English Learning Language in Vietnam: The Role of English in the Course of Foreign Turmoil, Globalization, and National Policy

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Abstract:

The story of foreign language learning in Vietnam is one involving the competing influences of colonial and imperial powers from China, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. For the common people, living in the wake of this economic, social, and political struggle requires a clear assessment of the motivation behind learning a second language in conjunction with policies that reflect domestic and foreign conditions. This is especially prevalent for the period between the reunification of Vietnam (1970's) where English was discarded and the implementation of Đổi Mới (1980's) and then successfully reintroduced. While scholars have long examined the history of English language learning in Vietnam, the debates use a top-down approach with overarching generalizations that fail to consider deviations using individual perspectives. Since few have investigated a fuller picture of foreign language education from an individual perspective, this capstone project focuses on approximately half a dozen narrations spotlighting the various cultural and social shifts of foreign languages. The interviews reveal the adaptability of the people, changing cultural context, and pressure of globalization and international integration for a country still trying to rationalize its national identity.


This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.
Abstract

The story of foreign language learning in Vietnam is one involving the competing influences of colonial and imperial powers from China, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. For the common people, living in the wake of this economic, social, and political struggle requires a clear assessment of the motivation behind learning a second language in conjunction with policies that reflect domestic and foreign conditions. This is especially prevalent for the period between the reunification of Vietnam (1970’s) where English was discarded and the implementation of Đổi Mới (1980’s) and then successfully reintroduced. While scholars have long examined the history of English language learning in Vietnam, the debates use a top-down approach with overarching generalizations that fail to consider deviations using individual perspectives. Since few have investigated a fuller picture of foreign language education from an individual perspective, this capstone project focuses on approximately half a dozen narrations spotlighting the various cultural and social shifts of foreign languages. The interviews reveal the adaptability of the people, changing cultural context, and pressure of globalization and international integration for a country still trying to rationalize its national identity.
Part one: Introduction

Since the 1980’s, the English language has been used in the Asian region as a ubiquitous form of communication and learning with considerable variation in accents, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax (Bolton & Kirkpatrick, 2020). This growing basis has prompted compulsory English language programs in an increasing number of education systems, reflecting the influence of globalization and international integration (Burns, 2017). The process of English instruction is especially prominent in Vietnam as remnants of neo-colonial cultures in the early 20th century, diplomatic relations after the proclamation of the Đổi Mới (or Open Door) Policy in the 1980’s that paved the way for economic reforms, and international integration in the 21st century (Phan, 2021). With Đổi Mới establishing the intention to shift to a market-oriented economy, Vietnam started normalizing diplomatic relationships with other countries (Lam, 2009). Such growth in English proficiency is often undertaken with the goals of furthering social and economic gains for the individual and the country, and today, approximately 98% of Vietnamese students from primary to tertiary education are learning English (Bolton & Kirkpatrick, 2020). However, despite extensive research into English language learning in the contemporary landscape, few scholars have examined how the most desirable foreign language came to be in Vietnamese society through the perspectives of people who lived through that part of history. Scholars tend to portray the period immediately after the Vietnam war as one where Russian was the dominant language of instruction. After that with Đổi Mới, the traditional narrative stresses that English gradually began to predominate all of Vietnam. Instead, accounts with Southern Vietnamese growing up from 1975-2000 paint a different picture of English language learning – one with individual resistance to top down linguistic policy. Rather than subscribing to the generalized underpinnings of why English has grown to its popularity in Vietnam from a chronological
timeline, this paper attempts to document the fuller picture of individual and small group’s interaction of the systematic movement of English from 1975 to 2000. In many respects, this time frame offers a glimpse into a period when the development of English in Vietnam was met with a spectrum of responses from outrage to admiration.

In evaluating the vast linguistic landscape of Vietnam, the country is a multiethnic and multilingual society with approximately 54 ethnic groups and 100 different languages (Nguyen, 2019). Despite the diversity, the Kinh, an ethnically homogenous Viet, constitutes 86% of the population (Nguyen, 2019). With their significant economic and political grasp over the country, Vietnamese became the most widely used language in modern Vietnam. In 2005, the Education Law declared Vietnamese the official language of the country, successfully entrenching it into education, technology, law, and other spheres of contemporary life (Nguyen, 2012). However, there is an increasing movement to embed English in Vietnamese society for the sake of economic reforms, international cooperation, and globalization. These efforts over the past few decades have made English the most popular foreign language in the country, to the point where the term ‘foreign language’ is synonymous with English for many Vietnamese people. However, this was not always the case. The popularity of English is a controversial matter that depends on the country’s historical and political circumstances, stage in development, resistance to imperialism and colonialism, and awareness of interdependence with foreign ideas. This project hopes to explore the context surrounding the teaching and learning of English from individual accounts with the goal of enhancing voices that were lost in the present English dominant world.

