

## SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING VIETNAM'S FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN THE ERA OF THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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### ABSTRACT

Foreign language education in Vietnam is currently receiving strong support from the authorities, the people and the learners. In recent years, with specific and practical policies, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam has helped improve the foreign language proficiency of Vietnamese youth than before. However, during the implementation process, the results did not reach the set goals. Foreign language proficiency of newly graduated students is not enough to meet the job requirements. This article presents some limitations of the current foreign language teaching policy in Vietnam and give some recommendations to help build a highly effective foreign language policy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization today, foreign languages have become even more necessary than ever. That a country's foreign language education is developed strongly and in the right direction, achieving efficiency and meeting social needs does not depend on its current foreign language policy. Vietnam has a long time of developing education without vision and foreign language competencies of Vietnamese people are lower in comparison with the overall situation in the world. Since the economic reforms, the increasing demand for international trade has required every person to know as many foreign languages as possible. Our country, in this period, fell behind because it failed to meet this urgent demand of development. Policies in foreign languages education in this period mainly aimed at meeting the instant needs of temporary socio-economic development. For some recent decades, English has still been the primary foreign language that the State always set as a priority in teaching and training. Nowadays, together with the stable development of the country as well as the globalisation worldwide, there has been the increasing need of using a variety of foreign languages. As a result, in order to be in line with the current situation of the society, Vietnamese Government have decided to put some important foreign languages into teaching at all levels. Despite a long time of implementation, the set goals have not been achieved. Many changes in the policy have been conducted for a better outcome but many opportunities are still missed and many shortcomings still exist. In spite of a large number of changes and improvements, the quality of learners, in fact, has not yet met the social needs. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the policies for more fruitful future development.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the introduction of some foreign languages into the teaching programs at primary education level, or the requirements of foreign language proficiency for teachers have demonstrated the long-term vision of the leading Communist Party and the State in the aim of our country's development. It can be said that these policies are the guidelines for foreign language teaching, learning, research and development activities Vietnam in recent time.

The topic of improvements of foreign language policies have received a great deal of attention from researchers, teachers and education managers. There have been many workshops organized on the national scale in order to support and improve foreign language education policy in Vietnam.

In the period from 2016 to 2017, there were 12 national and ministerial-level scientific projects, 54 university-level scientific projects, 199 articles published in both national and international journals, including 01 publication on the International Scientific Journal ISS/SCOPUS (Thuan, N. Q., 2017). These research projects have partly solved the problems of foreign language teaching and learning, some of which have described the experiences in policy making for foreign language education in some countries worldwide, contributing to further improving Vietnam's foreign language policy.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODS AND RESULTS

### 3.1. Research methods

- Studying and exploring foreign language policies of countries with successful/advanced/developed foreign language development policies in the world such as the USA, Singapore, Philippines.
- Referring to the studies of foreign language policies of these aforementioned countries.
- Referring to research works on teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam.
- Investigating the situation of teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam.
- Studying the policies on developing foreign languages in Vietnam, to make comparison with those of the abovementioned countries.

With the above steps, the research team has found out the weak points of the foreign language education policy in Vietnam. With this study, we hope to somewhat improve the current foreign language teaching and learning in our country.

### **3.2. Research results**

#### *3.2.1. The role of foreign languages in the current stage of national construction and development in Vietnam*

Foreign languages can be considered bridges between one country and others, between people across different nations. Teaching foreign languages in all countries in the world has been highly appreciated, attracting huge investment. In Vietnam, we are working on improving foreign languages skills for people, especially university students, who will take the responsibility of further developing our country in the future. Despite the time pressure, it is better not to be rush. What we need is to precisely determine the role of foreign languages so that the related policy can go in the right direction.

- Language is a basis for strengthening economic cooperation and exchanges. In multilateral or bilateral transactions, although English is a language of common use, it is not yet a language that all countries can use or master. Moreover, in some countries and regions, the importance of this international language has not been acknowledged or even recognised. Therefore, in daily transaction, English does not necessarily have to be the only common language. Thus, the Government need to seize the opportunity to provide training of a variety of foreign languages and accept the cultural diversity of these countries. This can reduce the language barrier, increase mutual trust in investment cooperation and minimize transaction costs.

- Language is a tool to enhance mutual trust and understanding. Vietnam continues to develop a plan of “reaching out” to understand and master the languages of other countries while enhancing exchanges to create good relationships with them. Through the understanding of these countries’ languages, especially the development of foreign language competencies, we can basically understand the cultural values of different countries and enhance of cultural exchanges.

