

The Learning And Teaching Of Second Foreign Languages For Language Majors:

The Case Of Chinese And English In Ho Chi Minh City University Of Education

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I. Introduction

In the context of globalisation where Vietnam has seen its growing active participation in international economics, the issue of foreign languages teaching and learning has become more and more important. On September 30th, 2008, Vietnam's Prime Minister has announced Decision 1400/QD-TTg ratifying the project 'Foreign languages teaching and learning in the national education system from 2008 to 2020', which is also known as Foreign languages Project 2020. The aim of this project is to comprehensively innovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages in all levels of the education system so that in 2015 Vietnam's workforce can have a significantly improved foreign language proficiency level and later in 2020 the majority of graduates are capable of communicating in foreign languages confidently and independently.

So as to achieve the goals, besides various state supportive policies and investment, there have been a great number of conferences and papers about this Project 2020. Our piece of writing also belongs to this theme and we aim to provide the readers with an overview of second foreign languages teaching and learning, in particular English and Chinese, to majors of foreign languages at the Ho Chi Minh city University of Education.

To begin with, it is necessary to have a glance at the curriculum for foreign language majors at Ho Chi Minh city University of Education. At the moment, there are 5 foreign language departments including: English, French, Russian, Chinese and Japanese. Besides the linguistic and professional modules which are taught in their major foreign language, the students in these departments have a chance to learn a second foreign language of their own choices in 4 compulsory credit modules (240 45-minute periods). In terms of graduation outcomes, according to document number 91/DHSP-DT on April 1st, 2013, students are

expected to reach level 5 for their major foreign language and level 4 for the second in the six-level Vietnam's framework of reference for language, which is basically relevant to level C1 and B2 respectively in the Common European Framework Reference for Language (CEFR).

II. Data description and discussion

Aiming to discover the realities and address the issues in second foreign languages teaching and learning, a small-scale online survey with 5 questions about language skills, facilities and participant's expectation was adopted.

There were 2 versions for students and teachers and the survey link was sent to the participants by means of social networks. At the end, there were 92 students and 6 teachers participating in the survey. After being collected, the data was analysed and compared between the two groups so that differences can be identified.

The questions are as follows and the illustrated figures can be found in the appendix.

Question 1: What language do you learn for the second language modules at Ho Chi Minh city University of Education?

(Figure 1)

The pie chart clearly shows that Chinese is the second foreign language that is most favoured by the students in the context given, followed by English, French and Japanese. To give an explanation for this, several factors should be taken into account. First of all, the rising prestige of this language is undeniable, considering the close geographical, historical, cultural and economic relations between China and Vietnam. Secondly, as a matter of fact, students in the English department outnumber students in other foreign language departments with roughly 1,000 students and a large proportion of whom choose Chinese as their second foreign language.

Question 2: In your opinion, which language skills are more focused on in your class?

(Figure 2)

It can be obviously seen from the bar charts that there is a big gap between the students' and the teachers' perspectives. In particular, the students believed that the teachers spend the majority of the time teaching Reading and Writing, which are non-communicative skills whereas the teachers argued that they manage to keep balance among the skills.

Question 3: In your opinion, is it possible for students to reach the graduate's foreign language proficiency level (which is Vietnam's level 4/6 or a relevant CEFR level B2)?

(Figure 3)

In terms of evaluating whether the students can meet the expected level upon graduation, the teachers and students generally agree on the likelihood that the designated proficiency level was beyond the students' reach. This result puts a question on the effectiveness of the currently adopted curriculum as well as the practicality of the proficiency level for second foreign language.

Moreover, it is also indicated in the chart that a great number of students were either ignorant of the framework or unable to assess their own progress, which in fact negatively affects the national ultimate education goal.

Question 4: In your opinion, do the university facilities meet your expectation for learning/teaching second foreign languages?

