

Doing Language Education Research in a Developing Country

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Abstract

This is an account of an American language education researcher doing two research projects (a case study and a quasi-experimental study) in a developing country (Vietnam), outside of her U.S.-based research context. During a five-month period, the researcher encountered a number of contextual features present in the provincial university and community where she conducted the research which constrained (and supported) her choice of topics to investigate, the breadth of those topics, and her gathering and analysis of data. Salient among these were her role as a temporary sojourner, availability of interpreters, schedule miscommunications, transportation, physical condition of the classrooms and other resources, source of her financial support (and her resulting lighter teaching schedule), and differences in grouped student ability due to prevailing institutional placement test practices. The sum of her experiences led her to reject the notion that language education research could not be done in resource-poor developing nations. Rather, the central question is how those local contexts (and the local contexts in the U.S. and other "inner circle" countries as well) shape language education research, and what implications these local contexts have on the generation of global knowledge and transnational research partnerships.

Purpose of the Report

For nearly five months in 2005, I lived and did language education research in Vietnam, a country in the throes of rapid economic and social development (Lamb, 2002). I had the incredible luck to have a Fulbright Visiting Lecturer grant and was sent to Vinh City in north central Vietnam, where I worked at Vinh University, a comprehensive teacher education institution with an enrollment of 15,000. There were two items on my research agenda for my stay: Complete a situation analysis (a case study) of foreign language education in Vinh (e.g., Richards, 2001), and conduct a full scale quasi-experimental trial of a reading fluency methodology called repeated reading, which I had done in Japanese contexts with my research partner, Etsuo Taguchi (Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2002; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004),

and which he had been working on since the mid-1990s (Taguchi, 1997).

The purpose of this report is to describe what it was like to do research in north central Vietnam. I will detail features of the context that became salient in the process of doing the research, and speculate on how these features likely shaped my planning and execution of the research. I will also comment on how the context changed my thinking as a researcher, and my future research plans.

A Sojourner on the Outside

A description of my role in Vinh University is warranted. How I saw myself and how others saw me likely influenced what information I had access to, and my awareness of what features of the contexts became salient in terms of the research I undertook. I write this report from the point of view of an outsider. No matter how much I respected and identified with my Vietnamese colleagues and friends, I was still a temporary sojourner who enjoyed the benefits of having monetary and professional resources not necessarily available to others in that context. I also enjoyed substantial personal gifts: A first rate doctoral education in applied linguistics from Temple University Japan with a strong grounding in research methods, 15 years of experience living and teaching and doing research in Japan plus another six years in the United States at a research university (where there are significant inducements to do research but not necessarily the help to do it), a committed and generous research partner in Japan, and a supportive spouse back in the U.S. who is also a language education researcher.

Although I did not see this at the beginning of my first visit, being externally funded (and not on the payroll of the school) was also a gift. For the first time in my 21-year teaching career I could limit my teaching schedule and be more free to do research. At the same time, this freedom put me firmly outside the circle of my English teaching colleagues. They taught far more than I did and had much less free time. At first I felt left out of the Foreign Language Department and wondered whether I would even have colleagues. But gradually, by using the interviews with teachers stipulated by my case study and through chance and then later, more intentional meetings, I crept closer to that line dividing insiders (my colleagues) and outsiders (me). From my sojourner point of view I could see (but still could not know) what it was like to teach eight hours a day, be unable to obtain personal copies of teachers' reference books or see only borrowed third hand bootleg copies of such titles, and watch the dream of getting a master's degree in Hanoi drift ever further away when the monthly \$45 salary is never enough to keep the family going.

That said, being an outsider allowed me to do things, such as bring materials not available in Vietnam (graded readers and teachers' reference books, audiotapes, tests, stopwatches) to use and then donate to the school. I had the funds to buy a tape recorder, and hire translators and interpreters to help with research. I also had a new and powerful laptop computer with a statistics program and Internet capability. I was able to move relatively freely in Vinh City (but not elsewhere) and collect documents and conduct interviews (although mostly off the record at the request of the interviewees), and was allowed access to students without many questions asked. Beyond initial permission-getting discussions, no one remarked on my activities, no matter how strange they may have appeared (interviewing a French language teacher who usually sat silently in a corner of the teachers' room, or having students read a

passage five times in a row using stopwatches). Perhaps because I was an outsider, I was allowed latitude.