Scholars often represent language policy in Vietnam chronologically through a socio-historical perspective including Confucianism teachings, Chinese feudal regime, French
invasion, and Soviet political influence (Nguyen, 2019). Through historical accounts and archival research, there does not appear to be strong debates among academics in representing this history. The consensus has been portrayed again and again in most research without deviation, but in considering the limitations of the literature, most are written by north Vietnamese historians. It seems there is always a struggle between Chinese, French, and Russian, with recent attention to English. However, all these languages were derived from desperate situations whether through colonization or pressured globalization. This makes the adoption and rejection of foreign language learning a good barometer of political identification. Hence, the topic of foreign language education is important because it reflects the various influences and political perspectives in education, cultural activities, and communication between Vietnam and its allies.

In considering the rise and fall of the number of people studying English, I will first discuss the social history of English language learning, the development of English in Asia, and the chronological progression of English in Vietnam. Next, drawing upon the existing literature, I will present a series of oral histories of approximately half a dozen people’s experiences with English from 1975 to 2000. In considering grassroot actors, I find that by interviewing predominately southern Vietnamese people, learning and preserving a dominant, hegemonic language like English could be considered a subversive act in post-war Vietnam. The hope is to capture the “bottom up” qualitative interviews of people choosing to learn English between the reunification of Vietnam and the enactment of Đổi Mới reform and the short period that fully encompass the lingering effects of the new policy. The rationale behind the “bottom up” approach stems from the argument that it can illuminate long-term issues through individual perspectives (De Haan, 2010). Finally, I will offer a discussion on the significance of these
narrations in identifying deviations from the historian consensus, attempting to give a voice to those who would have otherwise been lost to the generalization of history. Collectively, this capstone attempts to rewrite history by narrowing in qualitative interviews and reconstructing the social network of English language learning in a way where learning is individualized, unique, and significant for the “lived experience.”

**Part two: Scope of research and research question**

Given the lack of emphasis on a bottom-up approach to English language education, my capstone aims to understand the period between the end of Vietnam War in 1975 and the beginnings of the Đổi Mới Policy in 1986. The extent to which language education has been studied in Vietnam during that period can be summarized by Soviet Union and American politics with little regard for the individuals affected by mandated changes in education policy. The accounts of the common people are missing from history, and the portrayal of language learning during that time fails to show the granular details of the political division, hostility, and ideological shifts that took place. During this 15-year grace period, there was a decrease in interest in English Learning Language, an increased demand for Russian, and then a sharp reversal where English became the contemporary dominant foreign language.

Through the nuances of their narratives, I am attempting to understand how their personal decisions reflect the change-of-hand in the privileged foreign language as well as their feelings toward the present where English has become a “living language.” In other words, I am trying to understand how people in the generation before me reacted to the decline of English and favor of Russian during the reunification period in the late 1970’s. Additionally, I am also trying to understand how the enactment of Đổi Mới Policy and hence change of the privileged foreign
language in the 1980s affected people’s choice of foreign language. Lastly, I hope to examine people’s sentiment about the contemporary dominance of English in the 1990’s.

The research question I am hoping to explore are: considering the period after the Vietnam War of “Anti-Americanism” and the era of globalization during the Đổi Mới Policy (~1975-2000), how did Vietnamese high schoolers who learned English during that time react to the demand for English language proficiency and the dominance of English in the cultural context? The time frame, 1975–2000, was extended to reflect the lapse in response to language education policy after the reunification period and the Đổi Mới Policy and better encapsulate the ascendancy of English language learning in Vietnam. Consequently, I hope to explore how Vietnamese high schoolers who focused on Russian or Chinese reacted to the sharp transition in the dominant foreign language.

In trying to understand the evolving responses to English learning language during periods of favorable and unfavorable conditions, it is important to note the linguistic landscape is divided geographically, socioeconomically, and varies person-to-person. This paper focuses on English language education between 1975 and 2000 – the period between the reunification of Vietnam and indoctrination of Đổi Mới when English was successfully reincarnated. This paper is also limited by the interviewees’ backgrounds and my connections to them. The reason is that my initial connections are centered around South Vietnam or focused in higher education.

**Part three: Literature Review**

This section explores the approaches to language learning and policy by creating the distinction between the “top-down” approach and a “bottom-up” approach. Then, a top-down approach is applied to analyze English language education in Asia. Finally, the paper examines Vietnam’s top-down approach of colonial power and education through a chronological format, explaining
how a bottom-up method can fill the gap in the research question. This paper attempts to rectify these blind spots by digging into qualitative interviews during the 10-year grace period where Vietnam faced a decreasing interest in English Learning Language followed by an acceleration where English became a “living language.”

*Geometry of Language Learning and Policy*

Experts in the field of language policy research have argued that language policy and planning are politically and socially situated – where larger, systemic powers and socio-economic intentions have attached themselves to linguistic realities and ideologies (Kirkpatrick, 2016). Hence, to explore the context of linguistic shifts, scholars have begun shifting from a “top-down” approach to a “bottom-up” approach in building the conscious link between language policy and the social, political, and economic context within countries (Shohamy et al., 2010, p. 13).

