

**TEACHING AND LEARNING IN INTENSIVE ENGLISH CLASSES
AT TWO PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN HO CHI MINH CITY:
REALITY AND CHALLENGES**

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Abstract

This primary research is aimed at exploring learning activities in intensive English classes at two primary schools in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), and understanding the challenges of teaching English skills for primary pupils so as to satisfy the requirements of National Foreign Language 2020 (NFL-2020-P), which are interpreted in HCMC Department of Education and Training's framework for Primary School English Education. Data were gathered from qualitative paradigms, including class observations and teacher interviews. The findings showed that controlled activities were dominant in total instructions. Listening and repeating took most class time whereas reading and writing were mostly limited within word, phrase and sentence levels. In the meantime, teachers had difficulties in managing pair and group work for large classes and multi-leveled pupils. Also, they especially found it a big challenge to carry out all the pre-scheduled content in Primary School English Education Framework. It was considered by teachers a constraint to flexibly implement lessons to reality of teaching practice.

Key words: NFL 2020-P, primary intensive English programme, young learners

Introduction

On September 30th, 2008 the Prime Minister of Vietnam issued Decision No 1400-QD-TTg, approving the national project on foreign language teaching and learning for the 2008-2020 period (NFL 2020-P). Since then, the scheme has faced evaluative criticism of its implementation. Many educational experts said that "this is too hard target to achieve" (Binh & Tam, 2013). On the one hand, the NFL 2020-P has been carried out without a concrete foundation – both teaching framework and materials are being in the process of piloting, evaluating, and reviewing (An, 2013). On the other hand, most teachers have not been trained to apply appropriate methods for primary students and are not able to teach English through English (Doan, 2011). In fact, more than 75% of primary English teachers are at lower level of required language proficiency (Dung & Huong, 2013). As to prove this reality, a survey conducted in one province on the Red River Delta showed that the most important problems were related to teachers' low level of both communicative and instructional competences (Chi, 2010).

Referring to national targets, NFL 2020-P defined pedagogic policy for teaching and learning English at primary level in which six principles are mentioned: (1) learning by playing; (2) learning by doing and through visual aids; (3) learning with realia resources rather than textbooks; (4) focusing on listening and speaking; (5) encouraging imitation rather than grammar explanation; and (6) learning for fun, not for scores (Thinh, 2010). It is obvious that these principles closely reflect general understanding about the way children learn a language. However, referring to the current educational setting in Vietnam, most experts concern about the shortage of learning facilities, the inconsistency of educational standards, especially the instability, unreliability and lack of clarity of MOET policies and support (Binh & Tam, 2013). It turns out that, similar to a lot of other countries, the government tries to implement a policy too quickly, so that teacher educators and teachers do not have enough time to appreciate appropriate methods (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002).

On the other hand, in an attempt to push the process, various trainings on professional skills and language proficiency have been conducted. The British Council Vietnam has been working closely with MOET, offering “Primary Innovation Programmes” to support cadres of local trainers to improve their skills in training teachers through a ‘cascade’ model. MOET also enhanced a Framework to train primary new qualified teachers at state education colleges (Hoa, 2013). A lot of trainings on new materials and their methodological philosophy are organized for teachers on a regular basis according to the responsible of HCMC Education Department (DOET). Above all, teachers are promised to receive better income and job security if they meet the qualification for NFL 2020-P.

From this reality, this research was carried out in the hope of gaining better insights of teaching English at primary schools in HCMC. The data were gathered from two primary schools where the researchers spend about two months every year with HCMC OU’s student teachers during their practicum sessions. The first aim of the study was exploring what activities teachers tend to apply in intensive English classes. This general picture of teaching practice leads to the understanding of whether or not NFL 2020-P’s expectation has been met so far. Secondly, teachers were invited to have a say about the benefits and challenges they have been coping with in their teaching practice, hoping to achieve more support from administrators.