Being a sojourner also allowed me to make some connections an insider might not make. For instance, it was clear to me that even though Vietnamese teachers of English spend most of their waking hours teaching English (often in English), they have few opportunities to keep their English abilities for personal use alive. Few of my Vietnamese colleagues seemed to see maintaining their English abilities for personal use as a need. They were very good at improving students' English but, having few ideas for maintaining their own abilities apart from classroom needs, had fewer ideas to offer their students to develop their English abilities once they left school and became English teachers themselves, even though most students I knew were deeply concerned about the issue. One colleague pointed out that more priority is placed on teaching as many private, test-preparation type classes as possible to make money. Because English is used for work, and because work takes so much time and energy, worrying about personal English use is not worthwhile. As an outsider I did not immediately appreciate the extra-teaching-for-money angle, but I did see how teachers' beliefs about personal English proficiency could be propagated from one generation of teachers to the next.

Before Departure: Choosing What Research to Do

Pre-departure information about Vietnamese higher education, Vinh City, Vinh University, and English learners at Vinh University was limited. About Vietnamese higher education: My reading (e.g., Dao, Thiep, & Sloper, 1995) suggested that Vietnamese higher education was strongly influenced by remnants of French colonialism, and that as a result schools were under central government control in terms of funding and curriculum. My sources also noted that opportunities for higher education were limited to Vietnamese under the age of 25, suggesting to me either a young population, or underdeveloped educational infrastructure, or both. I also learned that Russian and French language study had given way to English in recent years. About Vinh: Vinh is located in Nghe An Province about 200 kilometers south of Hanoi and faces the Tonkin Gulf. The population is currently 200,000. Nghe An Province has been one of the most impoverished provinces in Vietnam for decades as the result of wars with France and the U.S., and poor weather and soil (Florence & Jealous, 2003). As Vinh was the head of the famed Ho Chi Minh Trail, the U.S. bombed the city and nearby port so thoroughly that in 1975 the population was only eight and only one building (as it happens, a dormitory at Vinh University) was left standing in the entire city (Lamb, 2002).

About Vinh University: I was the first Fulbright scholar to be sent to the university, although not the first foreign teacher, as the university had been hosting volunteer native English speaking teachers sent by a Christian organization for several years. About English learners at Vinh University: In the course of researching language development of international teaching assistants (ITAs) in the U.S. I interviewed a Vietnamese graduate student from Hanoi and learned that many young Vietnamese do not begin foreign language study until age 14, and then only in once- or twice-a-week classes with 40 or more students. From e-mails from the university, I surmised I could work with one or two intact classes of undergraduate students at Vinh University and that classes had approximately 30 students in them. I knew that

the students planned to be English teachers in Vietnamese secondary schools once they graduated. The chair of the foreign language department kindly e-mailed me three reading test passages and average student scores on comprehension tests associated with the passages. Analysis showed the passages to average 9.37 on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, which is on the high side (I think) for an English as a foreign language context with limited opportunities for L2 input. A look at the test results data showed that only a few students were able to get high scores on test items based on the passages.

My conclusions and resulting choice of research projects are in Table 1 below:

Table 1

<p><u>Conclusions</u> Little has been published about language education in Vietnam, much less provincial Vietnam. Therefore, little is likely known globally about current teaching methodologies used, historical and current priorities and trends, current foreign language needs, and foreign language teacher and learner characteristics.</p>	<p><u>Project</u> Situation analysis (case study) of foreign language education in Vinh City, using interviews, documental retrieval, and questionnaires.</p>
<p><u>Conclusions</u> Vietnamese learners of English likely lack opportunities for L2 input and opportunities for fluency building. This is likely even more pronounced for Vinh, a provincial city in a poor region.</p>	<p><u>Project</u> Repeated reading study using a quasi-experimental design (experimental versus control groups) using multiple pre-and post-test measures and pre-intermediate graded readers for the repeated reading treatment.</p>
<p>Vinh University is willing to let me teach one or more intact classes of 30 students each. Based on a difficult reading test few did well on, students can probably comprehend pre-intermediate reading materials easily.</p>	
<p>The Vinh University test passages and items suggest a curricular focus on intensive reading.</p>	

In choosing research projects to do I focused on possibilities presented by what I knew of the context, my needs, and probable needs of learners. As I prepared boxes of textbooks and teaching materials to send ahead I was acutely aware how little I knew about language education in Vinh, and how few contacts I had there. This suggested a situation analysis: "an analysis of factors in the context of a planned or present curriculum project that is made in order to assess their potential impact . . . these factors may be political, social, economic, or institutional . . ." (Richards, 2001, p. 91). While Richards defines situation analysis in relation to proposed

curricular innovations (a basis which did not necessarily apply to my planned sojourn), the kinds of data and the breadth of the data collection plan presented in his situation analysis model was suggestive of a case study, which I felt would help me understand more, and quickly, about foreign language education in Vinh. Due to a lack of published reports from Vietnam, I felt the field would be open to information about foreign language education in Vinh. Further, I believed that to do the situation analysis, I would need to interview a wide variety of people: students, teachers, administrators, parents, employers. I felt this would propel me out into the community, thus increasing the breadth of my contacts, which I believed would be a positive move professionally and personally. The main point is that the context determined my choice of one project: The fact I was being sent to a little known region in a country just reopening to the West probably accounts for my doing a situation analysis. It is not something I would have ordinarily undertaken unless considering a major curricular innovation in the U.S., something which was not then on my radar.

