless opportunities for Vietnamese people to do business and exchange science and technology with the outside world. At the same time, they posed pressing requirements for Vietnamese people, particularly those of the younger generation to have good English skills for global communication (Do, 2007; Hoang, 2010).

The supportive directive documents by the CPV, the NAV and the PM, and the favourable factors paved the way for the development and promulgation of *Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông môn tiếng Anh* (General Education English Curriculum) in 2006 (commonly known in Vietnamese ELT as *the 2006 Curriculum*) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). A close examination of *the 2006 Curriculum* and its implementation activities reveals the following characteristics of ELT in the general education in the period of 2002–2018.

1. Policy and Aims: explicitly articulated (ELT in Vietnam's general education was based firmly on policy and directive documents from the CPV, the NAV and the PM).

2. Curriculum Design: explicitly but not fully comprehensive designed: *the 2006 Curriculum* consists of only four main components: (i) Status of English (English was a subject curriculum in the general education system), (ii) Goals of teaching and learning, (iii) Views of curriculum design and construction, and (iv) Contents of teaching and learning (see Ministry of Education and Training, 2006).

3. Teaching Goal: clearly articulated in terms of learners' levels of English language knowledge, English language skills, and their positive attitude toward their mother tongue (Vietnamese) and English language and culture.

4. Status of English in the Education System: obligatory.

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity:

- **Course Duration:** 7 school years, running from grade 6 to grade 12.

- **Course Intensity:** 735 teaching hours with 3 teaching hours per week spread over 7 school years.

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

- **Pre-service Teacher Training:** explicitly categorized – those EFL teachers graduating from a 3-year college programme were assigned to teach at lower secondary level and those graduating from a 4-year university programme (or BA degree in TEFL or TESOL) were assigned to teach at upper secondary level.
- **In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development:** centralized (all the courses that trained in-service teachers to familiarize with the new curriculum, to use the new teaching methodology and to employ the new textbooks were run by MoET Department of Secondary Education).

7. Teaching Methodology

- **Teaching Method:** strongly grammar-based.
- **Teaching Approach:** predominantly teacher-centred.

8. Textbook

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** centralized (both sets of ELT textbooks in this period were written by Vietnamese authors, organized and produced by MoET VEPH).
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** grammar- and skills-oriented.

9. Test/Examination

- **Test/Examination Mode:** predominantly objective-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Approach:** grammar-, reading- and essay-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Format:** a typical test or an examination paper consisted mainly of multiple-choice phonological and lexicogrammatical items, some reading comprehension passages designed in multiple-choice format, and a short paragraph writing.
- **Status of the Final Upper Secondary School Examination:** compulsory.

10. Learning Outcomes: not stated in any extant documents.

4.3.2. The 2008 Innovation

While *the 2006 Curriculum* was being actively implemented nationwide, ELT in Vietnam, particularly at the general education level, was promoted by the Prime Minister's Decision 1400, a decision that for many was an extremely significant catalyst leading to what can be referred to in this study as "the 2008 Innovation" (cf. Hoang, 2010; Le, 2015).

The 2008 Innovation can be said to be an innovation for ELT alone. It was motivated by the following factors. First, psycholinguistic research into foreign and second language learning/acquisition indicated that the earlier a foreign language was introduced in schools, the greater the likelihood of successful learning (Lenneberg, 1967; Stern, 1967; Rivers, 1970; Broughton et al, 1978; Strevens, 1985; Eurydice, 2005; Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, 2008; and many others). This view gained strong support from the Vietnamese Government, Vietnamese educational thinkers and educational administrators. Second, as Vietnam integrated more and more extensively into the world, many Vietnamese parents wanted their children to start learning English much earlier than the age they were required to start learning the language in *the 2006 Curriculum*. With the hope that their children would have the right kind of start for a new kind

of society, many parents, particularly the younger ones in urban and affluent areas sent their children to private English centers, international bilingual schools to learn English even when they were preschoolers. Third, in many countries where English was taught as a foreign language such as Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, China, Thailand, South Korea, and many others, English was already introduced in the primary school from grade 3 and even earlier (Nunan, 2003; Eurydice, 2005; Lee, 2005; Lam, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