Literature review

In spite the fact that English has been introduced into primary programme worldwide, researches which provide ‘a detailed description, on a case-by-case basis, of how expert teachers in local contexts ‘do’ English language teaching’ are rare (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). In Vietnam, there are no studies, as far as we are aware, that examine how teachers go about their everyday practice of teaching English to young learners, their attitudes to this teaching, and the challenges they face. Therefore, this part reviews the overall context of teaching and learning in Vietnam and recommendations on best teaching practice by international book authors in this field.

Contextual factors in primary language teaching and learning

Broadly speaking, the influences on teaching practice are related to the educational frameworks – the way curriculum is structured, the way it is delivered, the number of English hours for language exposure (Pinter, 2006). Until now, as part of NFL 2020-P, the Intensive English

Programme for Primary Pupils has been dispatched and modified annually by DOET and applied in most of Primary Schools in HCMC. According to Decision 2839 /GDĐT issued on August 27th, 2013, pupils in intensive English classes have eight periods per week to learn English. The programme involves diverse learning activities: Learning Maths and Science through English, English Story Telling, Project-based Activities, My Passion for Reading, Reading Circle, Learning Vietnamese Culture through English, and Cambridge ESOL Test Skills. In fact, in response to these overwhelming requirements, almost all the teachers graduated from traditional education colleges find themselves unqualified and in the need of retraining for professional development (Chi, 2010).

In short, the national facilitation reflects the recognition of rising status of English when Vietnam goes international. HCMC, as a developing area of the country, displays an ambitious plan to go ahead in making NFL 2020-P's target come true. Hopefully, the children who are now experiencing the innovative way of learning provided by Intensive English Programme will be well-prepared with English, and thus have competitive competences in the open labor market by the year of 2020.

Classroom context for learning English for young learners

Based on the teaching and learning principles defined in NFL 2020-P, the issue is drawn to how to create optimal learning conditions for primary pupils to learn English in a holistic approach. From teaching perspective, enabling teachers to drop down traditional stiffling teaching to implement more child-friendly approach determines the success of the programme. Discussing the key conditions for young English beginners to get ahead, Johnston (2009) approved the viewpoint that English language learning is a good thing if only a supportive environment is ensured. Particularly, Read (2007:8) emphasizes that as "children make sense of the language through contexts that they find themselves familiar with", teachers should build connections between the classroom lessons to children's real life experience at home, and also to their knowledge from other school subjects like maths and science. In other words, creating natural, real and understandable contexts or using content-based instruction allows children to learn actively and encourage the use of language for real purposes (Slattery & Willis, 2001). To be able to do this, teachers need to keep internal coherence between language and learning content.

As for primary pupils, the role of naturalistic learning is a central issue as they are not unable to understand grammar rules and explanation about language. Instead, children must have plenty of time for exposing to English of variety of input all around them (Moon, 2005). Moon also mentions the children's needs of using English "as a means of communication, where the focus is on the meaning not the form of the language" (p.2). On the same stand, Pinter (2006) states that opportunities to be exposed to natural language to interact with each other are vital for children to acquire the language. This raises a problem that in a non-English speaking environment like Vietnam, teachers are required much of competencies, both in term of their proficiency in English to provide exposure to the language, and of their confidence in methodology to offer opportunities through appropriate tasks for pupils.

Referring to using tasks for pupils in class, teachers should make use of activities which develop children's creativity, fantasy and imagination. Enjoyable activities and comfortable atmosphere motivate young learners to learn English (Halliwell, 1992; Slattery & Willis, 2001; Brewster,

Ellis & Girard, 2002; Moon, 2005; Pinter, 2006; Read 2007). In any syllabus for primary school, there must be a balance between ‘content goal’ and ‘attitude goal’ which aims to develop pupils’ “pleasure and confidence in exploring language” (Halliwell, 1992:10). Moon (2005:7) comments that pupils will be “more involved and this may increase their desire to continue”, if they enjoy the learning activities. Therefore, teachers can help pupils by using a lot of gestures, actions, pictures to demonstrate, talking a lot to them in English, playing games, singing songs, say rhymes and chants together, telling simple stories in English, constantly recycling new language, and varying activities (Slattery & Willis, 2001; Brewster Ellis & Girard, 2002). Read (2007) defines scaffolding is a special kind of help for children to make learning happen. In general, learning process should be fun as all children come to class with creative potential, leading to personalized, divergent responses naturally.