The context also helped determine a research design (quasi-experimental) I had wanted to try on a reading project my Japanese research partner and I had been discussing for several months, but with American Japanese language learners at my university in the U.S. as the participants. The fact that I had been told I could work with two intact classes at Vinh University suggested we could try a true, robust quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups of substantial size. We had used the design with very small groups in Japan, but in all cases, both groups had still done some kind of reading instruction. With the students at Vinh University, the control group could be assigned to another teacher and not actually be taught reading, while I would be teaching the experimental group using repeated reading as the methodology. What information I had suggested students at Vinh University would benefit from repeated reading (RR), an established methodology for fluency development (see the National Reading Panel, 2000; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003 for extensive reviews of studies on RR in English L1 settings), and thus increasing L2 input exposure and development of word recognition skills which seem to underpin reading fluency (Anderson, 1999; Jensen, 1986; Segalowitz, Poulsen, & Komoda, 1991). I surmised that if Vietnamese English learners read, it was likely for assignments involving intensive reading, in other words processing sentences for the teaching of grammar and vocabulary (e.g., Bamford, 1993; Day & Bamford, 1998), not sustained silent reading.

Planning the Research

In choosing the two projects, I focused on possibilities present in the context, not potential negatives. As I prepared my research plans and boxes of materials I needed, however, I worried about whether I would be able to get around, physically and socially, to do the interviews for situation analysis/case study, as I did not know the transportation situation, nor the physical size of the city, nor whether people would talk to me as an outsider, a foreigner, and dare I say, an American. I worried whether the graded readers my research partner had ordered and the four comprehension tests I was developing were at an appropriate level for the participants in the reading study (with repeated reading, it is important to choose texts that are not too difficult in order to maximize the fluency building effects of the treatments). I worried how long the batteries for the stopwatches I had ordered from

an office supply store would last (I ended up buying 30 spare batteries and taking them with me). After reading about frequent, prolonged power outages in regions outside major Vietnamese cities online, I wondered whether I would be able to make photocopies for the tests I had made or whether I would be able to play the audiotapes for the listen-while-reading stage of the repeated reading methodology. I dealt with my concerns by assuming each of these negatives were true and then solving the problems associated with them. For instance, with my concerns about the match between student level and the comprehension tests, I decided to administer the tests with instructions in Vietnamese, the items in Vietnamese, and with students answering in Vietnamese, reasoning that having learners operate in their L1s on the tests would at least allow us to capture some idea of participants' comprehension of the test texts (which would be read in English) if their level was much lower than I anticipated. The testing-in-L1 decision was confirmed shortly thereafter in my perusal of resources on reading comprehension test construction (for a comprehensive resource see Weir, 1993).

Intense preparation also helped. I wanted both projects to be ready to go upon arrival because I knew from experience that overseas living (cooking, shopping, getting around, teaching) took up a lot of time and energy. For the situation analysis, preparation meant drafting an overall plan, a document retrieval plan, and interview protocols. See [Appendices A, B, and C](#). Additional interview protocols were written for teachers (47 items), higher education specialists (deans and other administrators) (36 items), parents and citizens (27 items), and employers (8 items) with items arranged under the categories, societal, institutional, and teacher factors (e.g., Richards, 2001). Partial results of the situation analysis and examples of formative evaluations and other data collection instruments for the situation analysis can be requested from the author (Gorsuch, 2006).

For the repeated reading project, our preparation focused on developing and validating two types of reading comprehension tests: Two forms each of a short answer test and a recall test (details of test development can be requested from the authors, Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2006). Etsuo Taguchi ordered class sets of two graded readers (we ordered two titles because we were not sure how many treatments we could administer in the four and a half months of my stay—we did not know how often classes with the participants would meet, nor for how long) and had them air shipped to Vietnam (they still took six weeks to arrive from Japan, all incoming foreign parcels are unabashedly and unhurriedly opened and inspected).

