

English in Vietnam

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, English has emerged as a lingua franca and the dominant foreign language in the fast developing and populous society of Vietnam, placing the country in the center of the Expanding Circle. This paper presents a sociolinguistic profile of English in Vietnam following Berns' framework. The profile begins with a demographic description and defines how Vietnam can be considered part of the Expanding Circle. We discuss the functional distributions of English in Vietnam by (i) chronicling its instrumental function from Chinese domination in Vietnam in 111 BC until recent years, (ii) detailing its administrative function before and after the country's Economic Reforms of the 1990s, (iii) revealing its interpersonal function in contemporary Vietnamese society; and (iv) illustrating how English borrowings and nativizations are used in the media. We conclude with a discussion of Vietnamese learners' attitudes towards English learning and different English varieties.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Vietnam, officially known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is located in Southeast Asia, bordering China to the north and Laos and Cambodia to the west (see Figure 1). Covering an area of 331,212 square kilometers (approximately 127,882 square miles), Vietnam has a population of 96.2 million and ranks 15th in the world (*Nhan Dan Online*, 2019). Most Vietnamese believe in folk religion or no religion; and Buddhism and Catholicism, two of the largest organized religions, are practiced by 14.91% (U.S. Department of State, 2019) and 7–8% (Chu, 2008, p. 151) of the population, respectively. The official and national language of Vietnam is Vietnamese; however, there are a number of minority languages spoken by ethnic groups such as Cham, Khmer, Muong, and Thai. Since 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party has been the ruling and the only legal party in the country, playing the central role in politics and society.

Vietnam's history is one of wars, colonization, rebellion, economic reconstruction and development. The country underwent a thousand years of Chinese domination from 111 BC to 938 AD until Ngo Quyen defeated the Chinese army and declared national independence. Subsequently, Vietnam was ruled by a succession of dynasties against the constant threats of Chinese invasion. These threats only ceased with the arrival of the French in the country and the beginning of the French colonization era. The French colonized Vietnam from 1884 to 1954 interrupted by

BẢN ĐỒ HÀNH CHÍNH NƯỚC CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM ADMINISTRATIVE MAP OF SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