(Figure 4)

Regarding facilities, on one hand, it appears that in general the students were not satisfied with the available facilities. On the other hand, the attitude of the teachers was less negative with all participating teachers giving the facilities above-average scores.

Question 5: In your opinion, how can we ensure the achievement of the expected language proficiency level?

(Figure 5)

In the last question, there were plenty of options for the participants to choose. Figure 5 displays the three most chosen options in each group, with the numbers in blankets showing the times of being chosen. Moreover, as this is an open question in which the participants were welcomed to provide their own suggestions, several notable responses are also included.

As it can be learnt from the table, both the students and teachers claimed that it was urgent to provide the class with new textbooks and extra materials as well as to renovate the learning methods and examination format. The students, as reflected in question 2, expected a

change in which communicative skills could be paid more attention to both in the classroom and the testing room. However, the teachers were looking forward to the improvement of the facilities, which is quite contrary to their satisfaction with the teaching environment as shown in question 4. Furthermore, the teachers also expressed the need of organising placement tests at the beginning of the course so that students of a similar proficiency level could be grouped in the same class.

III. Further discussion& Conclusion

The data from the survey has revealed several problems that teachers and students are encountering in the learning and teaching of second foreign languages at Ho Chi Minh city University of Education.

First of all, there is undeniably a likelihood that the students may not be able to achieve the second foreign language outcome upon graduation as expected, which is predicted by both the teachers and the students. Doing the calculations, it is crystal clear to foresee that the learners who start from scratch can barely gain a good command of a brand new language within just 4 modules (relevant to totally 240 periods) regardless of the fact that they are foreign language majors. In fact the designated level is obviously impractical and unrealistic since there is no clear and detailed route for the teachers and students to reach the goal. So as to make this more approachable, it is the responsibility of authorised educators to carefully organise the education system as well as the curriculum so that the outcomes that learners are to achieve can be clearly, consistently, systematically and creatively focused on (Killen and Hattingh, 2004). Moreover, education manager should also pay more attention to investing in and improving facilities in order that teachers and learners can perform their tasks in the best and most comfortable conditions.

Secondly, it is important to recognise the students' needs of learning through communication which was clearly illustrated in question 5 about how to improve their language learning. Communicative language teaching (CLT) which shifts the focus from grammar, reading and writing to listening and speaking is now in its golden age; furthermore, with real communication, CLT is more suitable to facilitate learning (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:72) and give learners better chances to study than a grammar-based approach (Richards, 2006: 12). Therefore, despite time limit, teachers should be encouraged to integrate real-life communicative situations into classroom activities. Materials should also be carefully selected and composed so as to keep the balance between the 4 language skills.

Besides the suggested solutions given above which can help improve the situations, there are other measures that may support the teaching and learning process in the long term. For example, the applications of technology in education which is a newly-risen and fashionable trend can greatly enhance language teaching and learning. The university may give aid by organising suitable workshops so that teachers can get themselves used to using technology and they can utilise computers in the classroom in several ways such as creating blogs, forums, Moodle or MOOCs (massive open online courses) to provide the students with a cyber-educational space where they can review the old lessons, do homework and have further discussion with classmates. Students are also expected to have an active role in improving their language ability by organising and participating in extra-curricular language activities such as speaking clubs or language eloquent contests. And most important, the students should always find themselves motivated for studying.

By conducting the survey, analysing and discussing the data, we have tried to address two main problems encountered by the teachers and learners in second foreign language classes at Ho Chi Minh city University of Education. The problems are the impractical language proficiency level outcome and the limited use of communicative skills in classes. Besides, we have also suggested some possible solutions to the problems. However, inevitably there remain several drawbacks among which are the small-scale research with a limited number of teacher participants and five questions being not enough to cover everything. So as to overcome these limitations, further researches with more time and a larger population are required.

Finally, we hope that this modest piece of writing may help contribute to the goal of Project 2020 as well as to the large picture of language teaching and learning research in Vietnam.