To give a brief comment, primary pupils need a pleasant and supportive learning environment to be keen on learning English. From teaching perspective, teachers have to drift away from the traditional teaching methods and familiarize themselves with a holistic and unanalysed approach. Obviously, it will take them time and effort to be able to feel comfortable with and master children-friendly teaching skills. As a matter of fact, teachers need as much motivation, support, and facilitation as their pupils do. Positive actions should be done also for new teachers and teachers-to-be.

Class activities for primary pupils

Apart from an appropriate learning context, a basic concern goes to arranging types of class activities in order to provide continuity from initial stage for learners of about 6 – 8 or 9 to the time they finish primary school. In other words, bridges must be built between different stages of language education based on the merits of language awareness and language competence (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002). Similarly, Slattery and Willis (2001) distinguish two age groups of primary pupils: learners of under seven and ones between seven to twelve. For the first age group, they learn a foreign language in the way they acquire their mother tongue; whereas the second group “are developing as thinkers … can plan and organize how best to carry out an activity, can work with others and learn from others” (Slattery & Willis, 2001:5). In a practical approach, Pinter (2006:2) tackles “age groups on a continuum of younger to older learners” with some distinguished features. While younger learners have low levels of awareness about language as well as process of learning, older learners show growing levels of these aspects. The latter also is able to understand abstract system, use analytical skills and have well-developed skills as readers and writers (Pinter, 2006). With older children, it is possible to work on self-motivating strategies: take increasing control over their own learning process, self-management skills to overcome environmental distractions (Dörnyei, 2001).

Although teachers have to harmonize between teaching and learning recommendations with the reality, those are absolutely useful guides for them to evaluate and choose appropriate activities in class. Thus younger learners can work with more teacher-controlled and drill-like activities such as repeating, listening that requires non-verbal response, copying simple sentences, joining with rhymes and songs (Well, 1987; Griffee, 1992; Slattery & Willis, 2001; Pinter, 2006). Teachers can get their attention to written language by simple exercises – matching spoken with written forms, complete short texts with relevant personal information. Additionally,

multisensory approach with tracing, copying, finger writing is very for younger learners (Halliwell, 1992; Moon, 2005; Slattery & Willis, 2001; Pinter, 2006).

On the other hand, older children can be encouraged to deal with more communication-oriented activities to practice language skills. They can skim and scan texts in English to work meanings out for themselves, explains simple things about language (Pinter, 2006). They are also ready for free writing – filling in speech bubbles, writing instruction, scripts, shopping lists, recipes, simple diaries, writing for record keeping, personal diaries (Pinter, 2006). Moreover, they need to use wider range of language through creative writing and experiment with language through interviews or role-plays which require some spontaneous, creative language use. Listening activities are more varied with recorded materials, besides teacher's input, to get used to different accents, longer texts/stories. (Slattery & Willis, 2001; Moon, 2005; Pinter, 2006, Read, 2007).

An internationally-scaled survey conducted by Garton, Copland, & Burns (2011) provided a list of “favourite” activities applied by teachers in primary English classes. Among the activities, listening to the recorded materials was most popular. A number of other popular activities included repeating after the teacher, reading out loud, filling the gaps, grammar exercises, and children memorising words or phrases. Some “creative” activities, particularly games and songs, were also frequently used. Role plays were in top 10 of activities used for both communicative, meaning-focused activities and for more drill-like, accuracy-focused purpose. The survey results show that primary English teachers focused more on listening and speaking and tended to conduct controlled activities in class. Reading as a skill (reading silently) and creative writing were rarely applied. This study, however, did not categorize popular activities for younger and older learners.

