

## The preference of western English textbooks in rural Vietnam

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### Abstract

English plays an important role in Vietnam because it is not only a tool for international communication among the ASEAN countries and the world but is also a tool for Vietnamese people to seek for well-paid professional jobs. Therefore, English language teacher education programs are vital courses at many Vietnamese universities and colleges. When the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam introduced the national language project 2020 which promotes communicative language teaching, the questions of what kinds of textbooks are being used in the English language teacher education programs, especially in rural Vietnam becomes urgent and necessary. Because existing studies which address this issue are limited, this study fills in this gap by discovering textbooks as well as their users' perspectives. Findings showed that there was a strong dominance of Western-published textbooks, which resulted in the bias towards the models of British and American English in this program. The study also showed that although all lecturers and students discussed strong beliefs and trust in the Western textbooks, they faced several challenges due to their book selections.

**Keywords:** textbooks, English language teaching, teaching materials, Vietnam

### 1. Introduction

There are two different levels of English teacher education programs in Vietnam. The program at the university is four years, but the one at the college is only three years. Although the general and specific goals of these two programs as coded in national documents are similar, the number of hours trained, the language proficiency upon graduation and the levels of schooling these future teachers will be qualified to teach are different. The main goals are to train EFL teachers with qualified knowledge of English language, teaching skills and teaching ethics; to provide adequate knowledge for student teachers to follow graduate studies; and to be able to communicate internationally. Student teachers must be aware of logical and systematic knowledge in different fields of English teaching methodology, culture, the study of education, psychology, English language, and research methodology. In addition, student teachers must have the ability to manage teaching activities in educational management organisations. The content of both university and college programs has three phases. In the first phase, students studied general knowledge, which consists of many compulsory subjects taught in Vietnamese. In the second phase, all the English subjects are taught in English. In many institutions, the subjects in these two phases can be taught at the same time. Finally, in the third phase students experience a teaching practicum.

Because lecturers have free choices of selecting textbooks for their subjects, the English teaching and learning materials among institutions vary from one another. This paper is going to report the types of textbooks being used at an English language teacher education program at college level in rural Vietnam. In addition, it also figures out lecturers' and student teachers' beliefs towards those textbooks. Finally, it analyses how the textbooks comply with the national language policy which encourages

communicative activities in the classrooms as well as how they support students to communicate with speakers of English all over the world.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1 The ownership of English language

Although English is a global language, the users and teachers of English have traditionally been rigidly divided into two categories: native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English (Jenkins, 2006; Butler, 2007; Yoo, 2014; Al-Zubeiry, & Al-Baha, 2019; Gnevshva, & Bürkle, 2020) <sup>[14, 3, 38, 2, 2, 11]</sup>. People using English as their first language, such as Britain, America, New Zealand and Australia belong to the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1992; Pilus, Zakaria, Zakaria, & Wahid, 2019) <sup>[18, 29]</sup>, and are considered native speakers (Jenkins, 2006; Butler, 2007) <sup>[15, 3]</sup>. People who adopt English as a second or foreign language are non-native speakers (Jenkins, 2006; Butler, 2007) <sup>[16, 3]</sup>. This group consists of the Outer Circle (Singapore, India, Pakistan, and Malaysia) and the Expanding Circle (regions where the varieties of English are used as a foreign language including China, Egypt or Korea) (Kachru, 1992; Proshina, 2019) <sup>[19]</sup>. Although a number of studies call for an open recognition of the variety of Englishes spoken around the world (Kachru, 1992; Canagarajah, 2007; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Forman, 2014; Tahmasbi, Hashemifardnia, & Namaziandost, 2019; Davis, 2019) <sup>[20, 4, 24, 10, 35]</sup> because non-native speakers outnumber native speakers (Rajagopalan, 2004; Crystal 2008; Wang, 2019; Floris & Renandya, 2020) <sup>[31, 6, 39, 9]</sup>, English in the Inner Circle has long been considered the standard that other speakers of English should follow (Jenkins, 2009; Park, 2009; Kang, Thomson, & Moran, 2019); Akkakoson, 2019) <sup>[14]</sup>. Jenkins (2007), Jenkins & Leung (2019) and MacSwan (2020) reported that "proper English" is believed to be the prerogative of the UK and the US, and thus those speakers 'are automatically in a

position of power as compared with those who have to learn it as a second language or foreign language' (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011: 392). As a result, native speakers of English tend to discriminate strongly against non-native speakers (Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Rucker & Ives, 2014; Kamhi-Stein, 2016; Choi, Tong, & Samuel, 2019; Wicaksono, 2020)<sup>[24]</sup>.