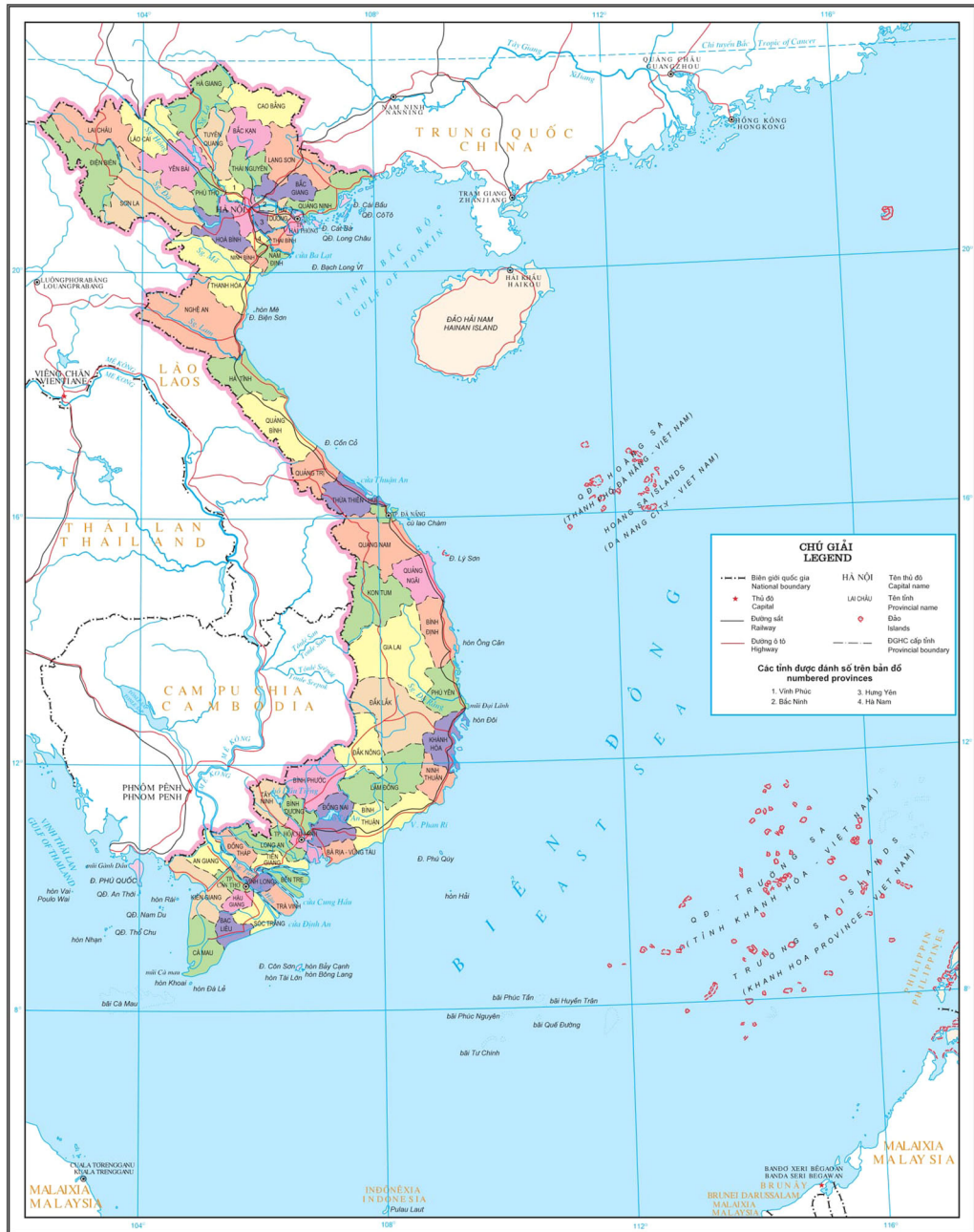


FIGURE 1 Political map of Vietnam (Source: Nations Online Project) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/vietnam-political-map.htm>

Bản đồ này được cung cấp để đăng tải trên Cổng thông tin điện tử và các trang thông tin điện tử của Cơ quan nhà nước và các tổ chức, cá nhân;

a brief occupation of the Japanese military forces in 1945. When France was finally defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the two countries attended the Geneva Conference to discuss and resolve several issues, including the conclusion of the war, with the world powers of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the United States and Great Britain. As a result of the Geneva Conference, the Geneva Accord was signed, marking French withdrawal from Vietnam, the division of Vietnam into North and South at the 17th parallel, and United States involvement in the South of Vietnam. In 1955, the Vietnam War began between the Communist North supported by the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries and the anti-Communist South allied with the US. The War lasted for 20 years and ended in 1975 with victory for the North, marking the national reunion under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

From 1975 to 1986, post-war Vietnam experienced economic isolation and stagnation due to the US embargo. Because of difficulties in communist member countries, aid to Vietnam was limited. Thus, it was urgent for the Vietnamese government to seek appropriate guidelines for national development. The Vietnamese government decided to expand its relations with countries of varying political ideologies at the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Community Party in 1986. For the purpose of economic reform and attracting foreign investment, Vietnam adopted *Doi Moi*, or an Open Door policy, which subsequently spurred significant economic growth and transformation. Nowadays, over 30 years after the implementation of *Doi Moi*, Vietnam has been reported by the World Bank as one of the most dynamic economies in the region (The World Bank, 2019), with a GDP doubling from US\$115.93 billion in 2010 to US\$244.95 billion in 2018 (Trading Economics, 2019). It took Vietnam and the US a few decades to normalize their relations. The US did not lift its trade embargo against Vietnam until 1994, and then-US President Bill Clinton declared the normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995. However, not until 2001 was a trade agreement approved by the United States Senate and signed by then-US President George W. Bush. It took five years for a bilateral trade agreement to be formalized which lowered tariffs and lifted trade barriers (Albert, 2019). It was not until 2004 that the first commercial flight from the United States since the end of the war landed in Ho Chi Minh City (NBC News, 2004). Today, sixteen years later, in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the streets are packed with either tourists and visitors from English-speaking countries or other parts of the world where English is used as a lingua franca. The number of tourists tripled from 2010–2018 when 15.5 million international arrivals came to Vietnam (Koushan, 2019). Over the past few decades, Vietnam has been shifting from a poor, agricultural society to an urban-centered, lower-middle class society (The World Bank, 2019). The migration to cities and to metropolitan jobs has given more impetus to English as the most common foreign language of the city, and of employment in an increasingly diverse metropolis that often requires knowledge of English as a lingua franca. English is now more than ever a part of the fabric of contemporary Vietnamese culture, and the role of English is becoming increasingly significant in Vietnam every year.

2 | VIETNAM IN THE EXPANDING CIRCLE

While Kachru's (1985) famous model of the Concentric Circles does not explicitly name Vietnam, he does imply that the country has always been a part of the Expanding Circle, along with Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan. Kachru (1985, p. 3) explained that the Inner Circle 'represents the traditional bases of English, dominated by the "mother tongue" varieties of the language', whereas in the Outer Circle, English 'has been institutionalized as an additional language'. The Expanding Circle 'includes the rest of the world where English is used as the primary foreign language, and the uses of English are unpredictably increasing' (Kachru, 1985, p. 3) as is the case of Vietnam. The population explosion in Vietnam has led to an increased number of English users. With a population of over 96 million in 2019, Vietnam is nowadays one of the most populous countries in the Expanding Circle, behind only China, Indonesia, Japan, Russia and Egypt (Worldometers, 2019). English in Expanding Circle countries, according to Kachru (1985), does not develop

into their own localized varieties, but rather are norm-dependent. Consequently, English in Vietnam is dependent on standard American and British English norms, with no standardized local varieties (even though nativized features of English are used locally). At the same time, Kachru (2005) claims that India has been exporting English to Vietnam, decentering the exportation of English from the US and the UK. Although the exportation of English varieties from South Asia is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that 'non-Western discourse strategies, new canons of literature, and novel ways of moving and combining elements of English with other languages' (Alatis & Lowenberg, 2011, p. 427) that characterize English in Outer and Expanding Circles, apply to English in Vietnam as well. It is possible that these 'exports' and creative, localized uses of English have flourished in Vietnam as much as such organizations as the British Council and the Peace Corps.

