

Analyzing Language-in-Education Policy at Vocational Institutions: A Case Study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The project *Teaching and studying foreign languages in the national educational system for the period 2008-2020* has prompted Vietnam's colleges and universities to innovate their language training programs. In this setting, the *Project of Foreign Language Education* at Hue Industrial College for the period 2012-2020 was born. The goal of this study is to examine this institution's language-in-education policy which is analyzed using the framework of the Baldauf and Kaplan's (2005) planning goals. This paper specifies the author's assessment of this vocational institution's language policy on seven planning goals ranging from access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methods and materials policy, resourcing policy to community policy. The study also suggests some pedagogical implications for Hue Industrial College's application of language teaching and learning practices and it was an attempt to provide more insights into the implementation of the Language-in-education Policy in orientation to *the Vietnam National Project* at other vocational institutions in Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

Language academics and researchers attempted to discover successful methods for language learning, teaching, and mastery evaluation during the twentieth century. The Council of Europe's release of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR or CEF) in 2001 was a significant consequence of European efforts (CEFR, 2001a). The framework acts as a language policy guideline that allows educational administrators, course designers, teacher trainers, examining bodies, and others to carry out their existing practices while meeting the requirements of the learners they are responsible.

The CEFR has had a global influence on language teaching and learning in the years since its release in 2001. Üstünlüoğlu, Zazaoglu, Keskin, Sarayköylü and Akdoğan (2012) found that several Asian and European nations, as well as Canada and the United States, have adopted or modified CEFR to their present language education programs. In the case of Vietnam, the CEFR has been implemented through a scheme named *Foreign Language Education in the Vietnamese Educational System for the 2006-2010 Period*, which prioritizes English as a foreign language. To improve foreign language teaching and learning in the national education curriculum, the Ministry of Training and Education (MOET) launched a new national project titled *Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national educational system for the period 2008-2020* (The Project 2020 for short) which was adjusted into *Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national educational system for the period 2017-2025* in 2017 (MOET, 2017).

Hue Industrial College (HUEIC) has devised *The Project of Foreign Language Education at Hue Industrial College for the period 2012-2020* (hereinafter referred to as "The HUEIC Project") in order to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in accordance with the Rector's Recommendations R(115), R(233), R(318), and R(472).

In this paper, the author provides a brief summary of the Project 2020 as a background for the implementation of these policies at a tertiary level - Hue Industrial College. Then, using Baldauf and Kaplan's (2005) planning goals as a framework, an analysis of the English language policy areas at this vocational institution will be conducted. The study ends with some educational implications.

2. Background

In practically every country's foreign language education policies, English has been the most popular language. For decades, English has also occupied a significant role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam.

According to Prime Minister's Decision 1400 dated 30 September 2008, the MOET has issued a language project titled *Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national educational system for the 2008-2020 period (the Project 2020 for short)* with the goal of improving foreign language teaching and learning (primarily English) in the national education system (MOET, 2008). English is expected to be a compulsory subject in a new 10-year foreign language study program, commencing with basic language education (grades 3, 4, 5, and onward to grade 12 of high school education) across the country, as one of several objectives set forth in Project 2020.

Within the framework of Decision 1400, the MOET issued Circular No.01/2014/TT- BGDĐT on the Common Framework of Levels of Foreign Language Proficiency, which is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR) (MOET, 2014). This Framework provides six language skill levels that are identical to the CEFR, as well as standard foreign language objectives that must be met by all graduates equivalently.

The execution of language education policies necessitates the implementers being acutely aware of all planned goals proposed by policymakers. Then there is a question of what language policy and planning are. Language planning, according to Kaplan and Baldauf (2007), is a collection of concepts, laws and regulations (language policy), change rules, beliefs, and practices aimed at achieving a planned change (or preventing change) in the use of language in one or more communities. Language planning, as for these writers, can be seen in four primary areas: (i) governmental agencies involved at the highest level; (ii) education agencies, sometimes acting under the impetus of higher-level structure or acting in lieu of higher-level structure; (iii) other quasi-governmental or non-governmental organizations acting according to their own beliefs, and (iv) all sorts of other groups or in some cases influential individuals creating language policy as an accidental (or sometimes purposeful) part of their normal activity.