## 2.2 The impact of the ownership of English language on the English language teaching materials

That explicit discrimination towards non-native speakers and non-native teachers of English has affected learners of English in Asian region strongly (Butler, 2007)<sup>[3]</sup>. This impact can be found in English teaching materials as well as the standard of oral communication in English which is aimed for and emphasized in pronunciation classes. While Taiwanese and Japanese students preferred British English and American English (Jenkins, 2007)<sup>[16]</sup>, Chinese students rely on those two Englishes (Hu & Lei, 2014; Song, 2019; Sun, & Kwon, 2019)<sup>[13, 33, 34]</sup>. With non-native teachers of English, there has been an assumption that the competence of native speakers is the learning goal (Zhang & Elder, 2011)<sup>[42]</sup>. Therefore, non-native speakers of English have come to see the standard of English of native speakers as superior (Kirkpatrick & Zhichang, 2002; Davies, 2006)<sup>[7]</sup>. As a result, the expansion of the Western imported textbooks and their impact on English language teaching and learning in this region is significant including Thailand (Ulla, 2019)<sup>[37]</sup>, Korea (Joo, Chik & Djonov, 2020)<sup>[17]</sup>, Uzbekistan (Norova, 2020), Taiwan (Wu, Leung, Yang, Hsieh, & Lin, 2020), Cambodia (Nhem, 2020)<sup>[41, 27, 26]</sup>.

In Vietnam, before 1986, some English textbooks were produced by French writers, such as the *L'anglais Vivant* series (Carpentier, 1940)<sup>[5]</sup>. There were also some bilingual English–Vietnamese dictionaries compiled by Le Ba Kong and Le Ba Khanh (Hoang, 2011)<sup>[12]</sup>. The content of those textbooks implies that the prevailing EFL teaching method at the time was grammar translation, although pronunciation drills and reading skills did receive a little attention (Hoang, 2011)<sup>[12]</sup>. From 1986, when English became a compulsory subject at school, two types of EFL textbooks were used in Vietnam: the seven-year and the three-year books (Nguyen, 2006). The former was for students who learnt English from year 6, while the latter was for students who started English in year 10. Students in this latter group usually live in rural areas (Nguyen, 2006). Both books were mainly grammar-based (Hoang, 2011)<sup>[12]</sup>. Since Vietnam opened its doors to the outside world in 1987, and especially since it joined ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) in 1995, English has become increasingly important. However, English textbooks in Vietnam remains under-researched, especially in the field of English teacher education, even though hundreds of Vietnamese teachers of English are trained every year. Therefore, this study is going to explore this aspect further.

## 3. Research Methods

This is a qualitative case study which consists of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The participants were lecturers and student teachers of English at a teacher training college in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data reported in this paper belong to the doctoral project.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

The results show that mainstream Western publishers have had a very significant impact on teaching and learning English in this rural area. The study also found contrasting differences between participants' beliefs about textbooks and the content of these materials.

### 4.1 Dominance of mainstream publishers

In the questionnaires, participants were asked what percentage of their English language textbooks were from Western countries. This was a five scale Likert question. Results from the lecturers' and students' questionnaires showed that around 75 per cent of the materials used at the college were from Western countries. However, in the classroom observations, this study examined 12 classes from six subjects: English Teaching Methods, Phonetics, British Culture, English Literature, Reading Skills, and Listening and Speaking Skills. Ten of the 12 classes used foreign textbooks as their main materials, and two classes collected foreign online materials for use as a textbook. All the lecturers chose the textbooks from the UK and the US, all of which were published by Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Longman or Pearson.