This is not to suggest that the British Council has not had an impact on the landscape of English in Vietnam. In 1993, the Council, then a wing of the British Embassy in Hanoi, established an English Language Training (ELT) program. ELT workshops were held across Vietnam, and ties between the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and Hanoi Science University were created. In the 1990s, the Council trained Vietnamese government officials, offered scholarships, and donated 150,000 literature texts in English to various educational institutions around the country. However, it was not until 2002 that the Council made English language teaching courses available to the public. Since then, the Council has started a radio program featuring contemporary music in the UK, collaborated with the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and has opened teaching centers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (British Council in Vietnam, 2019). In 2016, the first Peace Corps program was established. This event coincided with President Obama's 2016 visit to the country to accentuate US support for Vietnam. The Peace Corps' focus is English language teaching, yet Peace Corps volunteers undergo cultural and linguistic training before being sent to schools as English language instructors (Peace Corps, 2016). The presence of the British Council and the Peace Corps in Vietnam is evidence of the strength of English as a lingua franca in this country. As Vietnam develops economically, and as English becomes even more *de rigueur*, the sociocultural environment will continue to change.

A closer look at the use of English in Vietnam in light of Berns' (1990, 1992) sociolinguistic profile framework reveals that English displays different, though not in an equal manner, functions in the instrumental, regulative, interpersonal and creative domains in the Vietnamese society. Specifically, the use of English in Vietnam is primarily restricted to its instrumental function as the dominant foreign language in the educational system and to its interpersonal function as the symbol of socio-economic prestige, whereas its regulative function only serves economic, rather than regulatory, impetus and its creative function is limited to borrowings. In what follows, the use of English in the context of Vietnam will be examined in detail, profiling its instrumental function in the history and current situation of English education, its regulative function in the forefront of economic development and integration, its interpersonal function in everyday life and its creative function in the form of borrowings and social media. The profile will conclude with a discussion on Vietnamese attitudes towards English and English learning.

3 | THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

As Denham (1992, p. 61) remarks, 'Vietnam's linguistic history reflects its political history'. Due to the politics between Vietnam and countries that participated in its history such as China, France, Russia and the US, the status of English in society has varied over different periods regarding the status of other foreign languages (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007; Wright, 2002). Vietnam's history underwent a thousand years of Chinese domination, from 111 BC to 938 AD. During this period, education in Vietnam followed China's model and Chinese, with its Han script, was the language of instruction (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007). Vietnam gained her national independence from China in 1939, yet Chinese was still the influential and dominant foreign language for teaching and learning. In the late 13th century, Chu Nom, the Vietnamese orthography adapted from Chinese characters, came into use (Do, 2006).

From 1887 to 1954, Vietnam underwent almost a century of French colonization. During this period, Chu Nom was replaced by Quoc Ngu ('National Language'), an orthographic system using Roman characters, invented and first used by European missionaries. Later, the Vietnamese language sprang from Quoc Ngu, which was refined and developed into contemporary Vietnamese. French became the official language of Vietnam in the period of French colonization and was taught in primary schools; official examinations at all levels of education were given in French (Do, 2006). Vietnamese was recognized as the national and official language only when the country gained its independence from France in 1946. The period from 1946 to 1954 marked the return of the French and the Vietnamese resistance struggle, and the language used as an official and instructional language depended on its political status: French was used in French-controlled regions and Vietnamese in Vietnamese-led regions (Do, 2006). A military battle between France and Vietnam in 1954, which the Vietnamese won, led to the Geneva conference. The status of French didn't wane until the 1954 Geneva Accord, which divided Vietnam into north and south and dismantled French rule of Vietnam. Four foreign languages – English, Russian, Chinese and French – were taught in the schools after 1954. From 1954 to 1975, China and Russia gave the North substantial military and civilian aid; therefore, Chinese and Russian replaced French and English in secondary and tertiary colleges in the North. English did not receive much attention in the North in this period (T. Nguyen, 2011, p. 228).

As a result of American involvement, English became the most studied and spoken second language in Southern Vietnam. Americans began language training operations in this region as early as 1957. American missionaries, the United States Information Agency, and the US Department of Veterans Affairs hosted hundreds of English classes in their various facilities. Hundreds of thousands of learners became interested in studying at English language schools, which appeared in abundance especially after 1970. In both secondary and higher education, English became the main foreign language that was taught. People from such English speaking countries as Australia and New Zealand, as well as soldiers, businesspeople, missionaries and other foreigners, propelled the proliferation of English. The status of English as a foreign language started to wane in Vietnam after 1975, when the war ended with the victory of the North, leading to national reunification (Do, 2006). After 1975, Russian was the main foreign language to be taught and learned in schools nationwide due to Vietnam's political, economic and educational connections with the Soviet Union (Do, 2006). According to Denham (1992, p. 62), the targets set for foreign language education in high schools were 60% studying Russian, 25% English and 15% French. In the North, Russian continued to be the predominant language as it was before 1975. In the South, faculty were sent from the North to establish Russian departments in many universities. Enrollments of students majoring in Russian in high schools and higher education increased over the years. This situation was facilitated by Russian aid in education which allowed the Vietnamese government to send hundreds of Vietnamese teachers and students to study abroad in Russia annually.