Scholars of language learning have primarily used two different approaches to looking at language shifts. First, The top-down approach is derived from public bodies – government, municipal level administration, and public organizations – that are used to deliver a message to the public and carry out the will of the agency (Shohamy et al., 2010, p. 13). The bottom-up method is used to refer to the subordinate group that are controlled by the authorities of the public body (Shohamy et al., 2010, p. 13). The power relation and interaction between the top-down and bottom-up bodies are used in evaluating language policy. But recently, scholars have begun highlighting the explicit flow of power through the bottom-up actor’s ability to maintain autonomy (De Haan, 2010). In essence, while the top-down approach is more conventional with traditional literature, the bottom-up approach is able to make finer distinctions with individual morphemes (De Haan, 2010).
Top-down approach with English language education in Asia

Consider the context of English as an international language in Asia – its presence dominating across essentially every domain including education, business, commerce, and communication. Scholars have investigated English language education in Asia from a top-down approach where institutional factors were used to curate a synthetic perspective. Through a survey conducted in 2007, English in each Asian region (16) differ based on the status of English, the starting grade of English language education, the English class hour, the National English curriculum, and the school textbooks (Choi & Lee, 2008). Each of these variables are components of a top-down approach because they represent how government education policy controls English language learning. For the scope of this paper, we will only be focusing on the perception of English – the first variable. For the categorization of English, it can be divided into several categories: first, second, and foreign language. English is used as a second language in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka; it is used a foreign language in Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Iran, Israel; it is used as both a second and foreign language in Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the UAE (Choi & lee, 2008).

For countries that use both English as a foreign and second language, they tend to be more reluctant to use English for intra-national and intra-regional communication (Choi & lee, 2008). It is also worth noting that all the countries with English as a second language were subjected to foreign rule where English was the colonial language – an implication that the colonial period created pragmatic needs and tension that resulted in the restructuring of neocolonial influences (Choi & lee, 2008). This top-down approach leads to questions such as ‘what was retained or neglected from the neocolonial powers’ whereas the bottom-up approach...
leads to questions like, “how does the remnants of a neocolonial language shape its use in the region?”

In countries where English is used a foreign language, there were no former British or American colonies (Choi & Lee, 2008). So, while there is an emphasis on English proficiency, the language is used to perpetuate the socio-economic status of a country into a stage of better national development. While Vietnam is not an example of a postcolonial country where English was the colonial language, the country has a history of being subjected to colonial power and multiple mediums of instruction were circulated over the course of its development.

*Vietnam’s top-down approach of colonial power and education*

In continuing the discussion around the employment of English in the core education framework, it is important to examine the history of foreign language education in Vietnam to be able to understand the prioritization of English. From 179 B.C. to 938 A.D., Chinese language with its Han script was adopted as the official language of Vietnam (Nguyen, 2019). However, the Vietnamese people made alterations to the Chinese characters called chữ Nôm, a sign of resistance to Chinese influence and a symbol of national identity (Nguyen, 2019). In the 19th century, chữ Nôm was replaced with Quốc ngữ, a Roman alphabetic writing system brought by European missionaries (Nguyen, 2019). Quốc ngữ which translates to national language has six diacritic markers (ngang, sắc, huyền, hối, ngã, nồng) and was a mark of resistance against France when the first President of Vietnam declared it as the national language and medium of instruction in school after claiming independence from the French (Nguyen, 2019). This shift in educational policy through the Romanized Quốc ngữ demonstrates an official declaration of resistance by diminishing the popularity and need for French, especially in French-controlled urban areas. Additionally, this shift was also used to fight illiteracy – a ploy that not only
stressed the importance of the Quốc ngữ but fought the legitimacy of French colonist by downgrading French from an official language to a foreign one. Thus, the early history of language education in Vietnam involved foreign linguistic influence that was met with resistance to preserve its indigenous culture from outside influences.

Beginning in 1858, Vietnam was colonized by France, making the official language French (Do, 1996). The school curriculum focused on learning the French language in order to train Vietnamese natives to work for French administration. However, Vietnamese intellectuals created institutions such as schools that prioritized Quốc ngữ over French as a mark of rebellion (Do, 1996). In 1945, the Vietnamese declared independence from France and made Vietnamese the national language of Vietnam. Vietnamese was promoted in various rural areas, but in French-controlled urban areas, French was still the popular choice (Do, 1996). It was not until the Geneva Accords in 1954 when the French War ended that French stopped being officially used. However, the country was divided into the Communist North and Nationalist South Vietnam, each with its own political orientation and foreign language education (Do, 1996). In a divided Vietnam, the North relied on communists influence for support, and foreign language institutions promoted Chinese and Russian.