This selection of materials from large Western publishers is apparently closely related to how lecturers and students view the history of the English language. In the questionnaires, all of six lecturers and 83 per cent of students reported that they believed the English language 'belonged' to the UK and the US. This means that they perceived the UK and the US as creators of the English language. They also believed that only English from the UK and the US should be considered 'standard' English, leading to the selection of textbooks exclusively from these two countries which fall within the 'Inner Circle of English' (Kachru, 1986)<sup>[19]</sup>. This belief has also been recorded by other researchers (Garwood, Gardani, & Peris, 1993, cited in Nault, 2003; Ulla, 2019)<sup>[37]</sup>. However, the selection of textbooks from the UK and the US by lecturers is also strongly influenced by the government. For example, the structure of the curriculum in the English Language Teacher Education program includes the two subjects of British Culture and English Literature. The inclusion of subjects such as these in the curriculum indicates that central policy makers in Vietnam believe that, because English originated in the UK, to qualify as a teacher of English, students must learn British language and culture.

The issue of opting for British and American English as the standard became the subject of heated debate in Vietnam when the 2020 project was approved. Despite the spirit of the project being to promote communicative language teaching to develop students' communication with the world, the standard that has been used to measure the language competency of teachers of English in Vietnam is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Regardless of Vietnamese EFL teachers' contexts, they are evaluated through a standard provided by Cambridge English and materials published by Cambridge University Press and Pearson. From 2011 to 2013, all teachers of English in Vietnam were required to sit for an assessment, which returned shocking results. Nearly 75 per cent of Vietnamese English teachers at primary level, and 90 per cent of teachers at secondary level were assessed as 'unqualified' under the European standard. The result of the assessment meant that the 'unqualified' teachers—who

had been trained within the Vietnamese educational system for three or four years and were experienced in teaching—had to reduce their teaching responsibilities while they were re-trained by Cambridge English Test providers and Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. Therefore, the lecturers at the college in this study were influenced by the government’s policy. All of them believed that selecting materials only from mainstream British or American publishers would meet the demands of the national project, and that as a result their teaching would be well-founded. In an interview, a representative of the lecturers said:

‘I always recommend BBC English and Voice of America websites to students ... English teachers in Vietnam always trust these resources ... After I had a micro-teaching, if any peers questioned me about the accuracy of information in the lesson, I told them I had taken it from the BBC, and there would be no more questions.’

This lecturer believed that British and American materials were the ‘safe’ option and would ensure that his work would be recognised as standard and accurate. This belief is clearly a response to the policy direction set by the government following the results of the assessments of language competency of English teachers. Thus, to be able to be seen as qualified, lecturers selected all materials from mainstream publishers.

**4. 2 Participants’ perspectives on textbooks**

In student questionnaire, 66 per cent of students thought that Vietnamese- produced materials they had used in the past were useful, whereas 97 per cent of students confirmed that the foreign books they were using at the time of the study were useful for their learning. In the lecturer questionnaire, the majority of respondents believed that the Vietnamese-produced materials they had used in the past were at ‘chất lượng chỉ ở mức trung bình’ (just average quality) while all agreed that the Western books they were using were ‘rất chất lượng’ (very high quality).

Because the lecturers highlighted ‘the quality’ of the Western textbooks, in the interviews, I examined this term further. Lecturers were asked to share information about the quality of the materials they had experienced or were currently using. The following extracts from interviews show the high level of agreement among the lecturers:

‘Vietnamese-produced materials always contain mistakes in language use. They sometimes realise the problem and correct it in the next edition, but if teachers, pupils and students don’t buy the new editions, teachers have to figure out by themselves to tell their students ... Such problems never happen in Western textbooks since English is used as a mother tongue.’

‘The thing I like best in Western books is that most of the books designed for teaching English skills have many activities for students to work on. But because this program at this college is for training language teachers, it has many

other subjects not just for English skills, so lecturers have more books not for teaching skills, but rather for providing content knowledge.’