Richard B. Baldauf proposed four planning models to accomplish the planning goals: status, corpus, prestige, and language-in-education. The focus of *status planning* is either on societal policy planning, such as language(s) form, status standardization (officialization, nationalization, and proscription) or on language cultivation (restoration, revitalization, reversal), maintenance, interlingual communication (international, intranational), and spread of language(s). *Corpus planning* is closely linked to language itself, ranging from policy planning regarding the linguistic form of the language(s), corpus standardization and auxiliary code standardization (graphization, including orthographic reform, grammatication, and lexication), or cultivation planning - lexical modernization, stylistic modernization, and renovation (purification, reform, stylistic simplification, terminological unification, and internationalization). *Language-in-education planning* explicitly concerns language learning and teaching related to policy planning about the form of a language learning and teaching program(s) such as access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methods and materials policy, resourcing policy, community policy; evaluation policy; or to cultivation planning - reacquisition, maintenance, foreign language/second language, and shift. *Prestige planning* aims at the receptive goals of macro-level or micro-level language planning and policies about either governmental and institutional image promotion or pressure group and individual image promotion through intellectualizing language of science, professions and high culture.

According to Baldauf and Kaplan (2005), the policymakers' problem in language-in-education policy planning is to identify and facilitate choices that are relevant to individuals' interests and needs in order to satisfy those interests and needs while also ensuring that general education benefits and societal needs are met. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of achieving these objectives is primarily dependent on policy decisions made by instructors, as well as the courses of study, materials, and resources available. Baldauf and Kaplan (ibid) proposed a clear and comprehensive framework for analysing the implementation of language-in-education policies. This framework includes seven planning goals ranging from access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methods and materials policy, resourcing policy to

community policy that can be said to influence the success of language-in-education driven policy development:

Table 1. *Language-in-education planning goals (Baldauf & Kaplan, 2005, p.1014)*

Planning goals	Questions to be addressed
Access policy	Who learns what when?
Personnel policy	Where do teachers come from and how are they trained?
Curriculum policy	What is the objective in language teaching/ learning?
Methodology and materials policy	What methodology and what materials are employed over what duration?
Resourcing policy	How is everything paid for?
Community policy	Who is consulted/ involved?
Evaluation policy	What's the connection between assessment on the one hand and methods and materials that define the educational objectives on the other?

These planning goals have been adopted to analyze the language-in-education policies in many countries for instance China (Li, 2007), Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011), Japan, Malaysia, Nepal and Taiwan (Baldauf et al., 2011).

Whatever language planning and policy model is inspired and implemented from a top-down or bottom-up perspective, they all have the same aim of innovating foreign language education. In Vietnam, despite numerous efforts, the majority of Vietnamese students are unable to communicate effectively in English after several years of study in schools and colleges (MOET annual report, 2013a, as cited in Pham, 2015, p.53). These shortcomings have prompted educators and institutions' concerns for an urgent need to innovate the current language-in-education policies on all levels. In this setting, the HUEIC Project was created with the goal of implementing Project 2020.

In what follows, the author of this research will investigate elements in the language-in-education strategy of HUEIC in the execution of the national Project 2020 using the framework established by Baldauf and Kaplan (2005).

3. Language-in-education policy at Hue Industrial College

3.1. Access Policy

The forerunner of Hue Industrial College was Ba Cong School, founded on September 12th 1899 by Thanh Thai King's proclamation. In 1921, it was transferred to French Colony Government and renamed as Ecole Pratique D'Industrie de Hué (Trường Kỹ nghệ Thực hành Huế). During the time of the French domination (1921-1944), the French curriculum was instructed and French was used as the language of instruction rather than a foreign language at this school.