Doing Research in Vinh

As with any research project, unexpected things happened while I gathered data in Vinh. Some of the things could have happened anywhere (a surprise local teachers' conference which offered many insights on current teacher morale and concerns), but some were, I think, specific to the context of Vinh. For the situation analysis, two issues concerning interpreters for interviews became salient. First, my interpreters were, by and large, my English teaching colleagues. There was little demand in the commercial sector for English speakers in Vinh when I was there in 2005. Visits to two local travel and tour agencies failed to produce any English speakers, and it became apparent that the only English speakers with any proficiency were teachers at Vinh University. While this fact does the university a lot of credit, having my

colleagues interpret for their students (or potential students) and supervisors raised the issue of power relations influencing the willingness of interviewees to speak frankly. Second, because my interpreters were my colleagues I felt constrained to make many demands for their services, and sometimes interviews had to be delayed, or held at odd times and in odd places, or not held at all. English teachers in Vietnam are relentlessly busy with their public and private teaching. As one of my colleagues (and most able interpreter) noted "teaching at universities is barely making a living" and so intensive, semi-clandestine tutoring and translation obligations to private parties and companies becomes necessary (T. Tran, personal communication, March 2, 2005). Even though I paid my interpreters, asking them to interpret at the intensity needed for the full scale situation analysis I wanted to conduct became difficult. I had to scale back the ambitious scope of the situation analysis (foreign language education in Vinh) to focus only on Vinh University.

Many interview subjects insisted on speaking off the record, which made me wonder whether I ought to include their responses in my analyses. I also found that classroom observations I had planned were not possible. Colleagues were either resistant or insisted on welcoming me to class as the main attraction. Some of my colleagues could not understand why I wanted to see "boring" classes taught by "non-native English speakers." However, I was able to participate in a local teachers' conference and learned what teachers would say when asked what concerns them about using unscripted speaking activities in class ("students are too shy to speak" "syllabus cannot be covered when time is spent on games" "students prefer to work in groups, not in pairs or individually"). Finally, I found it impossible to visit local or national education ministries for interviews or document retrieval. Local ministries would not respond to my queries, and I could not easily get to Hanoi with my teaching schedule and transportation difficulties (Vinh City is accessible to Hanoi only by a six hour train ride (difficult to buy tickets for and often hours late) or an eight hour bus ride (NOT recommended)).

The repeated reading project was influenced strongly by the context. For the first month, it was never clear where my class was to be held, which resulted in many missed repeated reading treatments: From my research log:

I would go to the classroom pointed out by the departmental secretary only to find that another class was in there, taking an exam. I used different means to find my students (who always seemed to know where to go) such as asking a teacher to telephone a student in the class who had a mobile phone to find out where they were. This cut into classtime, sometimes in serious ways.

Despite my best efforts to keep the treatments regular, I was only able to administer 16 treatments in an eleven week period. A two week teaching internship caused the participants to be absent from classes, creating a noticeable gap in the treatments, possibly weakening potential increases in learners' fluency and comprehension (treatment duration and intensity was a real concern in our earlier studies conducted in Japan, e.g., Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2002). Because class location changed so much, quite a large number of participants in both control and experimental groups did not take the two pre-tests that had been set for them and thus had to be dropped from the study (experimental group n = 8 participants dropped; control group n = 6 dropped). Pre- and post-testing also cut into repeated reading treatment time for the

experimental group. Testing took much longer than anticipated due to test photocopying issues. Yes, photocopying service was generally available and cheap. However, the only paper available for use was tissue-paper-thin. This made handling the test question and answer sheets for a group of 35 students a real challenge in classrooms with no glass windows. Papers flew everywhere no matter what I or students did, and I ended up more than once creeping up to my flat with tension headaches I cannot even now adequately describe. Rather than completing pre- and post-testing on two total occasions for two groups, it took four occasions of 90 minutes each. From my research log:

I will say, that as I swatted mosquitoes away and saw the cigarette butts on the floor and as the flimsy little papers eluded my grasp and I struggled to get a working outlet for the tape recorder and I realized a student had taken my only pen, I hated what I was doing.

Finally, an artefact of the school's organization of students into classes influenced the analyses I did for the repeated reading study. The basic problem was that at the outset of the study, the experimental and control groups were not equal in ability. On the basis of a placement test administered in their first year, students are placed into three different levels: A (the highest), B, and E (the lowest). They are assigned to a class in which they remain for their entire undergraduate career, such as 43A2 (the experimental group) and 43A1 (the control group), which means they matriculated in the 43rd year after the founding of the university (they were juniors), are level A, and are groups one and two within level A. By the time the study took place in their third year, the two groups had diverged in ability, meaning the experimental group had statistically significantly lower reading comprehension and fluency than the control group at the beginning of the study. Quoting from the manuscript (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2006):

Therefore, the experimental and control groups' pre-test scores on the two test types and occasions were averaged into a single omnibus pre-test variable and then treated as a covariate for the purposes of further analyses being conducted at the end of the experiment. In this way, pre-test differences between experimental and control groups could be removed as a confounding factor when considering possible post-test differences.