The waning of English did not last long, however. Because of the US embargo, Vietnam was economically isolated and stagnant. The country also received limited support from other communist countries since they, too, were experiencing difficult conditions. At the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986, the Vietnamese government highlighted the urgent need to expand their diplomatic and economic relations with countries of varying political ideologies to achieve national growth. This resulted in the implementation of Doi Moi, or Open Door, policy which aimed for reforming the economy and attracting foreign investment. This change of political direction led to an increasing number of businesspeople coming to Vietnam, plus a growth in foreign investment from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and the European Union. These foreign investors used English as a lingua franca, which fueled the spread of English even more (Ton & Pham, 2010). Denham (1992) notes that English was seen to be used not only between Vietnamese and foreigners but also among Vietnamese people. Students began to choose the foreign language(s) they wanted to study when foreign language training took place more liberally. The teaching and learning of English developed widely in the south, and even in the north, larger numbers of learners chose to study English or French. To give their children better job opportunities related to foreign investment, parents sent their children to English language classes in urban areas. English was officially acknowledged as Vietnam's major foreign language in the 1990s, concurrent with the rapid growth of the economy (Do, 2006).

4 | THE CURRENT STATUS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is the governmental body in charge of foreign language education and policies. This Ministry designs the national curriculum, sets the syllabus, approves textbooks and supervises the implementation of pedagogical frameworks in schools. The Ministry also develops and monitors the administration of final graduation exams from elementary school to high school (Le, 2019, p. 8). English dominates the national foreign language curriculum and is taught at all levels of education (N. Nguyen, 2012). Although other foreign languages such as French, Chinese, Russian, Japanese and Korean are offered, 90% of Vietnamese children learn English (Ton & Pham, 2010). In the public educational system, English is a compulsory subject starting from third grade (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 62). To graduate from secondary school, which comprises grades 6 to 9, Vietnamese students are required to pass four national exams, one of which is on English or another foreign language (*Tienphong*, 2019). For those who select English, the two most important English examinations are the high school graduation exam and the university/college entrance exam. Both exams are administered at the end of Grade 12, and Listening and Speaking tests are not included (Le, 2007).

No national policy specifies which language should be the medium of instruction in English classrooms in Vietnam (T. Nguyen, 2017). A number of studies have shown that Vietnamese teachers instruct in both English and Vietnamese, and frequently codeswitch (e.g., Q. Nguyen, 2012). Many scholars claim that Communicative Language Teaching pedagogy (CLT) has been employed in the English classroom, especially at the university level, with an integrated four-skills focus (Le, 2007; T. Nguyen, 2017; Nunan, 2003). However, whether CLT has been applied effectively is questionable since it has been said to 'challenge the basic Vietnamese cultural and educational values' (Pham, 2005, p. 336). In particular, this approach, which encourages teachers and students to break 'the hierarchical barriers' and change roles in the classroom, is at odds with the traditional view that teachers should be the students' mentors and the 'masters of knowledge' (Pham, 2005, p. 336). Furthermore, there are pedagogical conflicts for teachers between teaching communicative practices promoted by the CLT approach and teaching grammar to make sure students pass textbook- and grammar-based national exams required to obtain a degree, which is the primary goal in the classroom (Pham, 2005, p. 337).

Before 2013, there was no official policy determining which textbooks were to be used in the English classroom. However, the syllabus and textbooks approved by the MOET were considered to set the framework for the teaching and learning activities in the classroom (Le, 2007). Evaluation of some English textbooks used at different educational levels indicated that their focus was more on grammar than on communication (Moon, 2005), and on reading than on other skills (Nunan, 2003). These findings showed that there was a discrepancy between the pedagogical theory, that is, the application of the CLT approach, and the teaching materials that governed the everyday practices in the classroom. In 2013, domestically produced English textbooks were introduced, starting from primary school, with the goal of strengthening Vietnamese students' communicative skills in multicultural contexts. Dang and Seals (2018) analyze the content of the new primary school textbooks and find signs that the CLT approach was applied in these textbooks via the promotion of real-life communication, the integration of skills, the absence of decontextualized grammar teaching, and the inclusion of intercultural communication and knowledge. However, the examined textbooks also have some drawbacks. For example, while British English is seen in the instruction on spelling and pronunciation, the textbooks do not address the existence of other English varieties. Dang and Seals (2018) claim that the tasks accompanied with intercultural learning will only result in a shallow understanding of other cultures, and will not allow students to communicate effectively in real-life multicultural contexts. Dang and Seals' findings about the intercultural orientation of the primary textbooks resonate with Nguyen and Cao's (2019) analysis of the locally produced English secondary textbooks. These scholars praise the secondary textbooks on the inclusion of Vietnamese local contexts that equip students with the linguistic repertoire to communicate about their home country and culture, and the use of interactive tasks that capitalize on students' lived experiences (Nguyen & Cao, 2019, p. 157). However, they also found a prevalence of Anglophone/Western cultural contents and the underrepresentation of other Asian contexts in the materials. Additionally, the textbooks tend to endorse a monolithic view of cultures as students are tasked only to

