

LEARNING THROUGH ENGLISH - A PERSPECTIVE FROM DA NANG UNIVERSITY, VIET NAM

HỌC TẬP THÔNG QUA TIẾNG ANH MỘT TRIỂN VỌNG TỪ
ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀ NẴNG

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TÓM TẮT

Khi thế giới bước vào thời kỳ toàn cầu hóa, tiếng Anh được nhìn nhận là ngôn ngữ toàn cầu. Về một phương diện nào đó, học tập thông qua tiếng Anh trở nên một giải pháp hữu hiệu để nắm bắt kiến thức và để giao lưu quốc tế. Tuy nhiên, để thực hiện thành công quá trình này không hề đơn giản; vì vậy, nhiều nước phải chuẩn bị cho công việc này một cách khoa học và mang tầm chiến lược. Ở Việt Nam, mặc dù chưa được hệ thống, chương trình quan trọng này cũng đã được bắt đầu. Bài viết này không thảo luận sâu vào những vấn đề của 'học tập thông qua tiếng Anh' hoặc để tìm câu trả lời 'Nên hay 'Không nên', mà là xem đây là một điều phải làm đối với trường hợp của Đại học Đà Nẵng. Trong phần đầu, người viết sẽ khái quát thực trạng dạy học tiếng Anh ở ĐHQĐ. Trong phần thứ hai, người viết sẽ nhận diện ra một số vấn đề cơ bản liên quan. Và cuối cùng là xác định các giải pháp trên cơ sở kinh nghiệm và nhất là trên các cứ liệu mới mẽ có được trong nước và trên thế giới.

ABSTRACT

When the world enters into the globalization, English is generally considered to be a global language. In a sense, learning through English (LTE) becomes an effective solution to knowledge development and international communication. However, to make LTE work well is not an easy task; therefore, many countries have to prepare for this important task scientifically and strategically. Viet Nam, although unsystematically, also starts such a program. This paper doesn't discuss the matter LTE or find the answer YES or No for this case, because the writer assumes that LTE is a MUST in Viet Nam's education innovation for economy development and international integration. This paper takes the University of Danang (UD) as a case to analyze the matter. In the first part, the paper has an overview of the process of 'teaching and learning English' at UD from 'teaching general English and ESP to 'learning through English'. In the second place, the paper describes what has been done for the program LTE, identifying some problems. Finally, from the practical experiences of LTE in UD, the author suggests some solutions to the case.

1. General introduction of English teaching and learning at UD

UD is one of the big ones in Vietnam. The number of its students is over fifty thousand. It consists of 7 member colleges and a higher education school. The big ambition from its training policy is to teach foreign languages, especially English, for all of its students as much as possible, namely *teaching general English (GE)*. In addition to teaching GE as a subject, UD teaches *ESP for some major subjects*. In fact,

its ambition is bigger in that UD wishes its students get knowledge through English in as many subjects as possible, namely *learning through English*.

To carry out the GE and ESP programs at 7 colleges of UD, nearly 40 English teachers of the ESP Department have to spend over 41,000 hours teaching hundreds of classes every year (a teacher/1,000hrs/year). It means that the English teachers of Danang Foreign Language College (CFL - UD) overwork. In fact, a big number of these 41, 000 hours are spent for the GE program; only a limited amount of time is spent for ESP. And, the *learning through English* program hasn't been carried out.

2. Problems

In recent years, UD has carried out these three programmes: *teaching general English*, *teaching English for specific purposes* and *preparing students to learn through English*. However, the first and the second programs are not much successful and the third program is limited to only a few subjects! To point out the problems that cause these failures is useful in looking for some effective solutions.