In essence, the adjusted analysis put the two groups on an equal playing ground. This is a perfectly acceptable statistical adjustment to make, but it does make the findings harder to interpret for consumers of the research and raises questions about other, more subtle and hard-to-detect effects of different group ability.

Research: Not If But How

As the world becomes ever more interconnected, "a strong, more professionally connected international community of scholars" has arisen (Boyer, Altbach, & Whitelaw, 1994, p. 1). Doing and publishing research, long the dominant yardstick of academic success (Boyer, 1990; Curry & Lillis, 2004), remains a potent goal for many international scholars in academe in general, and also in language education (Braine, 2005; Canagarajah, 2003; Ling, Wang, & Xu, 2005). This is also true for Vietnam, where foreign language department heads must report the research productivity of teachers to the government annually (N. Phuong, personal

communication, March 12, 2005). Wherever language education research is done, it is done in local contexts, and constitutes local knowledge. At the same time it has the potential to bring "a different perspective on the field as a whole, not just on a few topics of special relevance" (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 746). Context binds and guides everyone who does research, just as it did me in Vietnam and wherever else I have worked on projects.

That research can be done anywhere is not in question. A more pressing question is how context influences choice of research to be done and how research is done. I think context has a lot to do with what research people might choose to do. For many of my Vietnamese colleagues, research meant to them writing reports on linguistic analysis, which is learned at the M.A. level. Curricular innovation is not considered research, nor is it rewarded (only 20% of a curriculum can be changed per year, and this subject to government approval, N. Phuong, personal communication, March 12, 2005). Potential research on teaching methodology is undercut by local attitudes which equate principled teaching methods with a disparate collection of new and exciting techniques to keep students motivated (to be fair, I also found this attitude among mainstream teachers being asked to teach K-6 ESL in New Mexico a few years ago). It was interesting to talk with colleagues in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) just this spring after a presentation I gave on the Vinh repeated reading project, and to observe the depth and direction of their skepticism: They claimed that students would be bored reading one passage five times and that at any rate, by the fifth time, "they would just be skimming anyway." No amount of explanation about automaticity or attentional resource emancipation theories could persuade them that skimming on a fifth reading was a good sign, especially if students were comprehending propositions in the text they had not even noticed during a first and close reading. It is probably fair to say that reading fluency research might not be on the top of Vietnamese teachers'/scholars' lists of potential research topics. And this slighting of reading fluency is not at unusual in foreign language education circles globally where reading is seen as a vehicle for the study of lexis and grammar (Bernhardt, 1991) and test preparation (Carr & Pauwels, 2006).

Working in Vinh also made me focus on how research procedures might be altered by context. Certainly, linguistic analysis of existing texts would lend itself to the horrifically busy schedules my colleagues keep. Such work could be done in interstitial time and at a flexible pace, a little here and a lot there. Planning classroom research, or any research tied to daytime or early evening business hours (such as interviewing colleagues), would be daunting and likely to become a very long-term project indeed. I observed wistful interest in using quantitative data collection and analyses among my colleagues but with limited means to learn more or use them (few computers for personal use are available, and even fewer spreadsheet and statistical programs and resource materials), I did not see them venturing far into quantitative data collection techniques.

Having been an outsider in the context of Vinh forces me to ask the question of how can my world and the world of my colleagues meet? Our worlds did meet for a brief time in 2005. I know their context influenced me in a lasting way: I now think about how I can work with my colleagues in Vinh and Saigon long distance. I wonder how I can describe the reasons for students' progress using repeated reading in ways that are more meaningful and useful to teachers. I wonder what students in my experimental group think about repeated reading as they begin their own careers as

teachers next month. I think about areas of research I do not even know about now that my international colleagues might draw me into. One Vinh colleague and I are looking at a possible study on the content validity of final exams in language classes, for example. I look forward to finding new (to me) statistical techniques to more clearly illuminate data that I have little control over when I collect them.

But I still wonder if the context I carry with me (my background, my circumstances, my will) influenced my colleagues? The only way I can know this is to continue my relationship with them long distance, and when we can, face to face.

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Appendices

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Appendix A

Plan for Situation Analysis

Societal factors

Richards suggests five pivotal questions that situation analyses address (p. 93):

1. What is the role of foreign languages in the community?
2. What is their status in the curriculum?
3. What are the educational traditions of foreign language education in the community?
4. What is the community's experience in language teaching?
5. What are the expectations that members of the community have for language teaching and learning?