APPENDIX

Charts and tables

Question 1: What language do you learn for the second language modules at Ho Chi Minh city University of Education?

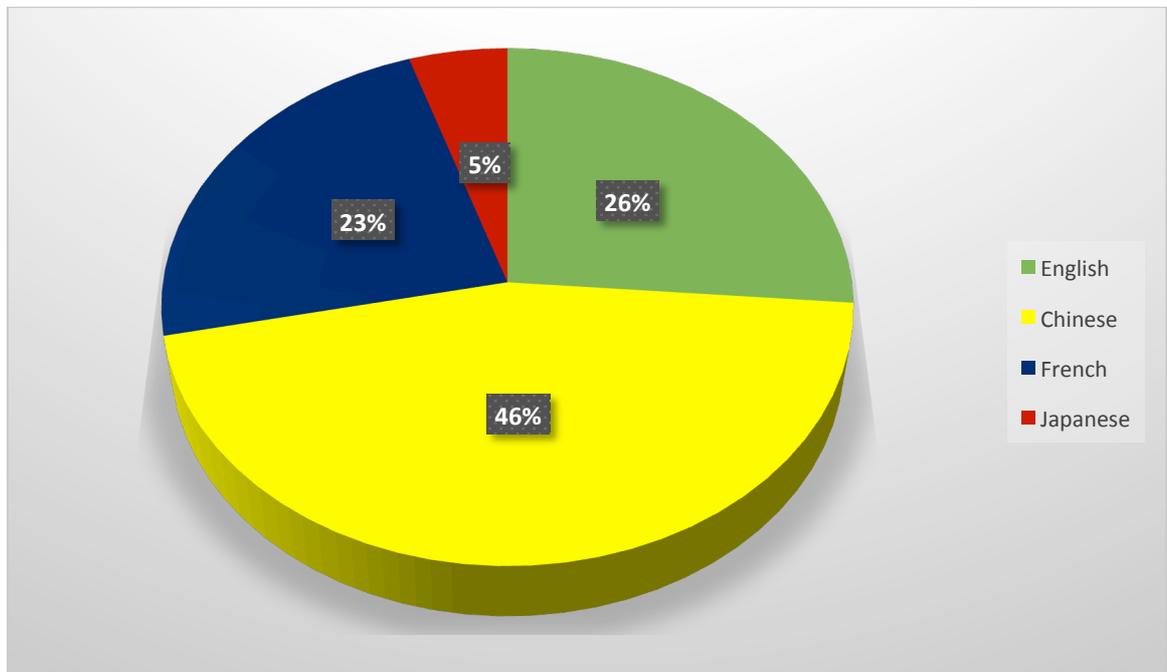


Figure 1: Languages chosen by students in second foreign language modules

Question 2: In your opinion, which language skills are more focused on in your class?