The college has passed different historical periods with various language-in-education policies. In 1945, Japanese staged a coup d'état. The school was under the management of Vietnamese and the instruction was conducted in Vietnamese. During the years 1954 to 1964, Vietnamese was used to teach all subjects while French was taught as a foreign language. From 1965 to 1975, students could choose French or English as their foreign language, except those of mathematics classes (similar to the intermediate level currently) who had to study two types of foreign languages starting from grade 10. When they chose English as the first foreign language, French would be their second foreign language and vice versa. After 1975, there was no foreign language taught until the school opened the vocational secondary education including the teaching of English in 1993. In 1998, the school was upgraded to train the students of technical secondary level. English has been taught as the main foreign language later on.

Currently, according to The HUEIC Project, English has been chosen the unique foreign language and a compulsory subject to all learners at HUEIC [except those of English who study French as their second foreign language].

Even though English, nowadays, becomes an international language and gains an inevitable position in the foreign language education, a number of students at HUEIC had no access to learn it at secondary schools. Especially, some of them who come from Nghe An Province studied French as their foreign language; some others from Thanh Hoa City learn Russian. Following the HUEIC Project, these students have no right to choose the foreign language (e.g. Russian or French) that they prefer or used to study at secondary schools. In addition, students' language proficiency was evaluated at the low level. The evidence was their poor knowledge of English grammar, low usage of vocabulary, and weak performance of language skills such as listening and speaking (Ho, 2008; Ho, 2015). Although much effort has been made, the quality of learning English as a foreign language is still very low. According to the statistical data from the Department of training in the school year of 2013-2014, the ratio of lower 4 to 10 marks was over 50 % in the final tests. All of these have laid out big challenges to both English teachers and students in the enactment of the HUEIC Project.

3.2. Personnel policy

It is known that teachers play a decisive role in the success of language education. The policymakers pay the greatest attention to the quality of the teachers devising the HUEIC Project.

Currently, the teachers possess various qualifications of English including one PhD instructor, 5 MAs and 3 BAs. According to the HUEIC Project, all English teachers are required to achieve level 5 (C1 of CEFR), 60% of whom attain level 6 (C2) by 2015 and 100% of the teachers reach level 6 by 2020. The college encourages the teachers to gain more teaching experience and upgrade their English proficiency through seminars, workshops or conferences in national or international areas. However, they have few opportunities to fulfill this guideline.

In reality, the HUEIC teachers have a heavy workload. They have to accomplish 25 to 30 periods per week, which outnumbers the maximum teaching load suggested in the MOET guidelines (18 periods). Despite being well conscious of the importance of English teaching improvement, the teachers have little time preparing well for their instructional and professional development. This is a popular problem revealed in several studies in Vietnam (Ho, 2008; Hoang, 2010; Nguyen, 2012; Tien, 2013).

Besides these permanent English teachers, the school has hired a number of teachers from other schools. Noticeably, these part-time teachers specialize in secondary education. They have no idea of vocational students' cultural backgrounds and language limitations. These teachers often fail to relate the teaching activities to learners' occupational contexts and work situations meanwhile this is a need in teaching English language learners in vocational colleges. In fact, it is well documented by Garcia (1996) that 'English language learners perform better when they are engaged in meaningful activities grounded in contexts they can relate to in some way'. Unexpectedly, the part-time teachers are not concerned of this fact. Hiring qualified English teachers is a real challenge for HUEIC.

The year 2015 was over but the quality of the English teachers has not been enhanced as expected in the HUEIC Project. 20% of them have not achieved level 5 while none have gained level 6. As can be seen from the above analysis, it is quite difficult for HUEIC language teachers to promote their professional development due to the above-mentioned disadvantages.

3.3. Curriculum policy

For tertiary education, the MOET expect graduates from vocational colleges to attain level 2 while university graduates level 3 and graduates from language college level 4. In accordance with the MOET policy, the HUEIC Project sets level 2 as the minimum English proficiency for vocational graduates, 50 to 60% of whom reach level 3 or higher. By 2020, all graduates should achieve level 3 as minimal English proficiency, at least 60% of whom get level 4 or higher.