Groups to consult are: educational government officials, employers, higher education specialists, educational organizations, parents, citizens, students

Plan

- Questionnaire for students + interviews for randomly selected students
- Interviews for parents and citizens
- Interviews for educational government officials
- Interviews for employers
- Interviews for higher education specialists
- Document collection on government foreign language policy
- Document collection on articles appearing in the popular press
- Document collection on articles in teaching journals

Institutional factors

p. 98 Richards poses many questions, of which the following are relevant:

- School's physical resources, including classroom facilities, media, technological resources,
- library resources
- Role of textbooks and other instructional materials
- Problems teachers face
- Communication between the teachers and the administration
- Support from administration

Plan

- Interview teachers
- Interview appropriate administrators
- Observation log of physical resources

Teacher factors

p. 99 Richards poses many questions of the which the following are relevant:

- language proficiency
- teaching experience
- training and qualifications
- morale and motivation
- teaching style, beliefs and principles

Plan

- Questionnaires + interviews for teachers of all foreign languages
- Document retrieval: syllabuses from teachers, reading lists, etc.

Learner factors

pp. 101-102 Richards poses a variety of questions of which the following are relevant:

- learners' past language learning experiences
- level of learner motivation
- learner expectations
- learners' views of teacher as culturally specific
- learners are homogenous, heterogeneous?
- learning approach preferences (teacher led, student led, small group)
- content preferences
- role of instructional materials
- access to learning resources

Plan

- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Classroom observations
- Classroom assignment collection (student logs, worksheet completion, etc.)
- Classroom presentation audiotapes, etc.

Note. Categories of societal, institutional, teacher, and learner factors are suggested in Richards (2001).

Appendix B

Document Retrieval Plan

Societal factors from students

- Textbooks currently used
- Junior high school, senior high school texts used
- English textbooks purchased on own (test prep, etc.)
- Career Center listings (also source for employers to talk to)

Societal factors from MOE/Board of Ed officials

- Curriculum statements
- Nationalized tests/prefectural tests or descriptions of
- Approved textbook list

Societal factors from higher education/teacher education specialists

- Curriculum statements
- Syllabuses
- Bookstore offerings

Articles in the popular press

Articles in journals

Appendix C

Sample Interview Protocol (includes one student's responses)

March 14, 2005, Interview with Ms. XXXX XXX XXXXXXX, Second year English student, Vinh University, Nghe An Province, Vietnam. Interview was conducted in my flat. Interview was recorded on a Sony Walkman with a lapel recorder. The transcription style is a broad style, as this interview is not being used for a linguistic analysis. The interview protocol was provided to the interview subject by e-mail, and was made available in paper and ink form to her throughout the interview. The finished interview was sent to her for comment and correction.

Societal factors

What foreign languages are used in Vinh?

I think there are some foreign languages such as Chinese, Russian, English, Korean, and Japanese.

What are they used for?

They are used for teaching and business. And learning and their job too, for work.

What foreign languages are used elsewhere in Vietnam?

I think these foreign languages are used in other places.

What are they used for?

For education, for business.

Are some foreign languages in greater demand than others?

Yes I think so. You know the number of person use English or Chinese outnumber than other language. Most of people use English for their education and other people use Chinese for their job.

Has this pattern changed over time?

Yeah I think so. I think maybe 15 years ago English are only used in a small area of our country such as Hanoi in Hue or Danang. Some big city in our country. But nowadays I think every city in our country use English as a second language. And I think nowadays I think the number of people who use Chinese is increasing. And I think many Chinese businessmen come to Vietnam especially come to Vinh and they invite in Vinh so I think the number of people who use Chinese increase.

Do some foreign languages have greater prestige than others?

Has this pattern changed over time?

What degree are you getting at Vinh University?

I check the dictionary and I think the degree I am getting at Vinh University is under master. It's a bachelor degree. I think in teaching.

Is knowing a foreign language a significant part of that degree?

Yes. I am learning French as my we call it second language.

Do you think you will teach French some day?

I don't think so because we only learn French to help us read other research in French and we only learn French in two years. And after that we stop learning French at school. We can learn French at home if we want. We can get a degree of French. But I think we can't teach French because the bachelor we get from Vinh University is English not French.

Are your friends learning a foreign language?

Which ones? What for?

Yeah. I can say that most of my friend learn foreign language and most of them are living in Hanoi some people learning in Hue and some people are learning in the south of our country. Most of them learn English and only some people learn Chinese. Most of them want to become a businessman or businesswoman in their future so they have to learn foreign language.

When you graduate do you intend to go into business or would you prefer to be a teacher?

As you know the degree decide what I can do in the future. So my degree is teaching so I can teach that's all. If I want to do another job like business I

think that is better if I can take part in other university to get other degree.

Are your family members learning a foreign language?

Which ones? What for?

Only my older sister and my younger brother. My mother and my parents know no foreign language. Only for education.