In summary, English pupils should be equipped with basic strategies to become independent learners in term of communicative skills by the time they finish primary education. These skills are shaped through the process of learning under the teacher-led activities to more free activities as pupils grow older. Referring back to DOET's English framework of primary pupil, it is obvious that the suggested activities are close to the principles of teaching English to young learners in terms of class activities and learning strategies. In order to achieve this target, teachers need to understand the communicative purpose of learning language and be able to choose appropriate tasks types for their learners.

Methodology

Research questions

The study is aimed at exploring the reality of teaching and learning intensive English according to NFL-2020-P and understanding of the challenges that teachers perceive in promoting pupils' language skill development. The first aim was achieved by class observation and analysis of observers' records. For a deeper comprehension of teaching practice, opinions of teachers were also taken into consideration. The second aim was concluded from teachers' interviews.

There are two questions that guide this study:

1. What learning activities do teachers implement in primary intensive English classes?
2. What challenges do teachers have to overcome to meet the requirements of NFL-2020-P?

Scope and participants

The research was conducted in Ky Dong Primary School and Nguyen Thai Son Primary School, both located in District 3, HCM City. English teaching staff at the former school includes seven teachers and there are six English teachers in the latter school. In both schools, some Phillipines and native teachers work on a contract basis, the number of whom depends on the number of English classes each school year. Pupils who study in intensive English classes spend eight periods of English per week; that means they have about 40 hours per semester learning English in class.

Approved by the two school Principles, six Vietnamese and four English native teachers let us observe their classes and take note on lesson procedures. From 10th February to 28th February, 2014, we conducted 28 class observations (35 minutes per each) in nine intensive English classes in Ky Dong Primary School and nine classes in Nguyen Thai Son Primary School. The observations were carried out in English Grade 1 (four periods), Grade 2 (six periods), Grade 3 (six periods), Grade 4 (six periods) and Grade 5 (six periods).

Furthermore, the two head English teachers from these schools took part in two separate semi-structured 30-minute interviews, sharing their insights about the advantages and disadvantages of implementing lesson plans and class activities as guided in DOET Framework.

Data collection and analysis procedure

Firstly, in order to answer the first research question, an observation form was used to record the class activities. Teachers' implementation in class was closely noted down with strict timing. The class activities were then categorized according to their aims/objectives, kinds of interactions and resources used during class time. After the activities of the same categories and characteristics were sorted, the frequencies and total time teachers spent on each group of activities were counted, using Excel 2007.

Next, the information about grouped learning activities were put in comparison to suggested activities in literature review and in predetermined teaching framework as to find out to what extent they were relevant to the young learners in general and their age groups in particular. The match and the gap between the reality of teaching and the methodological principles defined in NFL 2020-P and DOET Framework were expected to be clarified.

Finally, aiming at exploiting the data to the full, the researcher sent the class activities data and main interview questions to the two head teachers before the interviews were conducted. The questions were at: (1) to what extent the class activities data reflects the reality of teaching and learning English in intensive English classes; (2) what difficulties they met in job; and (3) what they thought about pupils' learning and prospectives. When the conversations took place, the teachers' answers were taken notes as they felt embarrassed being taped. Therefore, at the end of each interview, the interviewer just asked them to check her notes and correct any misunderstanding. The interview interpretation was made before being analysed in order to highlight the challenges in preparing for pupils to become proficiency English speakers at their age.

Findings and discussion

Classroom observation: information about teaching and learning in primary intensive English classes

According to the statistics, the participants used quite variety of activities appropriate for young learners in class, from teacher-controlled to more free communicative activities (*see table 1*). Particularly, restricted activities seemed to be the favourite of most participants. Unfortunately, most of cross-curriculum, creative skill-based activities required in DOET's Framework for Primary English Programme were not observed during the two weeks of the study, such as Learning Maths and Science through English, Project-based Activities, My Passion for Reading, Reading Circle, and Learning Vietnamese Culture through English.