South Vietnam became a capitalist state and began strongly promoting French for retaining the political and economic cooperation with France. Additionally, from the early 20th century, American businessmen came to South Vietnam in search of business deals (Nguyen, 2012). However, they had to translate from English to French then French to Vietnamese – a tedious process that eventually led to the advent of official English teachers (Nguyen, 2012). These teachers worked with government officials to train officers in English with the intention of increasing future dealings with English-speaking countries.
The Vietnam War also increased the popularity of English with American involvement in South Vietnam in 1957 to the end of the war in 1975. South Vietnam began seeing foreign language as a means to enhance the socio-political and economic relationship with capitalist countries and began emphasizing English and French study in school (Do, 1996). Since the French had deeper ties with the country, the French language remained essential in Southern Vietnam from cooperation to the influences of government figureheads (Do, 1996). English, on the other hand, gained influence as hundreds of English classes were offered by the Vietnamese-American association and American missionaries (Do, 1996). Over time, English became the predominant foreign language taught in secondary and tertiary education and was used in media, recruitment with American employment opportunities, and assistance programs (Do, 1996).

**English language learning in Vietnam**

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the American withdrawal out of Southern Vietnam and the reunification of the nation led to a sharp decline in English language learning. Additionally, the American Trade Embargo in 1964 prohibited all trade activities, ceasing any opportunities of interaction with the rest of the western world (Nguyen, 2012). Simultaneously, the country began to extend its political, economic, and social relationship with the Soviet Union (Nguyen, 2012). Through a political and educational alliance, Russian became the main foreign language required at all schools while languages like French and English lost favor due to their western status. These changes in foreign language education can be depicted by the National Institute for Educational Research – a government affiliated organization – setting their targets for foreign language learning in high schools to be 60% studying Russian, 25% studying English, and 15% studying French (Nguyen, 2019). The strong target for Russian shows the strength of Russian influence in education and their solid footing after the Vietnam War. During this period,
Russian continued to predominate, and its spread was strengthened due to Russian aid, cultural activities hosted by the Vietnamese-Soviet Friendship Society, study abroad programs, and international education programs in Russia for undergraduate and graduate studies (Nguyen, 2019).

In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, historians have documented how English was viewed as a foreign culture; hence its social status began to deteriorate amidst anti-American sentiments. English language learning inevitably became restricted in terms of development and use, and textbooks and other related education materials were burned to signify the discernment of Vietnam’s colonial and neo-colonial past (Long & Kendall, 1981).

Other research has documented considerable geographic variation on English language learning in the country. English was still seen as a practical language in Southern Vietnam, and its retention was limited but present. This was due to the fact that there were not enough Russian language teachers to support the new Russian mandate while English teachers were still in supply (Nguyen, 2019). Overall, the period from 1975 to 1986 was still marked by the drastic decline in the demand for teaching and usage of English and the dominance of Russian.

It was not until the Đổi Mới Policy in 1986 that the Communist Party initiated economic reforms that recognized its diplomatic relationship with the United States and the rest of the world. This dynamic immersion created a need to communicate, so English immediately became an attractive commodity – the English boom was practically created overnight.

As Vietnam continues to be more internationally affiliated and develop close relationships with foreign countries (especially English-speaking ones), the Prime Minister of The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has continued pushing for improving English Language competence (Dang et al., 2013). Currently, in the context of Vietnam’s fast-track economic
development, English has become the primary (and oftentimes only) medium of foreign language instruction, cutting off all presence of Chinese, French, and Russian. With increasing influences from foreign firms and pressure of future globalization, there is a mounting pressure to place more emphasis on English at every stage in Vietnam’s education system.

This historical depiction of foreign influences in Vietnam and the consequential foreign language agenda highlights the influence of top-down actors such as the Chinese, French, Soviet Union, Americans, and the Communist Party. However, the bottom-up counterparts – people who were targeted in the preservation and ratification of these significant linguistic shifts – were all together omitted from history. The question that arises for this research is how individuals analyzed through the bottom-up method feel about the language learning and policy, whether this is a shared experience, how their socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds create variation in this perception, and the preferences and expectations of the inhabitants during the specified time period.

Part four: Methodology

The primary sources for my capstone include qualitative interviews with Vietnamese people who were in high school between the years 1975 to 2000. This time period captures the fluctuation of English from being a privileged language to its steep decline then sharp revival again. To understand their evolving response of foreign language fluency, I recorded their stories and mapped how the linguistic landscape, especially English language learning, was affected in unfavorable and favorable conditions. The crux of this investigation are the experiences of shifting from an anti-American culture to prioritizing English.

In the collection process, I started off with a snowball sample via initial contacts of family members, family friends, teachers and administrators at the Vietnamese Language Study
center in Ho Chi Minh City as well as Vietnam CET Academic Program, and Yale’s Vietnamese language teacher. The interviews were conducted in either English or Vietnamese, depending on the preference of the interviewee. The samples were collected from a convenient pool of candidates that were accessible, so Vietnamese family members and professors were the ones to respond back to the request to be interviewed. They were recorded, translated to English (if the interview was held in Vietnamese), and transcribed to text. This capstone applied for IRB, expedited approval, due to the involvement of human subjects in the research study.