2.1. Students' low entry English level

In 2008, before the writer began the GE teaching program we made a placement English test for 1000 first- year students at UD; the result is as follows:

Table 1. Result of English Placement Test (1000 first- year students at UD)

Number (percentage)	Level of English indicated	Notes
748 (74,8%)	Under elementary	Language knowledge and skills: Very poor
198 (19,8%)	Around elementary	Weakest skill: Listening
45 (4,5%)	Low intermediate	Weakest skill: Listening
9 (0,9%)	Intermediate	Strongest point: Grammar

In 2009, we conducted another survey for 500 final year students from 5 high schools in the Danang city and here is the result:

Table 2. Result of English Achievement Test (500 final- year students in Danang city)

Number (percentage)	Level of English indicated	Notes
415 (83%)	Under elementary	Language knowledge and skills: Very poor
60 (12%)	Around elementary	Weakest skill: Listening

20 (4%)	Lower intermediate	Weakest skill: Listening
5 (1%)	Intermediate	

Both cases show us that the English teaching-learning program at Vietnam's general education system doesn't reach the expected goal (lower intermediate English level). Therefore, at the university, we must re-teach them and they must re-learn what they lacked in English of general education program. Accordingly, we have to spend more time for GE if we want our students to have enough GE for learning ESP. This problem cannot be solved because the time of GE program at the university is limited to only 105 – 150 hours, which is too short to help students cover a minimum level of GE before they begin the ESP program.

2.2. Little time for teaching & learning English

In Vietnam, according to Hoang Van Van [11], each university has a different quantity of time for GE. However, we see that most of them have more time for GE and ESP than UD does. Look at the following comparison:

Table 3. Allocation of time for GE & ESP in UD (compared with universities in Hanoi)

	Universities	Time for GE	Time for ESP	Time for LTE
1	University of Da Nang	105 periods	45	None
	Ha Noi Engineering Uni.	180	45	None
3	Uni. of Natural Science – HN NU	240	60	None
4	Uni. of Humanity & Sociology Science – HN NU	300	120	None
5	Thai Nguyen Education Uni.	140	55	None

We see that the time for teaching and learning GE and ESP at UD is the least. This is another problem. In common sense, the lower students' level of English is, the bigger time they need to study. But the fact is otherwise.

2.3. Lack of a strategy and basic conditions

The third problem is that preparation of a strategic program for teaching and learning English hasn't set up well at UD. This is the reason why UD and its member colleges begin to find out the right solutions to the above problems in order to speed up the process of teaching and learning English the most effectively.

In short, teaching and learning English for all students at UD in recent years has

some big problems: Students' entry English level is very low, the time for GE & ESP is very short and the strategy for solving these problems depends on many conditions in the future.

3. Solutions

In order to realize UD's 'ambitions' of teaching and learning English, firstly, UD needs to set up the concrete goals following the requirements and contents of the plan 1400/ QĐ – TTg [12]. Then, making a quick but adequate preparation of good conditions for LTE as a process and the final goal of its own in terms of increasing the ability of English for its students answering to the society's requirements.

3.1. Setting UD's goals

The plan 1400 '*Teaching and learning Foreign languages in the national system of education*', [12], declares "*For higher education, all students at universities except foreign language university students, the new English program requires that each student before graduation should gain a minimum capacity of English at the level 3 of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language)*". [Level 3 (B1) in CEFR equals 4.0 for IELTS, 437 – 476 for TOEFL (PBT), 41-52 for TOEFL (iBT) and 110-520 for TOEIC]

From this requirement, UD's concrete goals of teaching & learning English should be:

- In the first year, students must gain the level 1 and 2 (A1 and A 2) as GE; because students' entry English is very low and has different levels a placement test or diagnosis test should be carried out to classify them into at least two levels: 1 and 2. For students of level 1, besides learning English as a subject (about from 105 periods to 145) in the full time English program (a basic course or a consolidation course), they must attend the supplementary English program (part time, about 145- 200 periods) organized by the English Center of FCL and the English Foundation of each member university. Both the full time English program and the supplementary English program should be carried out systematically in a suitable process of teaching and learning basic GE. For students of level 2, they can follow the full time English program with a higher level in GE (about from 105 periods to 145). They can also attend the supplementary English program at the higher level in comparison with students of level 1 (105 periods).

After the students of both two levels 1 and 2 have finished they will sit another placement test for a good class arrangement. The better students will begin the basic ESP program for only a few subjects. And the lower English level students will continue their supplementary English program for A2.