‘Foreign books compiled by native speakers, so we can be sure that the information about culture in their books is absolutely accurate because they are writing about their life, their experiences ... English books written by Vietnamese authors usually contain misunderstandings about culture and these have been criticised by the media in the past. For instance, textbooks always described British people as ‘cold’, and British weather as ‘foggy. In America, racism is always very strong or all important scientific inventions were from America.’

From what the lecturers said in interviews, it became clear that they believed that the Western books they were using were useful because of the high quality of their language accuracy, the frequent activities in books for teaching skills and accurate information about Western culture. According to the lecturers, these dimensions were not present in locally produced textbooks. In the student focus groups, I informed the participants about the result of their survey, which had revealed the students’ positive beliefs about Western books. The following are some of the responses students gave when I questioned them about the ways in which the books were useful for them in learning English:

‘Foreign materials have rich and accurate use of language.’

‘The contents in foreign books are not condensed with grammar lessons like ones produced in Vietnam.’

‘Foreign books in general are usually divided clearly what part is for what skill, so it’s easy for learners to follow ... Some books we’re using, although they’re for learning skills, but they don’t have enough activities for speaking because the books are for upper-intermediate level. They have more exercises for thinking like true/false, matching, multiple choices.’

‘Foreign books describe accurate culture in native speaking countries, so they’re very helpful for us to understand the culture in those native countries.’

‘I like foreign books because they have useful information and knowledge about language to learn ... except a thing that many materials are too long and difficult, but my teachers have ways to help us to focus on main ideas only.’

The students’ responses show that the students had similar views to those of their lecturers about the usefulness of Western materials: accurate language use, many activities (in books for teaching English skills), and correct information about culture. However, students added the additional element that they thought Western books were helpful because they did not have too many dense grammatical explanations. To follow up this point, I asked students in the focus groups to rate the materials in the six subjects I observed based on the criteria they believed Western books contained.

**Table 1**

Subjects	Accurate language use	Not condensed with grammar	Communicative activities	True information of culture
British culture	✓	✓	☒	✓
English Literature	✓	✓	☒	✓
Listening	✓	✓	☒	✓
Teaching Method	✓	✓	☒	☒, not applicable
Reading	✓	✓	✓, but not enough	✓
Pronunciation	✓	✓	☒	☒, not applicable

### **Students' ratings of current textbooks in the focus groups**

The data in the table shows that students were happy with the quality of the Western materials in the six subjects in terms of language use, grammatical issues and information about culture. Although they realised that nearly all the material in these six subjects did not support communicative activities, they did not consider this a problem because their lecturers had solutions to get around this. However, data in the observations showed that lecturers and students faced more problems than they realised.

#### **4.3 Problems with Western textbooks**

As indicated above, participants were pleased with the Western materials in general because they believed the materials would be useful for learning language and culture. The only weakness perceived in the materials was that almost none of the books contained communicative activities, except for a few books for teaching skills. At first, this problem seems to be minor compared with the advantages that the participants believed the books offered. However, this problem in fact turns out to be a major concern for the use of textbooks in the program at this college because of the curriculum structure.

##### **4.3.1 Too long for communicative activities**

In this English language teacher education program, 15 subjects needed to be conducted in English, but only four related to teaching English skills. The remaining 11 subjects which needed to be taught in English provided content knowledge of English such as English Literature, British Culture, Teaching Methodology, Pronunciation, Semantics and Grammar. However, the participants' responses in the focus groups implied that the materials in the 11 content knowledge subjects did not contain communicative activities, and even some of teaching skills books did not have enough activities. This result was confirmed when students in the focus groups said that the materials in five of the six subjects that I observed in this study did not support communicative language teaching. In these subjects, the texts were always lengthy, which made it difficult for students to cover the material in a 50-minute class.

The introductory page on the subject British Culture shows that the text for a lesson usually involves five pages, whereas the text in a book for teaching skills involves just one page. One of the two lessons I observed in this subject was about 'The Monarchy'. Similar to the British Culture materials, the materials on English Literature were even worse because they were not only long but were also only texts, with no images to attract students. From all of the data above, it can be seen that the materials being used at this college raised a serious problem for the lecturers if they were to achieve their teaching goals.