- A complete master plan of foreign language teaching would guarantee a better economic growth and enhancement of Vietnam’s position in the international arena. However, this also brings considerable challenges. As a consequence, it is necessary to develop safe development policies, especially language safety. In the current situation of the world with such unpredictable changes, the country’s cultural, social and economic values are challenged together with language exchanges, which would carry certain dangers. Therefore, awareness of language safety needs to be strengthened and consolidated even more.

#### *3.2.2. Current situation of foreign language education in Vietnam since the reform*

Over the past years, the State and the Ministry of Education and Training have been trying hard to bring foreign languages into teaching with an aim to bring Vietnam on par with developed countries in the world. There have been certain achievements such as: the rate of people knowing foreign languages in Vietnam ranks the fourth in Southeast Asia, the fifth in Asia (after Singapore, Malaysia and India and Korea) with the 2015 EF EPI index of 53.81%. According to a survey in 2018, we are ranked at 41 out of 88 participating countries, the index is 53.12% (Education first, 2018). In addition, the fact that many Vietnamese students receive valuable scholarships from different countries in the world, plus the trade value with many countries around the world and the region increases are the results from foreign language education in our country.

The requirements for public servants to know foreign languages, teachers must be fluent in foreign languages, graduates need the required qualifications of foreign languages competencies to qualify for graduation are very good policies to develop foreign languages set by the State.

However, beside the above achievements, the quality of our foreign language education is facing certain problems. The report of the Higher Education Department, the Ministry of Education and Training stated that: “The results of the survey assessing the ability of graduates to meet the work requirements for English skills show that only about 49.3% of students meet the requirements of employers, while up to 18.9% of students are not qualified and the remaining 31.8% need extra training”. Furthermore, many studies on foreign language competencies of Vietnamese students have shown that Vietnamese graduates’ foreign language competencies are only sufficient to

communicate with their fellow Vietnamese. In other words, they still fail to meet the development requirements of the country, which partly reflects the current quality of foreign language education nowadays. Despite numerous efforts of the Government, our language development policies still have some shortcomings as follows:

*(1) Current foreign language education policies only address the immediate needs*

The long-term lack of attention to the study of foreign language education in Vietnam has resulted in the failure to create the desired effects of our research results. Consequently, managers lack the basis to build an effective and timely policy with long-term outlook for the future that leads to lack of necessary vision.

Some issues can be mentioned here, such as the quality of teacher training, developing teaching staffs and the somehow unreasonable training schedule. Those factors result in the low quality of learners. In addition, the relevant authorities do not have predictive studies on the development of foreign languages to effectively control the quantity and quality related to learning foreign languages and the final consequence would be foreign language saturation or denial (happened to Russian language before).

At the beginning of the 90s of the 20th century, after Vietnam's normalization in the relation with China, Chinese began to be taught at some major universities. So far, Chinese has grown very strongly, from 2014 to 2018, the number of students learning Chinese language increased by 124.26% (data from Guidebook on things to know about university, college admissions, year 2014 and 2018). In fact, Chinese was chosen by many students together with other learning subjects. This requires education managers to conduct specific studies to capture accurate information as a basis for planning appropriate development policies.

Looking further at the border areas, we cannot deny that the inhabitants of this region have extremely good foreign languages skills. In their bilingual environment, their ability to use and response in foreign languages are extremely strong. This, no matter how hard students study a foreign language at schools for 4 years, cannot be compared. If the organisations responsible for developing foreign language policy know how to rely on the strengths of inhabitants in the border areas to quantify, take advantage of opportunities as well as establish a reasonable foreign language policy, the training of foreign-language will certainly achieve remarkable effects.

*(2) Vietnam's education policy lack planning*

In the past, language education in Vietnam was completely based on the market demand, focusing on languages that were trendy in the world and neglecting other languages. Apart from foreign languages for special purposes, English is nearly the only foreign languages taught at university level while other languages were only considered a second foreign languages.

According to a survey, there are currently around 380 foreign languages being taught and used throughout the United States, in China - about 50 languages (Thuan, D. M., 2012). In Vietnam, there are 11 official foreign languages taught at foreign language specialized universities (English, Chinese, French, Russian, Arabic, German, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish). Other languages are mostly taught at foreign language centers and, of course, they do not have a position in the curriculum of Vietnamese education system.