Through a storytelling framework, I interviewed a diverse group of Vietnamese people who were in high school between 1975 and 2000. Interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling from personal contacts: family, friends, mentors, and their subsequent contacts. Their qualitative interviews not only capture their intrinsic motivation and societal pressures for learning a second language, but the details of their stories inform us about the historic and political backdrop. The interviews were analyzed based on themes – the coding process involved reading through the many pages of interview transcripts and drawing connections between them.

In addition to an interview, the interview subjects were asked if they have photographs from approximately the years they were in high school. Using both the interviews and the photograph, I created photoblog documenting their widely varying experiences with foreign languages in a consolidated format. The photos are intended to complement their stories in a way that adds color to the shifting cultural context during that period. In terms of formatting the qualitative interviews, I created a website https://thuypham0133.wixsite.com/website that displays the photographs and stories in an easy-to-read manner. The targeted audience include Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, foreign language scholars, and anyone interested in the development of language education and English language learning in Vietnam. Those with
access to the blog may be able to gain a deeper understanding of how English has taken a primary position in Vietnam by analyzing the period of foreign language turbulence that preceded 2000. For the broader audience, the qualitative interviews serve as a reminder that English is a language of both amity and hope, restraint and opportunity, and that its history is a part of political and educational divide.

Using the photo blogs, I analyzed the narratives in a way which isolates the beliefs, interactions, and experiences of each individual to uncover overarching themes masked by other methods of research. This methodology attempts to give a voice to someone whose non-conform ideals made them lost to history. This includes people who chose to study English before the Đoàn Mới or those who continued their Russian or French studies after the 1990s. Through spotlighting these individuals and their limited narration in time, I am thus striving to rethink the history of English Learning Language in Vietnam in a way that rejects the “perceived ethnocentricity of modernization theory” (Woolf, D. R., 2014).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hang</td>
<td>Late 1980s–1993</td>
<td>South Vietnam – Ho Chi Minh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuong</td>
<td>Early 1990s–2000</td>
<td>Central Vietnam – rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinh</td>
<td>Early 1990s–2000</td>
<td>South Vietnam – suburban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Part five: Findings

English has been the most sought-out foreign language in Vietnamese society for the past few decades, and there have been several studies investigating the sociopolitical forces that have shaped Vietnam’s linguistic landscape. However, scholars have not examined the resilience of
Vietnamese people in depth nor the linguistic persistence during periods of colonization, civil war, and massive globalization. Here, I conducted multilevel interviews to examine how moments of resistance are often overshadowed by scholar’s top-down approach in examining language education policy in Vietnam. Through interviews that offer an interpersonal perspective into traces of French colonization, a divided Vietnam, educational alliances with the former Soviet Union, and Đổi Mới, I find diversions between my interviewees’ experiences and conventional knowledge of foreign language education before and after the implementation of Đổi Mới. I find signification variation in 1) defining economic opportunities in the form of foreign investment, tourism, and employment for ex-veterans of the Vietnam War, 2) identifying humanitarian operations programs that are omitted in the conversation about diplomatic relations with the U.S., 3) understanding the role of teachers and resources amidst the transitional period of dynamic diplomacy. The individual experiences with foreign language are explained in part by geographic disparities, socioeconomic status, and differential attitudes toward international affiliations. Participants’ personal testimonies are analyzed as a part of the fuller picture focused on the privileged foreign language in Vietnam during a critical juncture in the country’s history. In table 1, I summarized the interviewee’s background from when they learned a foreign language in school as well as their geographic location for the duration of their schooling.

**Economic opportunities: foreign investments, personal investment, and tourism**

*How did the accumulation of foreign investments and tourism generate a greater public interest in English?*

I find that interviewees cited the economic opportunities of learning English as the primary reason why they learned English. These economic opportunities stemmed from the growth of foreign, financial investment into Vietnam, rise of tourism, and workplace pressure to
adapt to an English-centric culture. Echoing previous findings, interviewees recognized English as an essential core of compulsory middle and high school education for the purpose of being able to communicate with foreigners, obtain a career especially for businesses dealing with foreign transactions, and climb the socioeconomic ladder (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen, 2019). With the increased amount of foreign interactions and investment in Vietnamese businesses, people saw the practicality in being able to communicate with the foreigners in close proximity as well as their future English-speaking colleagues.