It was clear that in a world in which internationalization and globalization were becoming an inevitable trend, the need for high-skilled and highly qualified people who could communicate effectively in English had become an urgent requirement for Vietnam. This urgent requirement had made it difficult for Vietnam to sustain the current standards of teaching, learning, and use of English. Increasingly, decision-making bodies were becoming aware that without a radical change in the English curriculum, Vietnamese learners' standards of performance in English would be left behind. Recognizing the importance of foreign languages in the context of globalization and internationalization, on 30th September, 2008, the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam issued Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTG titled *Đề án “Dạy và học ngoại ngữ trong hệ thống giáo dục quốc dân giai đoạn 2008-2020”* (Project “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008-2020”), commonly known as “the Prime Minister’s Decision 1400” (Prime Minister, 2008).

In the Prime Minister’s Decision 1400, a very important part was devoted to the learning and teaching of English at Vietnam’s general education level which states: “To implement a ten-year foreign languages programme, starting from grade 3 with the compulsory foreign language (English in this case)” (p. 1), and “To organize the design of new ten-year curricula for the foreign languages being taught in Vietnamese schools, from grade 3 to grade 12, and the writing of new textbooks and other learning and teaching materials suited to the requirements for each level and each grade” (p. 2) of the general education.

Fueled by the Prime Minister’s Decision 1400, the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, commonly known as “the 2020 Project”, under MoET was set up. Among its many missions, the 2020 Project was assigned with the task to design and implement three pilot English curricula for Vietnamese schools: (1) *Chương trình tiếng Anh thí điểm tiểu học* (Pilot English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools in Vietnam) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010), (2) *Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông môn tiếng Anh thí điểm cấp trung học cơ sở* (Pilot English Language Curriculum for Lower Secondary Schools in Vietnam) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012a), and (3) *Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông môn tiếng Anh thí điểm cấp trung học phổ thông* (Pilot English Language Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools in Vietnam) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012b).

A close inspection of MoET’s three pilot English curricula and their constituent components, along with observation of their activities during the implementation process, reveals the following characteristics of the 2008 Innovation.

1. Policy and Aims: explicitly articulated, laying firm legal ground for curriculum design and implementation activities.

2. Curriculum Design: systematically designed toward communication, meeting many of the criteria of a modern foreign language curriculum (Hoang, 2018); each of the pilot curricula consisted of six components: (1) Principles of curriculum design, (2) Curriculum objectives, (3) Curriculum contents, (4) Teaching methodology, (5) Assessment, and (6) Conditions for successful curriculum implementation (for more detail, see Ministry of Education and Training, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; see also Hoang, 2018).

3. Teaching Goal: clearly articulated in terms of learners' English language knowledge, English language skills, and their positive attitude toward their mother tongue (Vietnamese) and English language and culture.

4. Status of English in the Education System: obligatory.

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity:

- **Course Duration:** 10 school years, running from grade 3 to grade 12.
- **Course Intensity:** 1,155 teaching hours spread over the 10 school years, including 4 teaching hours per week across the 3 primary school years (grades 3–5), 3 teaching hours per week across the 4 lower-secondary school years (grades 6–9), and 3 teaching hours per week across the 3 upper-secondary school years (grades 10–12).

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

- **Pre-service Teacher Training:** a required 4-year university programme (or BA degree in TEFL or TESOL) for teachers of all levels of the general education.
- **In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development:** centralized (all the courses that trained in-service teachers to familiarize with the new curricula, to use the new teaching methodology, and to employ the new textbooks were run by MoET's Department for Primary Education, MoET's Department for Secondary Education and MoET's National Foreign Languages 2020 Project); only teachers who had achieved CEFR level 5 were eligible to take part in the 2020 Project.

7. Teaching Methodology

- **Teaching Method:** grammar- and skills-oriented.
- **Teaching Approach:** mostly teacher-centred.

8. Textbook

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** centralized (the 10-year pilot English textbook series were developed and written by MoET VEPH authors in collaboration with those of Macmillan Education (for the primary level) and Pearson Education (for the lower and upper secondary levels) (for detail, see Hoang, 2015, 2016, 2018).
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** grammar- and skills-based.

9. Test/Examination

- **Test/Examination Mode:** a mix of subjective and objective mode.
- **Test/Examination Approach:** grammar-, reading- and essay-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Format:** a typical test or examination paper primarily included multiple-choice phonological and lexicogrammatical items, some reading comprehension passages followed by multiple-choice questions, and a short paragraph writing task.
- **Status of the Final Secondary School Examination:** compulsory.

