

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CURRENT SITUATION OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THAI NGUYEN PROVINCE

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### SUMMARY

This study investigated into the current situation of teaching English to primary pupils at six primary schools in Thai Nguyen province during the year of 2012. Particularly, this study aimed at finding out the challenges of teaching English to primary pupils in Thai Nguyen in terms of teacher education, teaching techniques, teaching materials, and teaching & learning conditions. Based on the findings, the researchers would like to recommend some changes to improve English teaching quality. The participants were 18 primary teachers of English in Thai Nguyen. Questionnaires and observations were used to gather data in the study. The findings indicated that most of the teachers faced with difficulties in using classroom English, understanding expectations of the young language learners, and using appropriate teaching techniques. The results also revealed that the teachers should be provided with more training courses of teaching English with the hope that quality of English teaching at primary schools in Thai Nguyen might be improved.

**Key words:** *young language learner, teacher education, teaching techniques, teaching materials, and teaching & learning conditions.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, as the world has become more and more closely integrated, English plays an important part in international communication. As a result, in non-English-speaking countries, this language has become the official subject in curricula at universities, upper secondary schools and lower secondary schools in the past decades. Naturally, it is necessary to teach English to children as early as possible in order to prepare them to face the new era.

In Vietnam, English has been introduced into the primary curriculum as an optional subject from Grade 3 since 1996 (Ministry of Education and Training, 1996) [1]. In 2003, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued a temporary primary curriculum of English as a guideline for primary schools (Trinh, 2005) [4]. However, according to Hung (2005) [3], in practice, there have been a number of problems, which emerge from the shortage of detailed regulations, lack of primary teachers of

English and poor physical conditions of primary schools. Not only the mountainous areas but also the urban areas face with this situation.

In Thai Nguyen, most primary schools choose English as an optional subject from Grade 3. Yet, from informal interviews with a number of teachers of English at primary schools in Thai Nguyen, the researchers found out many problems.

First, because there was a shortage of the number of primary teachers of English, many primary schools had to hire part-time teachers. It was often up to the teachers in those schools to decide how to teach English to primary pupils. It seems that there was no concrete guidance of teaching techniques and supervision from primary schools and the provincial department of education.

Second, as most of those teachers were teaching at secondary schools, they applied the same teaching techniques as used for adolescents to teach primary pupils. Moreover, they also indicated that they had not been trained to fully understand the characteristics as well as the needs of young

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language learners (YLL); therefore, their techniques of teaching may not be effective for this early age.

Besides, there were often about 40 to 50 pupils in one class, which made it difficult for the teachers to manage their classroom. It is obvious that no matter what methods the teachers used, success seemed to be difficult for these teachers who had no training of teaching English to YLL but still had to deal with 40-50 students in one class (Syahrial, 2010) [6].

Although in 2003, in Vietnam, a temporary syllabus of teaching English to primary pupils was issued, there has been no education conference on its effect so far. Therefore, the researchers conducted this study to investigate the current situation of teaching English to YLL in Thai Nguyen. The study focused mainly on issues relating to teacher education, teaching techniques, teaching materials, and teaching & learning conditions. The researchers hoped that the study might help to identify challenges and difficulties that teachers of English at primary schools in Thai Nguyen had to face with, and recommended some changes in order to improve English teaching quality to primary pupils.

#### METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers used a questionnaire containing 11 close-ended questions and 4 open-ended questions. First, as pointed out by Zoltan (2003) [7], a questionnaire is the cost-effectiveness instrument for collecting data. Second, Nunan (1992) [2] pointed out that questionnaires can be given to large groups of subjects at the same time. In this study, there were 5 personal questions to attain necessary information about the participants such as their age, gender, previous experiences of teaching. Also, 10 questions aimed at investigating information about the teachers' education, their educational background, and their challenges of teaching English to YLL.

According to Raniit (1996) [5], observation is a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place. Therefore, the researchers also used it to collect more in-depth information about the use of language, teaching techniques to YLL and the teaching and learning conditions that teachers of English had to deal with. The researchers used a classroom observation sheet to observe how and what the teachers perform in 45 minutes. The findings from the questionnaires and the observations were synthesized, calculated and analyzed to find out the current situation of teaching English to YLL at six primary schools in Thai Nguyen. The researchers calculated the results in percentage using Excel spreadsheet.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### Results from questionnaires

##### *English teachers' experience of teaching English at six primary schools in Thai Nguyen*

As can be seen from Table 1, most of the subjects had less than 5 years of teaching English at primary schools. This fact indicates that they seemed to have limited experience in teaching English at primary schools. Among ten teachers who had less than two years of teaching English at primary schools, six of them had a few years of experience as teachers of English at lower secondary schools. Thus, there was a doubt that teaching techniques used for secondary pupils were not appropriate for primary pupils.