At the tertiary level, while the MOET prescribes a time allocation of 180 hours of instruction for foreign language education taught in three semesters, HUEIC shortens the time into 165 hours, which is organized into two stages. The first stage (120 hours) supplies students with knowledge of English for General Purposes (General English). The second (45 hours) concentrates on English for Specific Purposes. It is thought that it is really hard for the students to get the language proficiency target with such a very short time allocation if they do not spend much time self-studying outside classrooms.

In order to enable graduates to attain minimal proficiency, the teachers are expected to apply a learners-centered approach in classrooms. It can be seen that the development of HUEIC language teaching program is performed in backward design which begins with a specification of learning outcomes and a determination of methodology. Then, the syllabus with appropriate teaching activities and content is rooted in the learning outcomes (Richards, 2013, p.20).

In implementing the HUEIC language teaching program, the teachers face a lot of obstacles. As a matter of fact, level 3 is still out of reach of most students at HUEIC. This problem is rooted in three main reasons viz. big class size (50-60 students in each English class), lack of well-trained teaching staff and students' unawareness of the importance of self-study.

3.4. Methods and materials policy

At HUEIC, most teachers believed that grammar-translation was the most feasible method due to big classes, students' low level of English and teachers' heavy load of work (Ho, 2008). This method was widely applied in most English classes with heavy instruction of grammar knowledge and exercises. The mother language was highly used to make sure that all students could keep up with the English lessons. Though communicative language teaching (CLT) used to be introduced to the teachers and they were well aware of the benefits of CLT, they failed to apply this approach to English classes at HUEIC. Students' low proficiency levels and big classes caused their hesitation in practicing productive skills, especially speaking. The classes were heavily teacher-dominated. Little time was reserved to encourage learners to utilize the target language items productively in classes. This fact contrasts with the interaction hypothesis developed primarily by Long (1996; 2006) that second language acquisition is facilitated through interaction when learners are engaged in negotiating for meaning. Giving English language learners classroom time to use their English productively is also one of the five principles for creating effective second language learning environments when English is taught in career and technical education programs (Hernández-Gantes & Blank, 2009, p.16). Nevertheless, this principle has not been followed by the HUEIC teachers.

All of this hindered the learners' proficiency progress. Consequently, the language teaching at HUEIC has been far from meeting the demands of the labor market, which requires employees well-equipped with language ability.

Being conscious of this disadvantage, the HUEIC policy makers suggest language teachers change the traditional methodology. In the HUEIC Project, student-centered teaching methods are required to maximize learners' opportunities to utilize the target language. Following the policy, the school has tried to lessen the number of learners per class so that the teachers can easily set up student-dominated teaching methods such as CLT. However, the managers have failed to minimize the class size. Currently, each class still numbers fifty to sixty students in all. For this reason, implementing student-centered methods seems to be unfeasible at HUEIC.

With regards to the materials, a series of pre-intermediate *New Cutting Edge* by Sarah Cunningham and Peter Moor (2008) has been used. The package consisting of teacher manuals has been designed based on a modular system of general English orientation. It consists of fifteen modules aimed to train learners to develop both linguistic competences and language skills at the pre-intermediate level. After five years teaching this package, the teachers find out that it is out of reach of their students though *New Cutting Edge* is in the list of materials suggested for attaining A1 to C2 with reference to CEFR.

Thanks to the HUEIC Project, the teaching facilities have been upgraded to some extent. Projectors have been installed in some classrooms. A language laboratory has been brought into use. However, few teachers have made use of these convenient teaching supports for some personal reasons. Some admit that they are not good at using information communication technology while others feel acquainted with their traditional language teaching. In the writer's opinion, it is necessary to supply teachers with good teaching facilities along with well-organized seminars and workshops so that they can make use of these supports effectively.