compare and contrast conventional values and beliefs between different cultures but not invited to critically evaluate these generalizations in a more comprehensive, unbiased manner that allows for an alternative understanding of cultural phenomena. Therefore, Nguyen and Cao (2019, p. 159) conclude that the content of the textbooks does not fully facilitate the development of intercultural competence in students.

In 2008, Vietnam's government issued Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg which approved the implementation of the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, or NFLP 2020 (Dang & Seals, 2018). With a budget of nearly 500 million dollars, this project was set to realize the grand ambition of renovating English education in Vietnam so that 'all young people leaving school by 2020 have a good grasp of the language' (Parks, 2011). In response to the long-standing concern about the qualifications of English teachers in Vietnam, eighty-five per cent of the budget was allocated to teacher training. Other foci of the project were placed on designing textbooks, streamlining assessment methods and incorporating technology in English teaching and learning activities. A new sequence of textbooks for different levels of education was produced as aforementioned, and a standardized assessment approach was adopted. Specifically, the project uses a six-level proficiency framework, an adaptation from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the assessment blueprints and a locally developed language proficiency test called VSTEP (Vietnam Standardized Test of English Proficiency) as the assessment instrument. These two tools serve to assess the English proficiency of teachers and students at different educational levels (Le, 2019, p. 10). 80,000 English language teachers in state schools were expected to demonstrate their proficiency by passing a test at the intermediate level. In order to realize the targeted English proficiency among teachers, an intensive 400-hour training agenda was carried out with teachers of different education levels. However, the screening test in 2013 revealed that 87 per cent of the 80,000 participatory English teachers did not meet the required proficiency level. This situation did not improve by the end of 2015 as the number of qualified teachers was considerably below the target.

On 16 November 2016, the Minister of Education and Training officially reported to the National Assembly that the NFLP 2020, after eight years of implementation, had fallen behind its initial targets for the 2008–2020 period (*Viet Nam News*, 2018). According to scholarly review, the failure of the NFLP 2020 was attributed to various reasons, including 'unrealistic benchmarks, inadequate instructional time, students' and teachers' low and varied starting points, lack of appropriate approaches to implementation, and a rigid syllabus and teaching methodology' (Vietnam News, 2018). However, in December 2017, the Vietnamese government has approved an extension of the Project, shifting its termination from 2020 to 2025 (*Dan Tri*, 2017).

5 | ENGLISH AT THE FOREFRONT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

After Doi Moi in 1986, Vietnam gradually gained membership into several regional and international economic organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). When the country first joined ASEAN, there were concerns about their lack of English-proficient personnel to attend ASEAN meetings (Frost, 1995, p. 7). As Vietnam was targeting further global economic integration, the country's leaders realized foreign languages were the 'door to trade' and paid more attention to improving the foreign language competence, especially in English, of state bureaucrats (N. Nguyen, 2011). In 1994, then Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet signed Instruction 422-TTg that required state cadres to study foreign languages, preferably English, if they were to be hired (Wilhelm, 1995). In the same year, an English language training project was implemented by the British government whose aim was to help train Vietnam's senior officials. By 2001, through the British Council in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, this project had provided English language training to more than 600 senior Vietnamese officials.

Nowadays, Vietnam has become an active member of numerous international organizations and forums where English is the working and official language. Videos on YouTube and other channels have documented diplomats and delegates from Vietnam communicating fluently in English during their participation in international political,

economic, and social events. The country has also played host to a multitude of international conferences and summits for which both Vietnamese and English are the language of communication and documentation. A focused search of keywords of 'Vietnam host conferences and summits' in Google or allconferencealert.com yields hundreds of results of international events held all over the country and this information is provided in English. These events are related to different sectors and areas, for example, education, social sciences, solar energy, and technology, and are documented in both Vietnamese and English. One most recent and remarkable example of such an event was the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in 2017 where senior officials and delegates from 21 member countries convened to discuss frameworks, agendas and action plans for economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. The website for this event is in English and Vietnamese (www.apec2017.vn).