In **Integration of foreigners in the workplace.** Several respondents observed the workplace value of learning English as a universal language, both in relation to multinational corporations that started moving into Vietnam in the early 1980s and the rise of global tourism returning to Vietnam. For Duc who grew up in a city in South Vietnam, he observed starting in 1980, it was obvious to him how quickly Vietnam was developing economically and the popularity of foreigners using English in the country. Even before the Đổi Mới policy, he felt there was a shift in the government response as they tried to provide a hospitable environment for tourists and businesspeople: “The country demanded that every student use English to understand [the foreign visitors], and [English] was the most useful foreign language for future employment in order to converse with anyone.” For another South Vietnamese, Hien who started learning English in 1986, remembered she “saw a lot of foreigners begin to come in [Vietnam] from the anchors on T.V to the teachers from foreign countries.” When Vietnamese nativists noticed the influx of foreign businesses and people who wanted to capitalize off the global job market, they perceived the change as being matter-of-fact without any sentiment. They described the process as one they were “okay with” or “universal.”
English as a personal investment. Moreover, they stressed the importance of being able to understand the “foreigner’s tongue” and applicability in the workplace. For Duc whose goal it was to make money from a young age, he emphasized the usability of English for business. In explicit details, he highlighted the utilization of English in specific sectors including business that dealt with a tremendous amount of foreign, direct investment. While most research have come to a consensus that Foreign Investment Laws and legal-economic rights derived from Đổi Mới reform facilitated foreign direct investment into Vietnam, some southern Vietnamese recognized the inflow of capital from foreign businesses even before Đổi Mới. As a career-oriented individual who hoped to one day enter the finance industry, Duc explained, “In business, it was essential to be able to communicate in English because if you wanted to work at any large company, you had to be able to communicate in English in the workplace.” For people like Duc who recognized the pervasiveness of English early on, the language became a necessary status symbol. Additionally, in large companies, English became the expectation for a candidate’s skillset, and in other white-collar professions, “if you knew English, your wage would be much higher.” This prejudice in whether someone knows English or not became laced in everyone decision in their foreign language education.

Schools’ responses to developing relations with foreign countries. Schools responded to the demand for English proficiency by equipping their students with English literacy from the beginning of 6th grade and emphasizing the usefulness of English for future employment and communication. In classrooms, teachers and peers began to emphasize the importance of seeing English as an international, universal language that could be used in the workplace and abroad. For students and parents from more dire financial backgrounds in rural Vietnam, English became an outlet for opportunities. Through national, scholarship competitions that tested students’
English proficiency, every aspect of Vietnam’s society started subscribing to the idea that English was a universal language. For Phuong who aimed to be a top contestant at the National Competition, her decision to study literature and English was a “financial” one. In predominately poorer communities, especially in central Vietnam, Phuong wanted to alleviate the financial burden of education on her aging parents by leaning into her strength and win the top prize. Phuong explained that, “[the prize at the national competition] is very important because when you get the it, you don’t have to take the national high school graduation exam to get into university.” To these students and parents, saving money on essential after-school tutoring classes, traveling fees, among other variables for these entrance exams is a huge financial burden off their shoulder. Hence, for an educational system with highly competitive exams, almost-mandatory additional extensive tutoring, and prioritization of education among parents and peers, Phuong explains that, “studying English is something I needed to do.”

Moreover, while English became more prominent in the school curriculum, starting from cities and spreading outward, people from the outskirts of the country began to fear getting left behind. The fear of abandonment is often felt economically – given my less privileged financial background, how can I compensate for it? How can I be competitive for this scholarship that determines if I can afford to study at university? The answer to these questions for students whose finances are at the forefront of their decision is often the same: don’t get left behind in a country currently being swept away by change and adapt as quickly as possible. This means when international affiliations are booming and English is at the center of interaction, those from poorer areas must fixate even more on English acquisition. Phuong argues, “It’s not just me, many of my friends had the same thought process and fear of being left behind … we went on to focus on English, so my learning experience may be different from other people from others on
different tracks.” Her perspective reflects the shared experience for those in less geographically privilege areas that any development in their socioeconomic status stems from choosing the “correct” foreign language. From these grassroots actors, geography from suburban (i.e. Duc) to urban (Hang) to rural areas (Phuong) played a large role in dictating the internal and external sentiment around foreign language learning, the relationship with English and western culture, and national identity amidst rapid change in domestic markets and international affairs.

How did the evolution of tourism in Vietnam shape English acquisition for nativists living in the area?

Tourists and backpackers venture into the country. During the first few years of the Đổi Mới (open-door policy), as the name suggest, foreigners ventured into Vietnam looking for natural wildlife, cultural exchange, and an “exotic” type of experience. Through a number of tourists in Vietnam, along came cultural cross-pollination and a chance for local Vietnamese citizens to interact with the newly invited foreigners. The exposure to tourism was glaring for locals but perceived in a neutral, almost curious, light. As someone who lived ten minutes away from the Cao Dai Temple, a religious building for Caodaism and a massive tourism hotspot, Hien explained, “I saw more and more foreigners come into the country bringing with them their English, and the economy began to revolve around the language.” These locals sought to highlight a prominent change brought forth by the enactment of the open-door policy: the immense flow of English-speaking foreigners. Unexpectedly, tourism became the child of active integration into the global economies and the liberalization of the domestic market.