**Table 1:** *The teachers' experience of teaching English*

<b>Years of teaching English</b>	<b>N<sub>o</sub> of teachers</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Less than 2 years</i>	10	56 %
<i>From 3 to 5 years</i>	8	44%
<i>Over 5 years</i>	0	0%

##### *Challenges faced in the process of teaching English*

Table 2 below presents the challenges faced by the teachers in the process of teaching English.

**Table 2:** Challenges faced in the process of teaching English

Challenges faced in the process of teaching English	Y	N
1. Choosing appropriate teaching techniques to YLL	83%	17%
2. Choosing textbooks/ materials	17%	83%
3. Designing additional activities	22%	78%
4. Managing the classroom	67%	33%
5. Creating an attractive learning environment	67%	33%

**Table 3:** Teachers' English proficiency

Criteria	Items	NW	A	W	VW
Language use	1. How well did the teacher use English at class?	17 %	66 %	17 %	0 %
	2. How well did the teacher create an English-speaking environment at class?	83 %	17 %	0 %	0 %

**Table 4:** Teaching materials used by teachers

Criteria	Items	NW (not well)	A (acceptable)	W (well)	VW (very well)
Materials in use	1. How well did the teacher organize the activities based on the textbook to promote communication?	50 %	33 %	17 %	0 %
	2. How well did the teacher use handouts?	33 %	17 %	33 %	17 %
	3. How well did the teacher use visual aids to motivate students?	66%	17 %	17 %	0 %

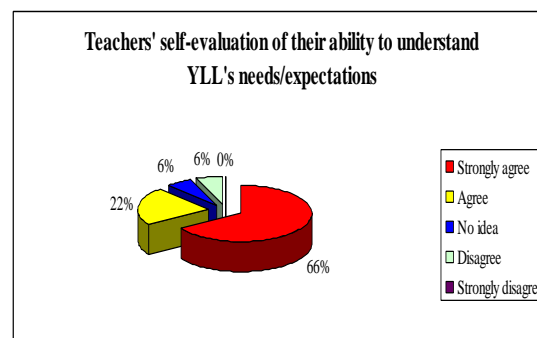
As can be seen from this table, most of the teachers faced with some challenges in teaching English. In fact, about 83% of them had difficulties in choosing appropriate teaching techniques to YLL. 67% of them found managing their classroom a very challenging task. Similarly, 67% thought that it was difficult to create an attractive learning environment. Therefore, there must be more specific training programs to help the teachers to deal with these challenges.

#### **Teachers' self-evaluation of their ability to understand YLL's needs/ expectations**

Chart 1 below presents teachers' self-evaluation of their ability to understand YLL's needs/ expectations.

As indicated from the chart, a majority of the teachers (66%) stated that they did not feel confident to understand the needs/ expectations of YLL while only 6% of them might appreciate the importance of YLL's needs. Therefore, there is an obvious need of

providing the teachers with more training to understand the children's needs and expectations.



#### **Results of classroom observations**

##### **Teachers' English proficiency**

Table 3 shows the ability of using English in class by the teachers. It is clear from the table that a majority of the participants could speak English at an acceptable level in class (66 %) while only 17% of them could use English well. Yet, most of them failed to create classroom interaction.

**Teaching materials used by the teachers**

Table 4 presents teaching materials used by the teachers. As can be seen from the table, most of the teachers did not succeed in organizing the activities based on the textbook to promote communication, using handouts and visual aids to motivate students. This might partly lie in the fact that they had many pupils in class, and that the tables and chairs were often arranged in an inconvenient way for organizing such activities. It is clear that some teachers lacked the skills and techniques to organize different activities to motivate the students and enhance their learning.

**Techniques of teaching used by teachers**

Table 5 below shows teaching techniques used by teachers. The findings indicated that 83 % of the participants did not exploit the effectiveness of teaching techniques such as games, role-plays, stories or songs in the process of teaching. It is obvious that YLL might learn English better through these teaching techniques because they have a great pleasure for funny activities. This finding also indicates that inexperience of using teaching

techniques in teaching might be the reason for failure in motivating YLL.

**Teaching & learning conditions at six primary schools in Thai Nguyen.**

Table 6 presents teaching & learning conditions at six primary schools in Thai Nguyen. It is clear from the table that the conditions of teaching and learning at these schools are inadequate and under standard.