10. Learning Outcomes: explicitly and elaborately stated: Upon completing grade 12, students should have achieved CEFR Level B1. Specifically, upon completing grade 3, students must have achieved CEFR Level A1-1; grade 4, CEFR Level A1-2; grade 5, CEFR Level A1-3; grade 6, CEFR Level A2-1; grade 7, CEFR Level A2-2; grade 8, CEFR Level A2-3; grade 9, CEFR Level A2-4; grade 10, CEFR Level B1-1; grade 11, CEFR Level B1-2; and grade 12, CEFR Level B1-3.

4.4. The Fourth Period (2018 to the Present)

ELT in Vietnam's general education in the fourth period began in three favorable contexts. First, "..., the world witnessed profound changes in all aspects. The third and fourth industrial revolutions came into being one after another, the strong development of the knowledge economy brought about outstanding development opportunities, but also posed big challenges for each country, especially developing ones. On the other hand, climate change, resource depletion, environmental pollution, ecological imbalance and political and social fluctuations also posed global challenges. To ensure sustainable development, many countries have continuously renovated education to improve the quality of human resources, equipping future generations with a solid cultural foundation and high adaptability to all fluctuations of nature and society. Educational innovation has become an urgent need and a global trend"¹ (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018a, p. 3). Second, Vietnam carried out the Fifth Educational Reform which required the general education to change radically, orientating curriculum design toward developing learners' competencies. And third, achievements from the implementation of the Prime Minister's Decision 1400 in curriculum design, materials/textbooks development, and standardized in-service teacher training created strong momentum for the development of ELT in the general education in Vietnam.

In light of these favorable contexts, MoET consolidated the three pilot English curricula into a single curriculum to be officially used throughout the country. This effort resulted in the introduction of *Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông: Chương trình môn tiếng Anh* (General Education English Curriculum, commonly known as *the 2018 Curriculum*) (see Ministry of Education and Training, 2018b). It should be noted here that unlike the previous periods, English in *the 2018 Curriculum* was recognized as one of the three major subjects whose status, in terms of the Government's policy and time allocation, ranked third: only after Vietnamese and Mathematics.

Analysis of *the 2018 Curriculum* and its constituent components, and observation of implementation activities from 2018 to the present reveals the following characteristics.

1. Policy and Aims: explicitly articulated, laying firm legal ground for implementation activities.

2. Curriculum Design: (as compared to the previous curricula) more systematically designed toward communication and learners' competencies, meeting most of the criteria of a modern foreign language curriculum. *The 2018 Curriculum* includes eight components: (1) Subject characteristics, (2) Views of curriculum design and construction, (3) Curriculum objectives, (4) Requirements to be met, (5) Educational contents, (6) Educational methodology, (7) Assessment of learning, and (8) Explanations for and guidance on curriculum implementation (for detail, see Ministry of Education and Training, 2018b; see also Hoang, 2022).

¹ This passage appears in the Vietnamese original as follows:

..., thế giới chứng kiến những biến đổi sâu sắc về mọi mặt. Các cuộc cách mạng công nghiệp lần thứ ba và lần thứ tư nối tiếp nhau ra đời, kinh tế tri thức phát triển mạnh đem lại cơ hội phát triển vượt bậc, đồng thời cũng đặt ra những thách thức không nhỏ đối với mỗi quốc gia, nhất là các quốc gia đang phát triển và chậm phát triển. Mặt khác, những biến đổi về khí hậu, tình trạng cạn kiệt tài nguyên, ô nhiễm môi trường, mất cân bằng sinh thái và những biến động về chính trị, xã hội cũng đặt ra những thách thức có tính toàn cầu. Để bảo đảm phát triển bền vững, nhiều quốc gia đã không ngừng đổi mới giáo dục để nâng cao chất lượng nguồn nhân lực, trang bị cho các thế hệ tương lai nền tảng văn hoá vững chắc và năng lực thích ứng cao trước mọi biến động của thiên nhiên và xã hội. Đổi mới giáo dục đã trở thành nhu cầu cấp thiết và xu thế mang tính toàn cầu.