Vietnamese leaders also recognized the need for foreign-trained personnel who could understand the operations of capitalist systems. The party began discussing educational exchanges in 1988. While the Vietnamese government continued the pre-Doi Moi tradition of sending students for vocational training to the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern European countries, they also allowed students to study in other countries such as France, Canada, and Australia (Abuza, 1996). Vietnam began post-1975 educational exchanges with the US in 1990 when diplomatic normalization between the two countries was accelerated and the first American NGOs started operating in Vietnam (Abuza, 1996). The most important scholarship programs sponsored by the US government are the Fulbright Program and the Vietnam Education Foundation Program. The Fulbright Program has been the most influential educational exchange program between Vietnam and the US; its mission is to promote economic growth and to reinforce bilateral ties between the two countries (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, 2019). Over the last 20 years, more than 600 Vietnamese students, educators and scholars have been sent to the US for advanced education and research training in various fields such as political science, business, education, communications and others (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, 2019). However, Fulbright scholarships have historically been awarded to students in the humanities, sciences and business. Less than a third of Fulbright recipients were in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Therefore, in 2000, the US Congress established the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) to provide fellowships to students and scholars only within STEM fields. More than 500 Vietnamese graduate students have been funded by VEF for their US education in the last 15 years (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, 2018). Other than these two US government-sponsored programs, educational exchanges and training between the US and Vietnam also happen at the NGO-sponsored and university-to-university levels in various forms of scholarships, fellowships and assistantships.

6 | THE INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION OF ENGLISH

From the personal experience of the authors of this paper, it has been observed that Vietnamese do not generally speak in English to each other, unless they are practicing English or preparing for an exam. However, Vietnamese millennials working in grocery stores and other shops in big cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are fluent enough to navigate a conversation with an English-speaking tourist. Millennials are also likely to code-switch from Vietnamese to English in social media communications, perhaps because English connotes high social status in Vietnam. Some cable TV shows feature music videos from the US and the UK, and younger, educated Vietnamese are familiar with the same celebrities and icons that are popular in the US, for example. There are also movie theaters that feature English language movies, particularly in metropolitan areas like Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The instant-messaging platform, Viber, is extremely popular in Vietnam and its logos and ads in English appear on backpacks and stickers on the crowded streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Vietnamese millennials in particular code-mix between Vietnamese and English on instant messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp to show off their status as part of the increasing educated class. However, because Vietnam is a relatively homogenous culture, Vietnamese generally only speak English to tourists, foreigners, and politicians and businesspeople from other countries.

7 | BORROWINGS AND ENGLISH IN THE MEDIA

Alves (2009) documents that English loanwords have appeared in Vietnamese since the 1960s with the American participation in the Vietnam War. *Mit tinh* ('meeting'), *ti vi* ('TV'), and *top* ('top') were among the most commonly used loanwords back then. The *Dictionary of new words in Vietnamese* published by Vietnam's Institute of Linguistics in 2006 recorded 70 English loanwords, a majority of which are technological terms (Alves, 2009). However, in the past 10 years, the borrowing of original English words has gradually replaced the use of English loanwords in social life in Vietnam. Nguyen (2014, p. 817) found 762 English words being used in several Vietnamese print and online newspapers, while Do's (2018) study of popular Vietnamese online newspapers reported that English words appeared an average of 4.6 times per article. According to Vuong (2010), the use of many English words, such as 'computer', 'fan', 'fast food', 'hot girls/boys', 'internet', 'shop', is so pervasive that they may have replaced the Vietnamese equivalents in the everyday life of Vietnamese people (as cited in N. Nguyen, 2012).

English loanwords and borrowings are particularly prevalent in social media. Nowadays, the Vietnamese audience has become familiar with a series of TV programs franchised by foreign media companies that have such English names as *Vietnam idol*, *The voice*, *The remix*, *The face*, and *Vietnam next top model*. Although these programs have their equivalent titles in Vietnamese, as is the case with *Vietnam idol* (*Thần tượng Âm nhạc Việt Nam*), Vietnamese people show a preference for using the English names (Do, 2018; Tran, 2018). More importantly, as documented by vietnamnet.vn, the language used in these broadcasts has also been 'Englishized'. Instead of utilizing popular utterances and lexicons in Vietnamese, more English versions of these linguistic units could be heard in the shows, such as 'thank you' for *cảm ơn*, 'dancer' for *vũ công*, 'stress' for *căng thẳng*, and 'sexy' for *gợi cảm*. Many Vietnamese audiences have been following a Korean TV series entitled 'My wife is a gangster' which can be translated as *Vợ tôi là Sát Thủ*. In these examples, the Vietnamese words were replaced by their equivalent English loan words/phrases for stylistic and rhetorical purposes. As English is seen as an international language associated with powerful and developed economies, the employment of English words in the title or operation of a sitcom could evoke in the audience a sense about the prosperous, modern and more advanced world, hence hooking them into watching the show. Besides, many English loanwords hold certain cultural connotations which have no equivalent associations in Vietnamese, and which can only be conveyed in the English words themselves.