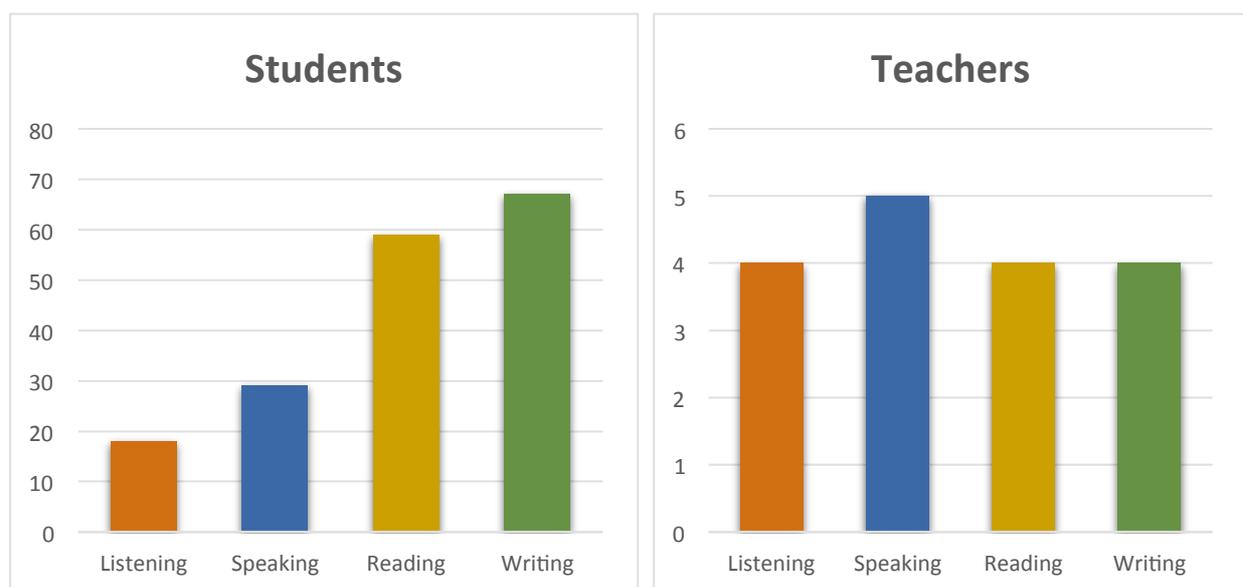


Figure 2: Focused language skills from the students' and teachers' points of view

Question 3: In your opinion, is it possible for students to reach the graduate's foreign language proficiency level (which is Vietnam's level 4/6 or a relevant CEFR level B2)?

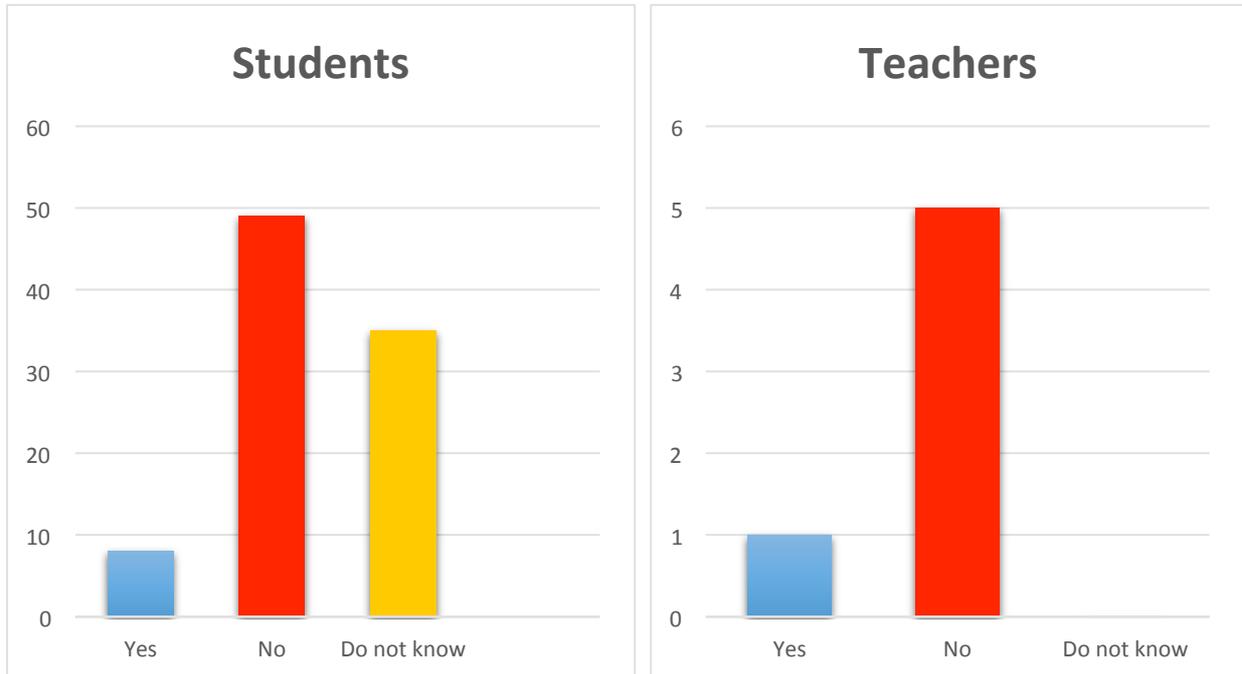


Figure 3: Students' and teachers' points of view towards the possibility for students to reach the expected proficiency level

Question 4: In your opinion, do the university facilities meet your expectation for learning/teaching second foreign languages?