Would your parents be willing to be interviewed in Vietnamese?

Yeah I think so. I will be interpreter if you want.

What foreign languages do you know?

I only learn English and French that's all.

When did you begin learning a foreign language?

As many other student I begin learning English from grade 6.

Is knowing a foreign language helping in finding a job?

Yes.

If you had the opportunity to work in business or politics or something like that, would you?

Yes. Because in my opinion teaching is a good career but other job is if I have opportunity to work in business I will accept because that is a good chance for me to use my English and furthermore I will have chance to communicate with many other people.

Describe a typical foreign language lesson in your junior high school.

How can I say. As many other subjects the teacher would come and ask something about the previous lesson and then she will ask some student to check their knowledge for the previous lesson and after that she will go through the lesson and then she teach. Usually the teacher usually check our new word first and after that she will teach grammar or she will give us some exercise usually in textbook. And after that she will give us mark. But you know the lesson we learn before is very different from now because we have change textbook and the way to teach English. When I am in junior school junior high school we only learn grammar. Grammar is the most important thing but now the student now can learn four skills. They have to learn speaking, they have to learn reading, writing and listening. That is different thing from now.

Teacher factors

Did the teacher use Vietnamese or English?

I can say that most of teacher in junior high school use Vietnamese.

What about senior high school teachers?

Senior high school only some teacher use English when they speak or when they teach. Because you know in only some student can learn can hear and understand what the teacher are saying. So after they use English speak English for short time they have to translate into Vietnamese.

How many students in a high school class?

About 60 from 50 to 60.

It might be difficult to use English to control the class.

Yes. They will not have enough time to check every student.

Was it useful?

Yes because at junior and senior high school we can get knowledge of English from teacher in class. And I think

[turns off recorder]

Subject adds here that she has studied English without having to take extra tuition outside of normal English class meetings at school.

Institutional/Teacher factors

Describe a typical foreign language lesson at college.

Was it useful?

[some discussion here over meaning of question] In speaking class as XXXX [a female foreign teacher] teaching us now she gave us some idioms and then we talk about it and we try to use it in our speaking. And after that she can give us a topic to talk about something like Christmas holiday Tet holiday and some other special day or some other special holiday. And in speaking we have special room in five five floor building in front of gate and we have textbook but you know we don't have any cassette tape. We can't buy it in Vinh. Only the teacher have cassette tape and we listen to for three or four times it depend on the content of the lesson. If we can't hear anything the teacher will switch on many times so that we can hear exactly. He only give us some time to talk about what we what we have heard. And after that she will he will give us the key. And about reading we have textbook too and the teacher will give us time to finish our exercise and after that she will give us the key and explanation. And writing we only learn theory about writing. We don't have enough time to practice at class. Rarely we have to write an essay or paragraph at home. We

only learn most of the time we learn theory.

What size are the classes?

33 students. Only a half of what is in high school.

Are foreign teachers used in a different way than Vietnamese teachers?

Yes I can say that. You know I think most of student want to learn with foreign teacher. You know I can say the reason why because when we are communicating when we are taught by foreign teacher if the foreign teacher are saying something and we do not understand we will try to ask the teacher in English. And we try to explain how we don't what we don't understand and how to do how to explain it in English. But if that is a Vietnamese teacher we will raise our hand and we speak in Vietnamese so we can't we can't say we can't express our idea at the time.

Why do you ask a question in Vietnamese?

We try to explain in English but sometime we can't find a suitable word and it only take a little bit time but the class can't wait and the teacher do not have time to wait do not have enough time to wait until we explain and so to save time we translate into Vietnamese.

So if you were to compare a class taught by a Vietnamese teacher and a class taught by a foreign teacher how would you compare the number of questions that are asked?

I think the number of question in foreign teacher is outnumber than Vietnamese teacher.

How do you think your parents learned a foreign language?

To be honest they have never learn any foreign language. [brief conversation about parents, subjects' father is an engineer and her mother is a nurse] Because in the past learning other language that is not the main subject. Only when our country develop then other language is really necessary.

Foreign language learning is easy? difficult?

In my opinion a foreign language learning is really difficult. If I learn I can say if I learn English when I was six or seven years old I can [inaudible] my accent is a little bit different from now because I learn English when I were in grade six. So my accent is difficult to learn other language especially in pronounce.

A good foreign language teacher is someone who:

Is someone who know [turns off recorder] who has who pronounce well very very well. Yes I think that is the most important thing and after that is their knowledge of foreign language. And they will willing to answer every question about foreign language the student want to ask.

Sometimes if a teacher needs time to come up with an answer, is that OK?