Human resources of foreign languages training has been the focal point of education since primary level. At high school level, the State has made relevant estimations and organised foreign-language specialized schools, ensuring the quality of human resources for higher levels. However, at the university level, human resources of foreign languages are often gathered in foreign language majors, which only focus on some fields such as pedagogy, linguistics, translation, tourism, commerce, etc. Students of these majors, after graduation, are still unable to meet the work requirements of other fields, thus still unable to satisfy the demand of our society.

*(3) Vietnam's education policy is not systemized*

The teaching of foreign languages now basically starts from the elementary stage. English is the only language with development through all levels of education that pupils can enjoy at any school.

Starting from 2008, with the foreign language project, 5 popular international languages were put into teaching at primary schools in Vietnam, which embodies the strong determination of the Communist Party and the State to bring Vietnam on par with the world's powers. However, it is necessary to keep in mind the lack of development of connection in the education of these 5 foreign languages (except for English). To be specific, primary school students can learn one certain foreign language at their school but when they transfer to another secondary school, the area where their school is located may not offer the foreign language that they studied at primary school, or when those students go to high school, where there is a classification in the foreign language subjects, or in case there are very few schools that offer these foreign language classes. As an exception, English can be learned in any school. Consequently, although the State has expanded the teaching of

different foreign languages, the systematization of teaching these foreign languages has not been handled thoroughly with certain short-comings and challenges for learners. In fact, many students have to discontinue learning a foreign language of their choice to follow the English language program taught at school. Thus, the State should provide reasonable solutions to avoid wasting resources, effort and investment, and also to help learners fully develop their language ability.

Another very serious and common problem concerns many high-quality professionals with insufficient foreign language competencies or poor professional background yet strong foreign language skills. In the modern society, it is essential for them to possess both of these competencies.

In short, the foreign language talents in Vietnam are scarce with limited competencies and hardly capable of meeting the current requirements of the country. As a result, there is a huge waste of human resources and serious damages to the country.

#### *(4) Foreign language development policy is not really in line with national interests*

The results of a research conducted by a research group at Kien Giang University on the purpose of learning foreign languages as well as many other studies show that Vietnamese students' learning purposes in general and with foreign language subjects in particular, are mostly personal, i.e. learning for themselves more, only 5% of all respondents said they studied because they wanted to contribute to the country. "The students' motivation is not strong, in particular, they spend very little time on learning" (Ha, H. T. T., 2012).

Also, for a long time, foreign language education in Vietnam neither made any outstanding impression nor create high values despite the State's huge investment into foreign language teaching and learning. English is still the top choice at universities, in society and in every family. The quality of teaching is still a big question because teachers' foreign language ability is not high and the foreign language policy is not consistent and comprehensive.

For example, in the US, foreign language education put the national interest as the top priority, especially after the September 11 event, the US Government agreed to propose the National Security Language Initiative - abbreviated as NSLI, which stated that starting from kindergarten level, foreign language education must be included in all stages of education until they adopts another new language plan, aiming at boosting national foreign language competencies. At the same time, this initiative also proposed languages of priority such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Iranian, Korean, Indian, etc. along with teaching languages, the foreign language initiative also proposed developing teaching staff, organising on-site foreign language programs, etc. At the same time, American government emphasized "to ensure national security and economic competitiveness, the most important factors are diplomatic policies, foreign language capacity of the people and understanding of global institutional, commercial and cultural values".

In conclusion, during the life-changing period of the country, the researchers would propose the following recommendations on foreign language education: (1) identifying important foreign languages; (2) investigating the quality of foreign language education; (3) implementing creative teaching; (4) conducting relevant scientific research; (5) training foreign language talents; (6) establishing the general structure of foreign language education.

#### *3.2.3. Some recommendations for adjusting the foreign language education policy in Vietnam*

In recent years, Vietnamese government has been constantly trying to put foreign languages into teaching at all school levels. This demonstrates the determination of the leaders to catch up with the world's leading countries.

In 1994, the Prime Minister issued Directive No. 422-TTg on foreign language training for public civil servants.

In 2015, the Government issued a joint circular No. 21/2015/TTLT-BGDDT-BNV with an aim to provide universal foreign languages education to teachers and improve teaching quality.