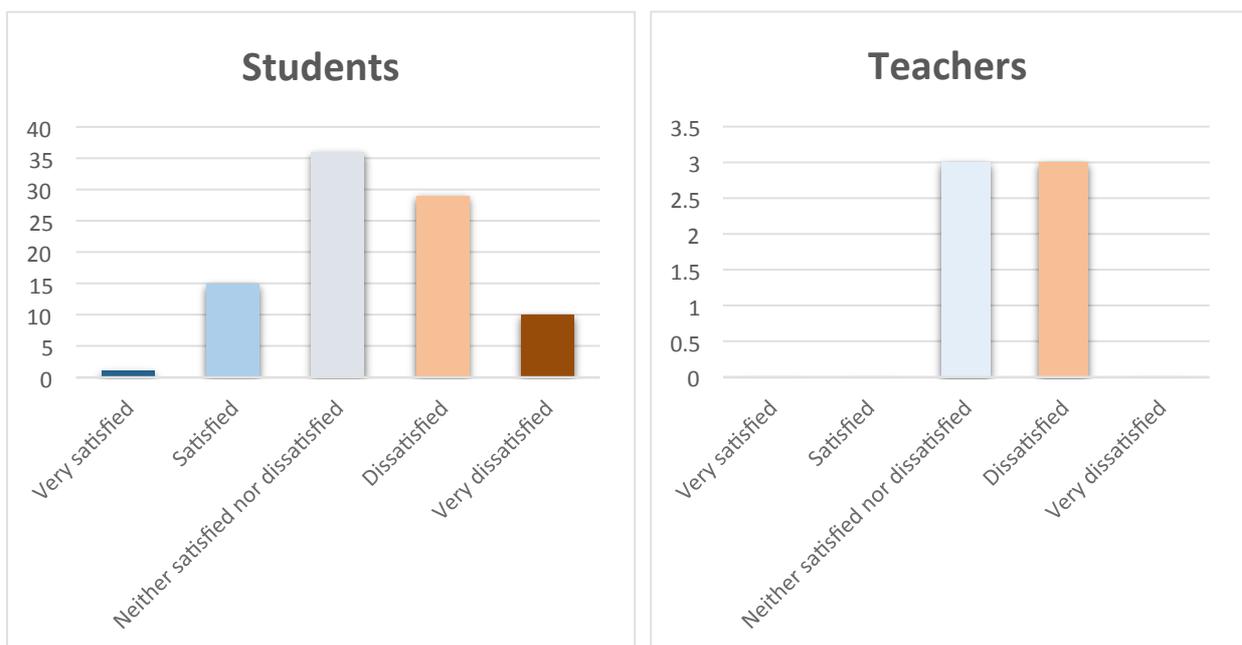


Figure 4: Students' and teachers' attitudes towards university facilities

Question 5: In your opinion, how can we ensure the achievement of the expected language proficiency level?

	Students	Teachers
1	Spending more time on communicative skills (65)	Improving learning methods (All)
2	Improving learning methods (50)	Improving facilities (5)
3	Providing extra materials (44)	Providing extra materials (3)
Others	Motivating the students; renovating the examination format with additional parts of Speaking and Listening; re-arranging the learning time	Renovating the examination format; changing the textbooks; organising placement tests

Figure 5: Measures to ensure the achievement of the expected language proficiency level

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