For Hang who lived in Ho Chi Minh, the largest city in Vietnam, she began to see the area getting more populated with backpackers in addition to traditional tourists. She described how Đổi Mới reform altered population to say, “It was really interesting because I do remember
distinctly a period when suddenly there were a lot of like foreign tourists who were, you know, coming in … and that was definitely like 89 [and] 90 eras.” She goes on to explain that even prior to these traditional tourists in the country for sightseeing, backpackers showed up even before the implantation of the open-door policy. “At the beginning of the 80’s, backpackers were showing up.” Similar to Duc who shared that he saw American corporations began to come in 1980, Hang’s testimony of seeing English-speaking backpackers in the early 1980’s brings into question the dynamic diplomacy with the United States. Their views reflect an untapped argument that perhaps a few years before the so-called open-door policy, the diplomatic relationship with the United States was not as severed as researchers suggest. Rather with the interviewees’ southern backgrounds, there may have been lingering ties with the U.S. from the Vietnam War that permeated several aspects of Vietnamese society. Scholars have historically grouped north and south Vietnam after the civil war and, in turn, undermine the course of foreign cooperation for a country constantly maintaining its national identity and sovereignty.

Amidst the shuffling of foreigners, Hien described how many young people sought to better understand the strangers in their backyard and practice their rudimentary English skills, “it was almost an expectation that you could practice English [with the foreigners] if visited Cao Dai Temple.” For young people in the 1990’s, English acquisition composed of being able to grasp the vocabulary and grammar structure taught in school while also being able to mimic the tone, pronunciation, and delivery of an “authentic” English-speaking person. These young people were often curious about the foreigners and often visit popular attracts such as temples, parks, cafes, etc. to interact and practice speaking their English with the “strangers.” A simple gesture, seemed to have manifested into a new social movement across the country where the younger,
English-speaking generation wanted to communicate with the wider international community in their backyard.

Many young people also got personally involved with foreigners for a more practical reason: sharpening their English skills in preparation for job interviews. As the country began to integrate foreign firms and use English as means to facilitate communication, large firms mandated an English assessment to filter out candidates with weaker English skills. Hence, for young nativists with easy access to foreigners through the flourishing tourism industry and the foresight that English is necessary for obtaining a cushy office job, many students like Hien believed, “With the increased tourism and interactions nearby, [my friends and I] wanted to hone [our] English skills in order to get accepted into foreign firms.” Through foreign firms that stimulated the demand of English, students and young people entering the new workforce utilized tourists to improve their language acquisition and more effectively supplied a means to communicate.

*How did the perceived future benefits of English from families and peers led to the discardment of French and Russian in favor of English?*

By the late 1980s, French began to fall out of favor with students amidst an increasing pressure from friends, family, and the overall community to pursue English in order to reap its potential economic benefits in the future. As noted above, the increase of multilateral integration with the West lead people to believe learning English would put people at a better position moving forward – this mainly manifested in the form of career. However, with the top-down nature of analyzing English as a foreign language, scholars often neglect the influence of familial ties and peer network groups in shaping the perception of English as a good investment. For Hien who started her foreign language track when Đổi Mới was implemented, she analyzed her
older sister’s decision to enroll in French and decided with the help of her peers that English would be a better alternative. As Hien explained, foreign expansion from English-speaking countries into Vietnam pushed the French out, “[it] seemed like French was useless now because the French colonialists weren’t coming anymore … there were just more investments from English-speaking countries.” The sentiment reflects the shifting language education policy where being literate in French no longer defined one’s social status. Rather, the social division between those who knew French and those that did not began to wash away as English gained popularity. As Hue, someone who chose French as her foreign language, points out, “as all companies began to use English, even the firms that didn’t even originate from English-speaking countries, the Vietnamese labor had to adapt … then French wasn’t useful anymore.” At this point Vietnamese opposition to French rule became synonyms with not adopting French lifestyles and converting official correspondence into English.

In contrast to the governmental and political correspondence tied to French language policy, the transition to study Russian remained largely an economic reason. Scholars believe that through various forms of economic assistance from the former Soviet Union, Russian became the most widely taught foreign language in school (Nguyen, 2019). However, the interviews demonstrated that the aid and influence of Russian was limited to the North and large cities where the language could be used for instrumental purposes and alternative languages coupled with Vietnamese marked the sign of national independence and borrowed identity. Ho Chi Minh City local Hang describes the economic importance of Russian to say, “Before 1986, a lot of people would learn Russian to get out of Vietnam and go to different parts of the Soviet Union as contract laborers.” However, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, she begins to highlight more explicitly the new economic opportunities that would turn Russian into a dead
language, “Afterwards, there were new trade opportunities in business and even new possibilities of even studying abroad in English-speaking countries that might not have been an opportunity before within the kind of communist bloc.” Hang believes that the concentration of opportunities to work abroad dictated the privileged foreign language. However, her personal narrative with Russian as a socioeconomic mobility metric is unique – the other interviewees did not share the experience with Russian being taught in school. Perhaps the sample size was too small and the discrepancy occurred by chance, but coupled with the perceived economic benefits of English in the south, there is reason to believe geography plays a key.