##### **4.3.2 Too hard to get updated textbooks**

The site of this study was located in a rural area, 60 kilometres away from the nearest major city. The main means of transportation in this area are motorcycles, coaches and buses. Having the access to general Western textbooks which are sold only in big cities is therefore a problem. The problem was made worse when all the English lecturers in this teacher training program needed textbooks for teaching specific content knowledge, not just general textbooks to teach English skills. A further finding from the

classroom observations was students' use of very old editions of photocopied books. In the six subjects observed, all of the materials dated from 2001 to 2003.

In the follow-up interviews, one of the lecturers explained the issue:

'Anyone who is an English teacher wants to approach the most updated materials from foreign countries, especially when we teach English language teacher program, but the only two bookstores here don't sell books we need for English major students. These bookstores just have books for general programs such as Lifelines and New Headways, which we recommend students to use as reference books for further reading at home. But those books are copyrighted ones, so the price is too expensive. A full set of books which has a student book and workbook usually costs more than 500,00 VND, nearly a full month's expenses for a student, so students never buy books. Thus, teachers here always use free pdf-books. That's why our materials are very out of date, because only such old books have free pdf versions for downloading.'

Another lecturer added more information about the use of photocopied books:

'Every year, the college Board of Leaders usually requests all departments to send them lists of wanted books for them to approve and buy. However, the English Department has never got any books because most of the books we want for English major students for very specific content subjects are from foreign countries. Those books aren't sold in Vietnamese bookstores, even in big ones in Ho Chi Minh City. The books have to be ordered online, but according to government regulation, when we buy anything for an institution, we have to submit the red tax invoice document ... We can't get such document from online foreign sellers. Some books we want for teaching skills are available in big city bookstores, but the price is high whereas the budget for buying books is very tight, so teachers have to find materials themselves for teaching during many years.'

The data indicate that due to the belief in the usefulness of Western materials, lecturers are attached to such textbooks. However, they face difficulty affording the original and updated textbooks due to the rural location and tight budget constraints. Therefore, lecturers provided a temporary solution by using old versions of books which could be downloaded free online. However, this raises the issue of the accuracy of information in the textbooks. For example, in the British Culture class, students used a textbook published in 2003 which contained the following information:

'There are three main ways in which people look for work in Britain: through newspapers ... through local job centres ... and through privately-run non-government agencies.' (Unit 15, Britain, The economy and everyday life, page 142) This extract describes the ways in which British people found jobs nearly 15 years ago. Given the rapid development of technology, the contemporary situation is very different, and most people find jobs through the internet. However, as lecturers and students believe that information about culture in Western textbooks is accurate, they are likely to have an inaccurate view of job-seeking in contemporary British culture.

### **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, this paper has just reported why Western English textbooks are preferred at an English language

teacher education program in rural Vietnam. It also reported lecturers' and students' beliefs about these textbooks as well the challenges they faced. Results show that lecturers at this teacher training college all selected teaching materials from the US and the UK. There were two reasons for their textbook selections: i) They believed English language belonged to the US and the UK, thus English from these two countries are 'standard'; ii) The impact from the Vietnamese national language project 2020 which has been using the European framework to assess English users' proficiency. All of lecturers and students in this study had very strong beliefs that Western textbooks were the best choices for them to learn English because of the accuracy of language and information in the books. However, results also showed that the textbooks used in that college had several problems in terms of supporting communicative activities as well as having the access to the updated textbooks. The findings of this study have pointed out that the preference to British English and American English, excluding other variety of Englishes in Vietnam is not suitable with learning goals and the reality. The learning goals stated that the program helped students have the ability to communicate to international English users, but the textbook selection clearly limited to a certain range of English speakers. In reality, Vietnamese people use English mainly to communicate to English speakers in Asian region. Therefore, Vietnam should be open to accept different Englishes. This study also provided an insight to the language policy makers in Vietnam.

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