First of all, all skills related to listening, speaking, reading and writing were appeared in the top list in terms of frequency of usage. In fact, the controlled activities – listen and repeat, role playing a dialogue, listening to CDs and read along a text, grammar exercises and copying words – dominated all the others (table 1). When focusing on vocabulary or patterns, teachers asked pupils to listen and repeat most frequently (30%). Besides, role play in which pupils practised a dialogue or read aloud a model conversation took a little more time than just listening and repeating to words or patterns (15%). Reading was done when teachers played CDs rather than reading as skill/silent reading (15% and 0.5% respectively). In addition, writing, limited within word/phrase levels, and writing grammar exercises, were implemented more often than other communicative tasks – 10% of class activities compared with only 1.5% total number for writing tasks.

Activities	F	%
Listen and repeat (after the teacher/recorded CDs)	87	20.96
Role play (Following a model / dialogue)	63	15.18
Listen to CD and read along a text	63	15.18
Write grammar exercises	40	9.64
Write words	40	9.64
Play games	31	7.47
Songs	30	7.23
Speaking tasks (survey, role-play, information gap)	12	2.89
Listening tasks	9	2.17
English story telling	9	2.17
Cambridge Tests Training	8	1.93
Pronunciation Training	8	1.93
Writing tasks	6	1.45
Chants	6	1.45
Reading Tasks	2	0.48
Drama	1	0.24
Total	415	100.00

Table 1: Activities used class according to frequency

In addition, story telling was almost a fixed activity at the end of Grade 4 and Grade 5 classes: teachers usually spent about last 5 minutes of each period for pupils to read aloud a short passage

from a graded reader, then finished class by asking them some questions about it. Testing strategies were included in a way that pupils were instructed to do a sample Cambridge test for Young Learners. Moreover, just like reading and writing as a skill, less controlled speaking and listening tasks were limited (2,9% and 2,2% respectively). Finally, drama was the least used – only once during the observed time – when a teacher asked pupils to act out a dialogue (0.2%).

Secondly, according to table 2, the longest time the teachers spent on was games in spite of its quite low frequency (16%). Games were often used after pupils' learning new words or a piece of grammar. Games were also played as a consolidate activities in which pupils use English purposefully. Besides, restricted role-play, listen and repeat activities took quite a lot of class time as they were used most frequently. Time for communicative tasks – speaking and listening tasks – gained higher stance compared to their frequencies. However, listening and writing were of only 4.1% and 4.0% respectively while reading as a skill made of even lower percentage of time (1.0%).

Activities	T (minutes)	%
Listen and repeat (after the teacher/recorded CDs)	114	10.76
Role play (Following a model / dialogue)	128	12.09
Listen to CD and read along a text	96	9.07
Write grammar exercises	92	8.69
Write words	73	6.89
Play games	165	15.58
Songs	54	5.10
Speaking tasks (survey, role-play, information gap)	91	8.59
Listening tasks	43	4.06
Storytelling	45	4.25
Cambridge Tests Training	40	3.78
Pronunciation Training	35	3.31
Writing tasks	42	3.97
Chants	20	1.89
Reading Tasks	11	1.04
Drama	10	0.94%
Total	1.059	100.00

Table 2: Activities used class according to time length

Obviously, the fluency-based activities and the ones which boosted pupils' imagination and creativity seemed to play a humble role in learning process. Within the time classroom observations were conducted, pupils had few chances for skill-focused activities. Speaking tasks took longest time in this category, but they took only 8.6% of total time with 12 different tasks. Particularly, although storytelling was an obligatory activity and given surprising importance in literature (Slattery & Willis, 2001; Moon, 2005; Pinter, 2006), only some of the participants spent about 5 minutes before finishing their lesson on reading out loud part of a story.