In some cases, media in Vietnam has gone beyond loan words, and expanded to English versions. For example, *The voice of Vietnam*, the state-run radio station, broadcasts in English, French and Russian. Several newspapers offer an English edition such as the Communist Party daily newspaper *Nhan Dan*, or the business weekly newspaper *Saigon Times*. The Communist Youth Union publishes a daily English language website and VietNamNetBridge, a website run by the Information Industry that provides background information about Vietnam, can be accessed in English. English words are also fashionably used to name places, buildings, companies. Some of the biggest companies in Vietnam incorporate English words in their names: Air Mekong, Appota Corporation, Asia Commercial Bank, Bien Hoa Sugar, Cuu-long Fish, Danang Rubber Company, Hue Beer, to name a few. Many Vietnamese singers, and movie stars also choose a hybrid English-Vietnamese name for their professional brand, such as Hamlet Trương, Angela Phương Trinh, Elly Trần, Cường Seven, which has become a familiar phenomenon in the Vietnamese celebrity community (Do, 2018). English loanwords and borrowings have permeated the industries of entertainment, TV, radio, journalism, advertising and business in Vietnam and are becoming a part of the Vietnamese lexicon.

8 | ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH LEARNING AND ENGLISH VARIETIES

As in many developing countries, the English language has a high social status in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government regards English proficiency as the linguistic instrument for 'national economic development, modernization, and participation in the global economy' (Le, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Barnard, 2019), a vision that has been translated into several

initiatives on reform of the country's English education landscape. For Vietnamese people, English proficiency is the key to educational success, professional development and economic prosperity (Le, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, in upwardly mobile, urban areas of Vietnam such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, parents send their children to English academies from a young age (Nguyen, 2011, p. 243) and consider it an 'early investment' (Le et al., 2019). Vietnamese students from middle school to college have various objectives and aspirations in learning English. The most popular ones are to access better job opportunities (N. Nguyen, 2012), to complete a compulsory subject at school (Ton & Pham, 2010), and to pass the national examinations (Le, 2007). Others include studying further at the college level (Le, 2007) or studying abroad (Ton & Pham, 2010).

As in other Expanding Circle countries, American English and British English are the two most familiar English varieties to the Vietnamese public. Indeed, a preference for Inner Circle varieties and a resistance to deviant norms from other varieties appear in the governmental, administrative and classroom levels (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p. xii). Two key documents providing guidelines for English education in Vietnam, namely the Framework of Foreign Language Proficiency for Vietnam and the implementation specifications of Project 2020 issued by the MOET in 2008 and in 2020, repeatedly referred to *người bản ngữ* ('native speakers'), *giáo viên bản ngữ* ('native L1 teachers') and *giọng chuẩn* ('standard pronunciation' or 'native accent') as 'the benchmark for evaluating English users in Vietnam' (Ho & Nguyen, 2019, p. 166). Also documented in Ho and Nguyen (2019),

[a]t the National Conference on teaching English at High Schools, broadcast live on Vietnamese television on October 19, 2011, the director of a regional Department of Education and Training in Vietnam criticized English teachers in Vietnam for [... speaking English with a Vietnamese accent] and considered this a hindrance to learning. (p. 166)

Expressed in the aforementioned documents and event is an orientation that subscribes to 'native speaker model idealisation' (Ho & Nguyen, 2019, p. 168). Not only at the administrative level, this attitude is also shared among Vietnamese English teachers and learners. Both Do (2000) and Ton and Pham (2010) reported on student participants' dominant preference for British and American Englishes. One third of the participants in Walkinshaw and Duong's (2012) study valued 'innate native-speakerness' for pronunciation, while some teachers in Tran and Ngo's (2017, p. 48) study cited students' resistance, confusion, or boredom when being introduced to non-British/American English varieties as '[t]hey just want to listen to native speaker voices only'. Also, in this study, a teacher participant shared that her colleague, who had improper understanding of the notion of World Englishes, '[tried] to correct the students' pronunciation, intonation to become native speakers' (Tran and Ngo, 2017, p. 49), implying that native-speakerism also exists among teachers. Ho and Nguyen (2019) surveyed and interviewed a mixed group of 42 Vietnamese teachers and students about their perceptions of English as a lingua franca (ELF). As their findings revealed, the majority of participants showed a negative attitude towards ELF as they preferred Inner Circle norms and accent and perceived ELF as having an artificial nature without rooting in any culture. These opponents further argued that the promotion of ELF would lead to 'decreased mutual intelligibility' among nonnative speakers, endorse the learning of 'erroneous' English, and pollute English with 'uncontrollable developments', which, as the authors criticize, demonstrated their uncritical reflections and a lack of knowledge about ELF (Ho & Nguyen, 2019, p. 174).