3. Teaching Goal: clearly stated and well spelt out in terms of learners' levels of English language knowledge, English language skills, and their positive attitude toward their mother tongue (Vietnamese) and English language and culture

4. Status of English in the Education System: obligatory.

5. Course Duration and Course Intensity:

- **Course Duration:** 10 school years, running from grade 3 to grade 12.
- **Course Intensity:** 1,155 teaching hours spread over the 10 school years, including 4 teaching hours per week across the 3 primary school years (grades 3–5), 3 teaching hours per week across the 4 lower-secondary school years (grades 6–9), and 3 teaching hours per week across the 3 upper-secondary school years (grades 10–12).

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

- **Pre-service Teacher Training:** a required 4-year university programme for teachers of all levels of the general education.
- **In-service Teacher Training and Professional Development:** decentralized (due to the “one curriculum, multiple sets of textbook” policy, most of the in-service training courses to familiarize teachers with the new curriculum, to use the new teaching methods and techniques, and to employ the new textbooks were the responsibility of the publisher who produced the respective set of textbooks).

7. Teaching Methodology

- **Teaching Method:** some combination of the grammar-translation method (mostly in rural and out-of-the-way areas) and communication-oriented method (mostly in urban and affluent areas).
- **Teaching Approach:** mostly teacher-centred (in rural and out-of-the-way areas) and some combination of teacher-centred and learner-centred (in urban and affluent areas).

8. Textbook Development

- **Textbook Construction Mode:** decentralized (any publisher can produce textbooks in accordance with *the 2018 Curriculum*; MoET only takes control of the quality of textbooks) (see Hoang, 2022).
- **Textbook Construction Approach:** grammar- and communication-oriented.

9. Test/Examination

- **Test/Examination Mode:** objective-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Approach:** lexicogrammar- and reading skill-oriented.
- **Test/Examination Format:** a typical test or examination paper primarily includes multiple-choice phonological and lexicogrammatical items, some reading comprehension passages followed by multiple-choice questions, and a short paragraph writing task.
- **Status of the Final Secondary School Examination:** compulsory from 2018 to 2024, optional in 2025.

10. Learning Outcomes: explicitly and elaborately articulated: Upon completing grade 12, students are expected to achieve Level 3 of the *6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam* (VFLF) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2014), which is equivalent to CEFR Level B1. Specifically, the required VFLF and equivalent CEFR levels upon completing each grade are as follows (for detail of *6-level foreign language proficiency*

framework for Vietnam, see Ministry of Education and Training, 2014):

Grade Completed	VFLF Level Achieved	CEFR Equivalent
Grade 3	Level 1-1	CEFR Level A1-1
Grade 4	Level 1-2	CEFR Level A1-2
Grade 5	Level 1-3	CEFR Level A1-3
Grade 6	Level 2-1	CEFR Level A2-1
Grade 7	Level 2-2	CEFR Level A2-2
Grade 8	Level 2-3	CEFR Level A2-3
Grade 9	Level 2-4	CEFR Level A2-4
Grade 10	Level 3-1	CEFR Level B1-1
Grade 11	Level 3-2	CEFR Level B1-2
Grade 12	Level 3-3	CEFR Level B1-3

5. Concluding Remarks

5.1. Summary of Main Findings

This paper is motivated by a strong desire to understand ELT in Vietnam's general education, focusing on: its history and development; the achievements gained during the surveyed period; and the challenges that must be addressed for the future of ELT in this important, fundamental level of education. To this end, I have conducted a historical survey of ELT in Vietnamese general education from 1954 to the present. Using an adaptation and supplement of the British applied linguist Peter Strevens' (1985) ELT model as the analytical framework, I explore four distinct periods of ELT in Vietnamese general education: the 1954–1975 period, the 1975–2002 period, the 2002–2018 period, and the 2018–present period. Our survey indicates that significant progress has been made in this education sector over the past 70 years, which can be summarized as follows:

- In terms of Policy and Aims, ELT within Vietnam's general education has progressed from implicit and unspecified policy and aims to explicitly and clearly articulated ones.
- In terms of Curriculum Design, ELT within Vietnam's general education has evolved from having no curriculum (in the 1954–1975 period), to a rudimentary curriculum (in the 1981–2002 period), to a relatively well-designed curriculum (in *the 2006 Curriculum*), and ultimately to a systematically and comprehensively designed curriculum that offers full specifications of a modern EFL curriculum (in the 2008 Innovation and *the 2018 Curriculum*) (see Ministry of Education and Training, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2018).
- In terms of Teaching Goals, ELT within Vietnam's general education has evolved from no specified teaching goals to clearly specified goals encompassing English language knowledge, skills, and learners' attitudes toward both their mother tongue and English language and culture.
- In terms of Course Duration and Course Intensity, ELT has been increasingly prioritized within Vietnam's general education system. This trend is reflected in the expansion of total instructional hours and length of study across successive curricular periods. Specifically, during the 1981–2002 period, English was allocated 3 teaching hours per week over 3 school years at the upper secondary level, totaling 300 hours. In *the 2006 Curriculum*, this increased to 3 teaching hours per week over 7 school years, amounting to 700 hours. Under the 2008 Innovation and *the 2018 Curriculum*,

ELT further expanded to 420 hours at the primary level (4 hours per week over 3 school years), 420 hours at the lower secondary level (3 hours per week over 4 school years), and 315 hours at the upper secondary level (3 hours per week over 3 school years), resulting in a cumulative total of 1,155 teaching hours.

- Regarding Textbook Development, ELT has progressed from rudimentary local, teacher-made, and adopted materials to materials developed solely by local Vietnamese authors (in the 1981–2002 period and *the 2006 Curriculum*). The process has since advanced to producing high-quality materials developed by local Vietnamese authors in collaboration with prestigious international publishers (in the 2008 Innovation and the 2018–present period).
- Concerning Learning Outcomes, ELT in the general education sector has evolved from unspecified or undocumented learning outcomes (in the 1954–1975 period), to implicitly stated or unstated outcomes (as in the 1981–2002 period and *the 2006 Curriculum*), to explicitly articulated outcomes (in the 2008 Innovation and *the 2018 Curriculum*).
- And most noticeable of all is the move from “one curriculum, one set of textbooks” model to “one curriculum, multiple sets of textbooks” model. This transition decentralizes and diversifies textbook production and in-service teacher training. More importantly, this transition enables teachers and students to have greater choice in this critical element of ELT.

Our survey also reveals a number of persistent challenges hindering the development of ELT within Vietnam’s general education, the two most prominent being Teaching Methodology and Assessment/Testing. Teaching methodology and assessment are recognized as two of the most rapidly evolving elements in global ELT. However, they appear to have demonstrated the least progress within Vietnam’s general education. Specifically, many teachers predominantly relied, and continue to rely, on the Grammar-Translation Method in the classroom. Furthermore, the assessment system – arguably the most conservative element of ELT in the sector – has consistently employed non-communicative tests/examinations. These instruments are limited to testing learners’ lexicogrammatical knowledge and reading skills, failing to address broader communicative competencies. Compounding these issues, while the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Government of Vietnam advocate “gradually making English the second language in schools” (The Politburo, 2024; Prime Minister, 2025), the Ministry of Education and Training decided to shift the final national upper secondary school English examination from compulsory to elective status. This policy contradiction has resulted in both immediate and long-term adverse impacts (see Vu, 2025). The immediate effects include a focus by both teachers and students on teaching/learning superficial “tricks” to solve lexicogrammar and reading comprehension problems specifically for the purpose of examinations. Moreover, the most apparent immediate negative impact is the dramatic drop in registration for the final English examination among 12th graders, falling from 100% in previous years to approximately 31% (358,870/1,162,134) in the 2024–2025 school year (see Government Online Newspaper, 2025). Consequently, in the long term, it is highly probable that the goals of “teaching and learning English for communication” and the Communist Party’s and the Government’s advocacy for “gradually making English the second language in schools” will be undermined.

Overall, the survey demonstrates that ELT within general education in Vietnam has developed consistently and is positioned for continued advancement. However, this progress

could be significantly accelerated and strengthened through the alignment and synchronization between the strategic direction set by the Party and the Government and the policy formulation and implementation executed by the Ministry of Education and Training.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study offers only a minute fragment of an account of the history of ELT in Vietnamese general education. Anything approaching a complete account (in fact there can be no such thing as a “complete” account of the history of a complex phenomenon) of it would be hundreds of times this length. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the advent and development of ELT in Vietnam’s general education, future research should investigate these established elements more extensively and also explore other related aspects of ELT in greater depth.

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