Generally speaking, the teaching practice in the two primary schools showed a tendency toward NFL-2020-P's guideline for teaching young learners. The fact that teachers organized controlled activities for young learners was relevant to NFL-2020-P from the perspective of pedagogical

guideline “encouraging imitation rather than grammar explanation”. Also, mentioning language skills, listening and speaking were put more concentration than reading and writing. When organizing games in class, teachers have considered children’s characteristics – “learning by doing” – to lift pupils’ spirit toward learning English. However, the data gathered still did not reflect the use of activities that involved situations similar to pupils’ real-life experiences. The activities which engaged pupils into “learning by doing” did not take place during class observation.

Interviews: information about challenges of teaching English in primary intensive classes

Firstly, both teachers agreed on major conclusions drawn from observation data. Explaining for the absence of activities related to Learning Maths and Science through English, Project-based Activities, My Passion for Reading, Reading Circle, and Learning Vietnamese Culture through English, they shared that most of these were optional activities, which meant teachers could consider the contexts and decide whether or not these subjects were relevant to a particular groups of learners. In reality, teachers at both schools did apply project-based activities for Grade 4 and Grade 5 once or twice a semester. However, they normally were not able to involve all pupils to take part in these activities, but only some active pupils in the support of their parents. They said that schools did not afford enough materials or teaching resources; thus teachers had to call for financial aids from parents when it came to activities related to “learning by doing.” On the other hand, one of them believed that if they were forced to get pupils familiarize themselves with cross-curriculum activities, they needed training to do so because they did not have specialized knowledge and even the methodology for teaching subject matters.

Secondly, it is true that learning contexts were limited within pedagogical tasks, while activities involving children’s real-life experience were rare. The reason for the fact that teachers tended to focus on the lesson target language itself rather than leading to communicative activities was to be able to manage pupils while they were in class. That means controlled activities helped teacher control class closely, keep classroom disciplines, so that they did not make too much noise and affect the classes next door. However, the interviewed teachers believed that teaching pupils pieces of language, asking them to do repetition should be a necessary step to get them ready for communication in English later on. Actually, they did want to engage older pupils into activate stage of learning, but to cover all lesson language target usually consumed almost all class time. As a consequence, they suggested that the amount of language knowledge should be cut down so that learners would have sufficient time for skill practice.

Referring to the responsibilities of teachers, the two head teachers shared that it was so tense to complete all required job description. They had to prepare lessons, progress tests and end-of-semester tests, mark tests at home, make teaching resources, and conduct regular class observation. In addition, they have to follow DOET’s Framework which means ensuring all the required activities to be done in intensive English classes. Besides professional work, they had to take part in other non-professional work at school, extra-curriculum events. They also had to join language classes at weekends to upgrade English proficiency. Therefore, they usually felt overloaded which entailed the lack of preparation for new teaching ideas. Another reason for not using various of activities was that teachers had to do-it-themselves – searching for resources, preparing visual aids, class posters, lesson pictures, prompt cards, relia, worksheets, toys, etc. – there was no supporting staff at school. They said although English teachers sometimes swap teaching materials, they were always in the thirst of new ones whenever they implemented ideas

of teaching. That means if they could not arrange time to create materials, they did not have any options than doing same activities again and again.

Therefore, lack of teaching and learning facility made teachers' job challenging. One of the participants described learning environment as "almost the same with 10 years ago". She meant that the classroom arrangement stayed fixed, the number of students was large, their English levels varied although, at appearance, we could "more colours" on the class wall. The situation has been changing, though, since a television and a projector were installed in every intensive English class. Pupils also had chance to study with an interactive board once or twice a semester. However, pupils still mainly studied from the textbooks because the time for reading books for pleasure, working with native teachers, learning with online resources was scarce. Especially, it was hard to maximize interactions in class due to fixed classroom setting. Therefore, they could not provide their pupils with a lot of exposure to English.