3.5. Resourcing Policy

The HUEIC Project has been funded by the MOET. While the college gives priority to the enhancement of instructors' proficiency, the teachers complain that they are not finance-assisted and

time-supported attending the English classes and proficiency tests. However, it can be clearly seen that the HUEIC language teaching facilities have been considerably improved thanks to the fund from the Project 2020. It is convenient when the educational context at HUEIC has reached the required standard for teaching English. The classrooms are already well-equipped with modern facilities such as projectors or LCDs. The college also installed a modern laboratory for English learning with visual aids, computers and cabled internet. Next to be mentioned is the upgraded library with several kinds of English books and ESP materials. The school also paid for an online referencing service, namely *tailieu.vn* so that students can search and download materials easily with their own accounts. All of these aim to support the teaching and learning of English and assist the students in achieving the expected English outcomes.

3.6. Community policy

The HUEIC Project is evaluated as a top-down plan since it has been decided without the involvement of various stakeholders such as language education experts, parents and students. Surprisingly, the HUEIC language teachers were asked for consultation just after the Project had been almost built up. Perhaps, there is a risk for the HUEIC Project to attain the objectives for 2020 due to this disadvantage.

3.7. Evaluation Policy

The HUEIC program was designed according to the system of five levels: Beginner Level, Elementary Level, Pre-Intermediate Level, Intermediate Level, and Upper-Intermediate Level. All students who passed the entrance examinations are estimated to have already obtained Elementary Level. In this respect, after finishing the academic year, the learners are expected to achieve the Pre-Intermediate Level. The assessment of learning processes is based on the calculation of the average grades from two regular assignments, a mid-term test and a final test of each semester. There are no quizzes within the semesters. To be eligible to move from the first semester to the second, each student must achieve a weighted average of 6/10. 60 percent of the final mark comes from the average grades of regular assignments and mid-term test; and 40 percent is from the final test. For each semester, unsuccessful students must re-attend the English classes and do tests until they pass. The students, then, do an achievement test after completing the two semesters. The administrators use the results to decide whether the learners can pass the English program so as to supply them with credits of Pre-Intermediate level achievement. The teachers are likely to be driven to meet the demands of the test-based language teaching and learning at HUEIC while the students are haunted by the pressure to pass the grammar-based tests. Whereas graduates are expected to reach level 3 of English proficiency, there is no time allotted for speaking and listening tests. Clearly, there exists a mismatch between the assessment and the objectives set in the HUEIC Project.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The aims of this study have been addressed using Kaplan and Baldauf's framework to examine the current situation of the implementation of English language education policies at HUEIC in orientation to the National Project 2020. From the above analysis, it can be said that the access planning goal has been achieved according to the guidelines from the college's policymakers. The other planning goals have not been accomplished. Some causes can be listed such as the lack of English teachers with expected expertise, the use of outdated teaching materials and the application of inappropriate traditional methodology into language classrooms. The college's policymakers have made efforts to deal with the problems by issuing related guidelines and decisions. It can be seen that since the HUEIC Project was brought into action, English language teaching and learning have been changing positively. However, there is also a risk for the HUEIC Language Project to be accomplished if no more efforts are made by the managers, teachers as well as learners.

Based on the above analysis, some possible solutions to enable closer achievement of the HUEIC Project and the National Project as well have been suggested. Firstly, more attention should be paid to the professional development. Financial assistance should be supplied for English teacher training. The burden of heavy teaching is expected to be unloaded so that they can realize their language proficiency improvement and attend professional seminars, workshops and conferences. Secondly, more funds should be reserved to upgrade the teaching and learning facilities such as installing more language

laboratories and equipping more learning materials. These supports would help inspire both language teachers and students. Finally, constant cooperation among learners, teachers and managers are required during the implementation of the above-mentioned projects.

In short, what is analyzed above specifies the implementation of language-in-education policy at a vocational institution, HUEIC, in orientation to executing the National Project. It is hoped to give useful insight into the execution of the language-in-education policy in alignment with the Vietnam National Project at other Vietnamese vocational schools.

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