In 2008, the Project of teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system for the period of 2008-2020 was proposed by the Ministry of Education and approved by the Government with the goal that by 2020, the majority of Vietnamese youths graduating from vocational education level, college and university with sufficient foreign language competencies to use foreign languages independently, confidently communicate, study and work in an integrated, multilingual, multicultural environment and to turn foreign language competency into the strength of the Vietnamese people.

However, through many national and international studies, statistics of the World Bank and EF, Vietnamese people were still ranked average in terms of English language competencies, at the 41<sup>th</sup> over the total of 88 countries participated in the survey (Thin, D. H., 1996).

In the National Assembly's questioning session on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016 regarding foreign language education, Minister Phung Xuan Nha briefly spoke about the results of the foreign language project 2008-2020 as "unsatisfactory".

Many studies such as "Foreign language competency of university students in Ho Chi Minh City" by Vu Phuong Anh (Dr.) and Nguyen Bich Hanh (MSc.) have shown that the quality of foreign language education for the students in this area

is unsatisfactory. According to a study from Da Nang University in 2012, the students' English capacity was still weak. At the Conference "Standardized English Competency at Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh city: Situation and solutions" held in 2017, the English proficiency level of most of the students surveyed did not meet the requirements.

Looking at Vietnam's policy on developing foreign language education and the reality of current foreign language education, the research team has proposed these following recommendations:

*(1) Establishing a foreign language education policy closely attached to the national interests*

The national interests include political, military, cultural, economic, scientific and technical, etc. benefits. These interest groups can be divided into: Hard benefits such as economic, political, military, etc. interests that ensure national survival and development; Soft benefits related to culture, science and technology... that can enhance competitiveness and demonstrate the national image.

Since the establishment of our country, the State's leaders have put much attention to teaching foreign languages in school. However, in the course of time and under the economical, political and cultural fluctuations, we gradually neglect of or even almost rejected other foreign languages while giving priority to English as the primary foreign language. From the reform to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnam gradually moved to economic development. While focusing on economic development, Vietnam strengthened the international relations and English language was placed at the center of foreign language education (Qin & Mao, 2015), neglecting other languages, especially those having bad effect on its cultural interests. These specific facts have proved that in the context of socio-political economy, Vietnam's foreign language education policy is severely limited.

From the macro perspective: We must build a policy that is not only suitable for Vietnam's current situation to meet international relation development requirements but also can protect the uniqueness of the native language, build a scientific and rational system of foreign language education ensuring the consistency, comprehensiveness and continuity.

From a micro perspective: It is important to achieve the alignment of interests between countries and regions; foreign language education policy needs to be classified into appropriate levels to avoid the waste of resources, improve efficiency, ensure continuity. It is necessary to implement multi-lingual language development, ensuring the comprehensiveness of foreign language education policy. Whether it is a general or specific policy, showing visibility or latency, they should represent the national ideology and foreign language strategy, at different levels, and at the same time, closely connect to the national long-term development plan. In addition, it is advisable to consider learners' characters as the starting point to establish policy on improving teachers' capacity, teaching quality, assessing learning outcomes, etc. to fostering and reserving talents, etc. with the utter aim of improving national soft capacities.

After many years of reform, Vietnam's foreign language education has made several breakthroughs. In the context of today's globalization, foreign language education becomes more and more urgent. In any form of training, the policy of foreign language education is required to prioritize the national interests as the guideline for foreign language planning and establishing effective implementation plans. In the aim of effective foreign language education policies, it is important to pay attention to the role of foreign languages in the development of the country. In the process of training human resources, it is necessary to take into account the goal of "foreign-languages-competent" human resources. In the current conditions, it is necessary to identify which language is the key foreign language to obtain a hierarchically and focusedly classification, and at the same time, stratify the implementation of fostering talents, expanding on a large scale so as to ensure a stable quality of foreign language education.

*(2) In the process of developing foreign language policy, attention should be paid to the languages of neighboring countries*

In the current context of globalisation and integration with the world, although English is a widely used language, we should also pay attention to the languages of the neighboring countries for the following reasons:

- Undeniably, local people at borderline areas are highly competent in foreign languages, especially those of the neighbouring countries, as much as their native language.

- This cross-border language has a great effect on regional cooperation. Although being highly unlikely to become a popular language, the cross-border language to some extent can still promote national foreign language education; therefore, it can also be used as a language of international exchange.

- Throughout the long history of Vietnam, it has always been a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country, so whether in the geographical field or in the cultural field, it is clear that the neighbouring languages have great effects on the exchanges between ethnic groups in bordering areas or neighboring countries.