On class activities for young learners, one teacher said that she found British Council trainings on teaching techniques really useful for teachers. However, not all activities were relevant to learning contexts at primary school. Normally, one intensive English class had 40 pupils, so they found organizing and monitoring class activities extremely exhausting. Due to large number of pupils, it was energy-consuming to get their attention, involve all of them during lesson sequence, check their work and provide them with feedback. It was hard to carry out activities involving physical movements, running/racing or competitions since the classroom did not have enough space and the noise could affect other classes nearby.

Another obstacle teachers met is, by and large, activities developing children's imagination, fantasy were out of reach. Vietnamese pupils traditionally follow strict disciplines that require them to obey what teachers ask. As a result, most of them found it unusual to express their individuality. Promoting positive attitude toward learning English, thus, means changing pupils' mindset about disciplines and creativity. The interviewed teachers, when being asked how they were ready to change it, admitted that most of them did not want to make it real just because they actually did not work with pupils as much as their form teachers did. Instead, they would prefer to achieve the basic requirements of English programme in the role of a specialized teacher.

Finally, the teachers believed that pupils in intensive classes would gain English competence sooner or later. Despite not having adequate skill practice at school, about more than 95% of pupils have extra English courses after school. Quite a lot of pupils have gained native-like accents since they have been studying with native teachers from very young age. Others have tutors at home or join evening English classes to study for Cambridge certificates. Therefore, their English final results were in fact very good in terms of four skills.

To sum up, teachers find English intensive programme too much to be completed thoroughly because of learning context, lack of facility and support for teachers. Several suggested subject matters from DOET's Framework for Intensive English Programme were too ambitious from both teaching and learning perspectives. Within current learning conditions, class activities focused on language drills rather than communicative tasks and learning-strategy training as a result of large class size, classroom setting, and poor teaching resources. However, it seemed that pupils did not meet big problems with final scores as they all have extra classes to deal with school exams and learning criteria.

Conclusion and implication

Generally speaking, in spite of criticism on the feasibility of NFL 2020-P, teaching and learning English at these two primary schools are undergoing an orientation toward children-friendly methodology to boost pupils' positive attitude and responsibility for their own learning. NFL 2020-P's guidelines do work to facilitate the change. At present time, teachers are well-equipped with knowledge and techniques to work with primary pupils thanks to annual trainings. They can create fun with games in class, consolidate lesson target language by conducting drills, increasingly use of visual aids and try to use technology in teaching. However, their efforts restrict in controlled instructions, not sufficient to facilitate pupils' independent use of English. This reality confirms the comment that enabling children to be able to communicate in English is "too hard target to achieve" (Binh & Tam, 2013). Importantly, different from some published researches which blamed this unachievable goal on teachers' competences (Chi, 2010; Doan, 2011), according teachers-participants' viewpoint, it is because of the workload, time constrains and classroom setting that they cannot meet the target.

From the results of this research, it is obvious that English teachers really need more support and motivation to make a better effort on skill facilitation. Training for teachers should put emphasis on large class teaching and giving instructions for communicative activities. Framework for teaching should focus on clear objectives and leaning outcomes rather than involving too many subject matters while time allocated for English learning is still limited. Furthermore, it would be more effective if teachers can make decision on how to teach a lesson based on their understanding of lesson goals and groups of pupils instead of following preprepared lesson plans. Teachers can help each others evaluate effectiveness of implementing ideas through observations as usual. Last but not least, learning environment should be gradually improved so that attention on individual pupils can be done and variety of activities can be carried out and enjoyed by pupils.

In conclusion, this study contributes a source of information concerning about the reality of teaching and learning at primary schools and teachers' opinions on challenges they face when working under NFL 2020-P's principles and DOET's Framework. There are some limitations of the study. First, the observation time was quite short, only two weeks, and withing two schools, so the data might not provide a big picture of reality in HCM city. Second, the researchers only interviewed two head teachers, who may have the best insight of teaching environment, but other teachers could give closer details to the results of class observations.

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