In another line of argument, more and more attention has been paid to other English varieties (Do, 2000; Ton & Pham, 2010; Tran & Ngo, 2017). Many teachers and students believe that knowledge and exposure to other English varieties would greatly benefit students as they are aware that students in the real world usually communicate and interact more with speakers of other varieties than with British and American English speakers (Ho & Nguyen, 2019; Le, 2007; Ton & Pham, 2010; Tran & Ngo, 2017). Therefore, learning different English varieties, in their view, will better prepare students for real-life communications and raise their communicative confidence knowing that they are legitimate users of English (Ho & Nguyen, 2019; Tran & Ngo, 2017). Despite this heightened awareness among Vietnamese teachers and students, British and American English are still the varieties most frequently taught in the English classroom in Vietnam for various reasons. First, the materials used in the classroom are mostly based on British

or American English and culture (Ton & Pham, 2010). Classroom constraints, like time limits and unfamiliarity with other English varieties, do not allow many teachers to instruct students about the existence of varieties outside of the Inner Circle (Ho & Nguyen, 2019; Tran & Ngo, 2017). Furthermore, the assessment culture in Vietnam, which only evaluates students against native speaker norms, largely contributes to teachers' decisions to not teach other unassessed varieties (Ton & Pham, 2010; Tran & Ngo, 2017). Students' resistance also leads to instructors' reluctance to introduce non-British/American varieties (Tran & Ngo, 2017). Lastly, some teachers believe that by learning only Inner Circle Englishes, students will already be able to communicate with any English speakers in the world, native or non-native, implying the need for instructors to achieve efficiency in classroom management (Ton & Pham, 2010). In terms of what English varieties to be taught in the future, 19 per cent of the surveyed teachers in Ton and Pham's (2010, p. 58) study speculated that Inner Circle Englishes 'would still remain a benchmark and model for instruction no matter who the Vietnamese used English with'. This is congruent with Ho and Nguyen's (2019, p. 175) finding that '31 out of 42 participants advocated NS (native speaker) English as a model for teaching and learning'. However, some teachers also pointed to the increase in recent years of considerable increase in business contact between Vietnamese and users of English from all circles. This reality suggests possibilities for teaching English varieties used by non-native speakers.

9 | CONCLUSION

Vietnam's history of occupation that lasted over 1,000 years makes it a unique example of linguistic flux caused by the upheaval of colonialism and war. Chinese, the dominant second language during periods of Chinese occupation, was replaced by French in the colonial era (1858–1945). The American involvement in the Vietnam War brought English to the south of the country initially, then to the country as a whole in the post-war years and especially after Bill Clinton lifted a 19-year-old trade embargo in 1994. By the time Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007, English as a lingua franca and as the most popular foreign language was gaining traction, as if in tandem with the billions of dollars of exports the US was suddenly sending to Vietnam. The impact of the United States in business and language cannot be overemphasized, as nearly \$10 billion in US goods were sent to Vietnam in 2018, a notable increase from 2017, according to The Office of the United States Trade Representative. Le et al. (2019, p. 1) have noted that 'developing countries have associated English proficiency with national economic development, modernization, and participation in the global economy. Vietnam is a case in point'. At no time in Vietnam's history has English been this widely implemented in education. English is more pervasive in interpersonal communication and in the media than ever before, and this trend is rapidly escalating per annum.

The expansion of English and the population explosion, an increase of 30,000,000 people in the past 25 years, has made Vietnam one of the most compelling countries in the Expanding Circle. The sheer number of people in densely populated urban areas who see learning English as both fashionable and necessary to their academic and career success, and the annual upsurge in the amount of English language learners, makes Vietnam one of the most vigorous and vitalizing countries in the world to teach and learn English, and for conducting research on the real life problems of assessment, pedagogy, second language acquisition and other areas. Recently, scholars have begun to take on this challenge. Scholarship has focused on English varieties, English in the media and in interpersonal communication, and English in education. Perhaps the most compelling work has come from inquiry into the Ministry of Education's (MOET) ambitious goal of achieving English fluency in Vietnam's secondary and high school students by 2020. Skeptical but fruitful exploration has been directed at the failings of MOET's plan from poor teacher training and inadequate pay for qualified teachers, to insufficient curriculum design and course materials, to disheartening results. Le and Barnard (2019, p. 184) suggest that 'unsuccessful implementation of language education policies is due to the failure to consider the specific challenges that teachers confront in their teaching practices'. It seems that the next step is to connect the good intentions of policy makers with the everyday realities of instruction in educational contexts. The productive body of research already available should pave the way for further research with practical applications that can influence

policy and pedagogy in ways that lead to more copacetic results. Hopefully, a resolution can be found for what Le and Barnard (2019, p. 184) call 'the tension between what is intended by policymakers and what is implemented by teachers in the classroom'. A more cooperative effort between the Ministry of Education and teachers, curriculum designers and administrators may lead to a transformation in English language education in Vietnam.

Although implementation of educational policies is still a work-in-progress, Vietnam belongs to various international political and business organizations where English is the official language. The interpersonal functions of English has increased so much that millennials often exchange texts and messages on social media in English as a sign of prestige, education and sophistication. Nonetheless, Vietnam remains a homogenous culture and it is rare to hear people speaking English even in urban centers like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. As English loan words and borrowings continue to increase in the media, TV, and social media, the interpersonal function of English may become more various. Among Vietnam's growing upper middle class, English is seen as *de rigueur* for their children to study abroad, preferably at a top school in the US or the UK. The ability to speak English well is perceived as a sign of high social status, and expensive international schools in urban centers are prospering. Nativized varieties are still little acknowledged because these do not carry the same status and are not recognized as having practical merit. Perhaps as Vietnam continues to develop, the usefulness of non-standardized varieties will begin to emerge.

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