- However, in Vietnam's bordering areas today, current bilingual education is only aimed at language education for ethnic minority students with the main goal for them to learn the official language, but not yet considered the advantages and promoted learning languages among these students. Therefore, it is necessary to learn from experiences to expand from small bilingual areas to gradually nationwide to ensure both ethnic minority students and Kinh students to be able to deploy the favorable foreign language environment to learn a foreign language. Mastering two or more languages is not only beneficial for each individual but also satisfies the requirements for human resources of foreign languages for the country during this renovation period. Developing appropriate strategies for adjusting foreign language teaching and learning based on the current situation of learning foreign languages in the bordering areas is not only beneficial to the training of foreign language human resources but also to reserving high-quality human resources of foreign language for the country in the future.

It is widely believed that the economic and political development has a great promotion effect on culture, but at the same time the counter-effect of culture to the political economy is also very obvious. In terms of international trade, the cultural similarities, especially in terms of languages, can create the sense of connection, sincerity and trust. Therefore, it can be seen that cross-border language is also a critical recommendation for establishing and adjusting our foreign language education policies.

### *(3) Establishing foreign language education policies towards regionalization and diversification*

Among the national official language, regional languages and local languages, national official language is considered the basic language, the regional language or the local language is the derivatives of the national official language. The rearrangement of language area, varied development of foreign languages as well as developing a foreign language education model, the acknowledgement of the importance of foreign language education is critical to the development of foreign languages in particular. Recently, together with the development of the economic cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian nations, foreign languages workforce with the countries such as Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and so on are not sufficient. For a long time, Vietnam only focuses on developing English competencies without achieving any set goals so far, failing to meet the requirements of national development in the upcoming future (Education first, 2018). Therefore, we need to take advantage of the opportunity to deeply develop the workforce of foreign languages based on regions, even countries to ensure the quality of the workforce of foreign languages and meet the requirements of the country.

Education of ethnic minorities' languages and foreign languages requires reciprocal relations, through various measures to achieve a common goal. It is necessary to focus on improving linguistic competences and learning cultural knowledge of ethnic minorities. In Vietnam, it is recommended to teach foreign languages based on region division, giving priority to areas with economic advantages, and adopting corresponding policy plans to ensure the implementation of new foreign language education policies. Some examples of such policies are: expanding languages that are not yet popular, offering bonus points to students in university entrance exams.

Studying and fostering foreign language skills require a long process. It is important to evaluate the situation and provide a scientific and rational policy on foreign language education. Limiting to only several foreign languages is certainly not be helpful to students' training and foreign language learning.

### *(4) Building a policy on foreign language education needs far-sighted vision*

Obviously, the foreign languages that we need in either long-term or short-term all require a consistent combination of long-term plans for developing and fostering talents and prioritizing foreign language teaching as one of the urgent tasks "foreign language is like the pioneering team of the Nation, wherever the country goes, foreign language is the first at work". But building and implementing a foreign language education policy is a progressive process. Therefore, in the process of building policies, it is necessary to flexibly deploy and expand foreign language education to ensure the supply of foreign language talents. As mentioned above, fostering foreign language competence is a long and gradual process, using the flash training model and putting it into use does not bring the desired effect.

Previously, Vietnam mainly considered English the main training language, other minor languages received attention only because they were native languages of developed countries. Today, in the period of international integration, when foreign languages are the superior communication tool to solve the problems of information exchange, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, the importance of foreign language education can be realised. In the process of developing language education policies, it's highly recommended to value education of border countries' languages and at the same time adjust the strategy of foreign language education to satisfy the requirements of foreign language talents for the country.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Foreign language education is a long-term country development plan, it is like a double-edged knife, bringing both benefits and problems. During the development process, it's important to pay attention to national economic development and security. Policies on foreign language education will have direct affect on the quality of human resources that it regulates, therefore, in order to ensure that foreign language talents can meet the development requirements of the country, the current foreign language policy needs to possess the necessary elements for the development of the country in the future. In conclusion, when the State sets specific implementation plans for foreign language development, it is compulsory to adjust the foreign language education policy to ensure the quantity and quality of talents that are needed. In addition, attention should also be paid to identifying key languages and setting up corresponding educational policies to ensure future inventory. Learners' competencies would be improved through a combination of short-term and long-term training to ensure quality and national security.

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