Naturally, it would be too much to hope that such conditions can raise the pupils' interest in the lesson. Therefore, the authorities should pay attention to them to make sure that classroom facilities and teaching aids may be improved.

In short, the results from the classroom observation are also quite similar to those from questionnaires. Although some of the teachers might use English well at class, they had difficulties in creating an attractive learning environment. Moreover, most of them did not succeed in organizing the activities to promote communication. In addition, inexperience of using teaching techniques might be the cause of failure in motivating YLL.

**Table 5: Techniques of teaching used by teachers**

Criteria	Items	NW	A	W	VW
Teaching techniques	1. How well did the teacher use teaching techniques (such as games/ role-plays/ stories/ songs)?	83 %	17 %	0 %	0 %
	2. How well did the students get involved in tasks through teaching techniques?	83 %	17 %	0 %	0 %

**Table 6: Teaching & learning conditions at six primary schools in TN**

Criteria	Items	NW	A	W	VW
Teaching & learning conditions	1. How well did the classroom facilities meet the needs for the process of teaching and learning English?	50 %	33 %	17 %	0 %
	2. How well did the teaching aids meet the needs for the process of teaching and learning English?	83 %	17 %	0 %	0 %
	3. How well did the number of pupils meet the standard (about 25-30 pupils each language class)?	100 %	0 %	0 %	0 %

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicated that most of the teachers did not receive appropriate training concerning how to teach English to YLL. This fact made them fail to use English at class. They were not confident that they could understand the YLL's needs, expectations and psychology. The teachers' lack of training also resulted in their difficulty in using appropriate teaching techniques for their class, especially using games, songs, stories and plays to teach English to YLL.

Also, the results of the study revealed that teachers must be provided with regular training courses of teaching English at primary schools as well as using teaching techniques effectively. In addition, MOET and the authorities should pay more attention to provide teachers with adequate guidance of teaching English to primary pupils and well-equipped facilities.

On the basis of the findings above, the researchers proposed a number of recommendations as follows.

First, in terms of training courses, MOET should regularly organize seminars, workshops and other training courses of teaching English so that primary teachers of English may improve their professional knowledge and skills.

With regard to curriculum, MOET should give the same curriculum for teaching English to YLL at primary schools throughout the nation so that primary teachers of English can be easy to choose teaching materials for their teaching.

With reference to teaching and learning conditions, MOET should provide modern teaching facilities for primary schools so that the process of teaching and learning English may be more effective. In addition, MOET should regulate the standard for the number of primary pupils in each class to ensure the quality of teaching.

The researchers also recommended that the teachers should use teaching techniques through games, stories, drama and songs. It is undoubted that YLL are active and creative; therefore, these techniques may be strategic and effective for ELL to learn English.

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TÓM TẮT  
**KHẢO SÁT VỀ THỰC TRẠNG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH  
CHO BẬC TIỂU HỌC Ở THÁI NGUYÊN**

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Nghiên cứu này điều tra thực trạng giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho học sinh Tiểu học tại 6 trường Tiểu học ở tỉnh Thái Nguyên trong năm 2012. Đặc biệt, nghiên cứu này nhằm phát hiện ra những thách thức, khó khăn trong việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho bậc Tiểu học tại Thái Nguyên với những vấn đề liên quan tới việc đào tạo giáo viên, kỹ năng giảng dạy, tài liệu giảng dạy, và điều kiện dạy và học. Dựa trên những kết quả đã tìm được, nhóm tác giả muốn đề xuất một vài biện pháp nhằm nâng cao chất lượng giảng dạy tiếng Anh. Đối tượng được khảo sát là 18 giáo viên đang dạy tiếng Anh tiểu học tại 6 trường tiểu học thuộc tỉnh Thái Nguyên. Hai phương pháp đã được sử dụng để thu thập số liệu trong nghiên cứu này là phiếu điều tra và quan sát. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết những giáo viên được khảo sát phải đối mặt với những khó khăn trong những việc như: sử dụng tiếng Anh trên lớp, hiểu nhu cầu học tập của học sinh, và sử dụng kỹ năng giảng dạy phù hợp. Kết quả cũng chỉ ra rằng giáo viên Tiểu học nên được cung cấp nhiều khóa học về giảng dạy tiếng Anh với hy vọng rằng chất lượng giảng dạy tiếng anh bậc Tiểu học ở Thái Nguyên sẽ có thể được nâng cao.  
**Từ khóa:** trẻ em học ngoại ngữ; đào tạo giáo viên; kỹ năng giảng dạy; tài liệu giảng dạy; điều kiện dạy và học

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