- In the second year, in the first semester, these students continue the ESP program in some more subject areas and they will be prepared for the real LTE program. In the second semester, LTE begins in a larger scale.

However, the term *'learning through English'* should be clarified. Richard Johnstone [2] writes: *"By 'learning through English' we mean more than 'learning the English language', important though this particular aim may be. We mean gaining knowledge, learning subject matter, acquiring skills, forming attitudes, developing oneself in ways that are not purely linguistic. This additional learning may take place within the school subject called English or it may take place elsewhere in subject areas additional to English as subject."* In other words, for UD's desideration, English is used at the university as a medium of instruction (to teachers) and as a medium of learning (to students).

In summary for this case, the final goal of UD in the term of teaching and learning English is to put its students and its teachers into the process LTE

3.2. A quick-but-adequate preparation for LTE

3.2.1. Time

Time here means the time teachers and students work together through English in English classes in other subject classes...

Time is one of the decisive factors making LTE successful. Therefore, UD should have more time for the program to assure to make the strategic and concrete plans work well. The estimated requirement time should be 200 – 300 additional hours after the programs for A2 have finished.

3.2.2. Teachers

There should be two solutions to the teacher problem. From the theoretical view, the first one is to double the number of the teachers (from 40 to 80), because the time for the whole program increases from 145 to 300 hours. In fact, the survey shows that about 20 teachers of the ESP Department can be responsible for 10,000 additional hours if they have a better pay. Another source of teachers from the English Department (CFL has two English departments: English Department and ESP Department) can also take part in this program. UD can recruit more English teachers by short and long term contracts. The last source of English teachers can be chosen from the best fourth year students of the English Department, who are going to be English teachers.

The second solution is 'up grade' teachers' quality in the terms of teaching methodology and English capacity. This solution has been carried out in some ways: CFL and UD sent about 35/40 teachers of the ESP Department to Australia and America to get some intensive courses in the TRIG Project. Nearly all of these teachers have taken part in many seminars and conferences related to teaching and learning English. Besides 15 teachers having finished MA courses inside and outside the country, two young teachers have graduated MA from Australia in the TRIG Project. Some weeks ago, CFL officially required each English teacher to sit any international English test (IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, FCE...) from now to the end of the year. This decision aims at evaluating teachers' ability of using English and teaching English. Besides, almost

every teachers have been doing scientific researches and compiling English textbooks in the TRIG Project.

3.2.3. *Innovation in textbooks, syllabus, and learning methodology*

There are direct and indirect relationships among teaching, learning, textbooks, syllabus, time and other teaching - learning conditions such as classrooms, teaching aids...The new goals of the strategic plan LTE requires many aspects including innovations in textbooks, syllabus and learning ways. Firstly, the innovation in textbooks should be done in two sections: Textbooks for GE and textbooks for ESP, but to the same direction '*Learning through English*'. In GE textbooks, much basic English should be added or we choose some suitable textbooks and we compile supplementary basic English textbooks (Foreign Language College of Hue University's model). For ESP textbooks, we will re-compile some ESP textbooks available and we also compile new ones in some subject areas. The syllabus, of course, will be changed in the way that fits the new goal and other innovations related. Changing the ways of learning English as well as other subjects is a very important factor to make LTE successful.

4. Conclusion

'*Learning through English*' is a very important requirement for those who want to learn effectively. This is the reason why many countries, especially in Asia in general, and in Vietnam in particular, try to activate this process in the right way. CFL-UD, after many years of experience in this field, has begun to recognize that LTE needs a systematic and strategic plan. In this plan, identifying the problems such as learner problems, teacher problems and other problems is necessary to find out effective solutions. The solutions suggested like making the plan more specific, developing the quality and the quantity of teachers, increasing time, innovations in learning ways, textbooks and other teaching-learning conditions are feasible. The two important factors that can make a good contribution to the success of the process are TRIGS Projects and the support and the leadership from the government, Ministry of Education and Training, Danang city following the spirit and the content of the Plan 1400/ QD – TTg. And, finally, the decisive factors are those who are most involved in the process: teachers and learners.

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