Yeah I think. In Vietnamese some teacher some student don't want teacher they want to have answer after they give the question. But some other teacher say that let me know or tomorrow I will answer for you. I think when the teacher have time to think about they will have a time to check their knowledge it will be more if will be better than answer immediately but not really exactly or correct.

A good language learner is someone who:

Is a person can use foreign language as their mother tongue as their mother language.

The best ways to learn a foreign language are:

[turns off recorder] I think the best way to learn a foreign language are try to talk with foreign language as much as possible.

Using a foreign language, what topics do you like to learn?

[subject asks for examples, interviewer provides] When we learn foreign language I would like to learn much more about the country we are learning their language. Such as we are learning English. We want to know about the geography of England and some other thing that is related to England such as the people the tradition the weather and something like that. And many other thing about England like the traffic light law and many many thing about England. So that we did such as I did about traffic I can explain for them what is it in England and that's why they different from Vietnam and that's why we go on the road in England we have to do that.

What foreign language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) are most useful?

I think it depend on what field I will teach in the future. Because you know if I become a teacher speaking is the most useful because I will use my English when I teach so I have to speak well and when I speak well it may not my knowledge of grammar is well also. And how about listening, reading and writing. I think for the four skills related to each other but I think the most important thing for my job in the future is speaking.

Which skill is most important for your future learning as a human being?

Writing. Because the more I learned the more I feel the knowledge I have is a little bit. And furthermore how can I say if I want to do something like research something like that my writing skill have to get improve because as you know if I want the most the most way we use in examination is writing not speaking or listening or reading. When we apply for a job we have to write and everything I think is related to writing.

What foreign language textbooks are you currently using?

I usually learn First New First News. I usually bought a book from this publish publisher because [tape runs out] Subject adds that she also buys books from western publishers.

I know that photocopied materials are very common in Vietnam. I wonder if it's harder to learn from the photocopies or does it make no difference?

Anyway photocopy and textbook from publisher is a bit different. When we learn from photocopy it is not really clearly to read. Furthermore the size of the letter is too small so when you photocopy it become fainter and fainter. It is a little bit difficult to learn. In my opinion I don't really like to learn photocopy because sometime it make me tired.

What do you use them for?

[subject asks for clarification] To learn English. I usually buy some textbook for my listening, reading, that's all. Because writing I don't know which one is suited for me. So it is really difficult for me to choose a book and furthermore you know learn writing in Vietnam I have to write it out and then other people can check for me. But up to now I only write it by myself and check it by myself.

You mentioned earlier that you only learn the theory of writing. What do you mean by that?

Something like when we learn about paragraph we learn that in paragraph we have to write topic sentence supporting sentence and concluding sentence and what we will write on the topic sentence we will write the main idea and it has two parts and that is topic and the controlling idea. And after that the teacher will give us something like now you can write some topic sentence for this topic, traffic, something like that.

What other foreign language textbooks, or tapes, or computer programs do you use?

To be honest I only learned French for more than one year so I can only read my textbook in French some that is very simple. I can say that is the lowest level of French so we don't need I can't read any other French book. Something I can read some knowledge of English in French. I only read in English. Tape? Yes I use many. Computer program not really.

What kind of tapes do you use?

I go to bookshop and buy some tape and close to it there are some book so I listen to the tape and after that I look for the tape read (script?) at the back of the book.

Do you have a computer at home?

Yes.

Is it connected to the internet?

No. It only for my father jobs.

Do you have access to computers outside your home?

Yeah but I don't usually it for my study now. I only use it to get in touch with my friend.

How often do you go?

Not very often. Only once a week.

Is it expensive?

No. And sometimes I use it only 15 minutes.

In terms of foreign language learning or use how would you rate the tapes, videotapes, computer software or DVDs available to you at school?

Only some tape. Video tape it is only a little but that is only movie. Most of them are movie. And tape there are some in my in our library.

How would you rate the copy machines, tape recorders, VHS players, OHPs, computers at school?

We don't usually the tape recorder and copy machine we are student we don't usually use it. Only teacher. I think the equipment is not really good that is OK.

How would you rate the library?

I think most of them are out of date. You can see many stories most of the are stories from our library. Some other are newspapers. But all of them are out of date. We need more newspapers up to date so that we can know something about what happen all over the world and in Vietnam in English. Although some other book in English they are only their theory about English. I think that is only effective for researcher not for student.

What would be more useful for you?

I would like to read newspaper. I don't really some other student want to read story instead of reading newspaper but I like reading newspaper more than story.

Do you ever look at any internet websites?

Not really.

Notes.

Underlined interview protocol items were asked spontaneously in response to something

the participant said earlier. Interview protocol items are in italics.

The responses of one participant are added in the table for the reader's interest (I cannot claim the responses are representative of responses from other participants).