Quickly, English became a tool to harness economic capital – both for the country and people who gain proficiency in the language. This trend continued in the 1990’s where parents who adopted English in their professional careers began to see returns on their foreign language investment and wanted the same opportunities for their children. Another interviewee, Trinh, began her English language learning curriculum in the 4th grade after her friend urged her to enroll in tutoring classes with her. The friend, whose dad was a doctor, emphasized the urgency of English proficiency early on after witnessing the heavy usage of English in the medical field. However, for Trinh from a socioeconomically poorer background, the goal to familiarized herself with a foreign language before it was compulsory in school seemed “bothersome.” Trinh explains, in a fairly humorous tone, that “The doctor knew a little bit of English and was trying to groom his child into learning English … I unintentionally got dragged into learning.” Despite the lack of intentionality from Trinh, the message about getting a head start in English was clear – families from more affluent backgrounds began to see the initial benefits on English proficiency within their workplace, and that training their children’s brains to the language would allow them to reap more opportunities in the future. Over the past few decades in the
southern region of Vietnam, English outcompeted French as a primary foreign language taught in school, and the timeframe in which school children began learning the language started earlier and earlier. However, the economic rationale stayed the same – learning English gave people an advantage in the workplace as foreign investors influenced the domestic market and offered people the opportunity to interact with the wider, international community as a whole.

*How did ex-veterans from the Vietnam War use English as an economic opportunity?*

After the Vietnam War, many South Vietnamese veterans went through a “reeducation” process doing hard labor, locked up in jail to reflect on their “crimes” against the communist regime, and endured various forms of torture and brainwashing to ensure past soldiers and officials would pledge their loyalty to the communist liberation (Nguyen, 2016). The postwar Vietnamese society was plagued with a sense of isolation, alienation, and acquisition for South Vietnamese, especially military families. Former soldiers would be singled out and silence by getting denied access to residential permits, education and employment opportunities, and any form of political control (Nguyen, 2016). However, the southerners were not entirely passive and often found everyday ways to resist without drawing attention to themselves. One form of resistance was spreading English. For another interviewee who lived in Ho Chi Minh, a prominent central business district, after the enactment of the Đổi Mới reform, the economic opportunities were heavily tied to the Vietnam War. For South Vietnamese veterans who fought alongside American soldiers, language was an inevitable cross-pollination effort, resulting in some form of English adoption by the South Vietnamese military. Hang’s father who served in the War opted to teach English classes in his home in the postwar era – often during the same time as Russian programming on the TV. Perhaps there was significance that his classes occurred during the same time the anchor taught Russian – another form of resistance against
communist authorities by limiting his daughter’s exposure to Russian language through it stands unverified. Hang’s father who was labeled as a rebel – someone who was against the country and the revolution – harnessed whatever skills he had to make a living. According to Hang, “Someone like my dad who had served in the South Vietnamese military in the postwar era really didn't have many opportunities… he, like many other people, taught English to make a living because that's a skill that they had.”

For former soldiers in the South, using English as a means to not only earn a living but creatively resist against the North’s communist ideology exemplifies individual persistence by spreading a dominant, hegemonic language like English. This subversive act in post-war Vietnam helps set the stage for after Đổi Mới when English’s popularity grows exponentially – not by chance but by the intricated form of resistance demonstrated here.

**Humanitarian Operations Program**

*How did humanitarian operation programs that sought to relocate Vietnamese people in English-speaking countries affect the popularity of English in Vietnamese society?*

While the economic prospect of English was a defining factor as to why many interviewees learned English, something that many scholars fail to acknowledge were the humanitarian operation programs that motivated many young Vietnamese to become serious about their English proficiency. The transition from studying English in schools to methodically understanding a language for the sake of being able to communicate in another country cannot be captured in a top-down approach. It’s through understanding the nuances of international government intervention and individuals who were resistant of top down orders can be begin to comprehend the expansion of English in Vietnam.
During the post-Vietnam War era, there were tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who fled the country by boat resulting in “boat people” piled into refugee camps in the neighboring countries or would turn up washed up on the shores, dead (Komar, 2012). As a result, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees sought to alleviate the humanitarian crisis by creating the Orderly Departure Program in 1979 to allow Vietnamese to leave Vietnam safely and resettle in the United States and other countries (Komar, 2012). While its goal was to reunify families, the spillover effect of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese resettling abroad stirred a generation with hopes of living in America. Consequently, this hope created a demand for English language centers – the idea was that proficiency in English would allow for easier integration within the new culture. According to historian QT, “A lot of racial Vietnamese were by boat, or they were leaving by the family reunification programs [or orderly departure program]. So, the people who were leaving for the order, the humanitarian operations program, were invested in learning English.” The sentiment runs deeper for Hien who described a similar family reunification program that motivated her to gain a deeper understanding in English but noted that it occurred in the 1990s, sponsored by the United States, and was stricter in identifying valid candidates. Rather than considering only former employees or those with relatives in the U.S., the program would only permit immigration from those with blood ties to people who served in the Southern military.

“A lot of people applied to go to the U.S. through the H0 refugee program. There were a lot of centers to help with the language easing process. People saw how useful it was, and they began being more serious about learning English.”

Her testimony shines a line onto a potential alternative mechanism in which Vietnamese immigrated to the U.S. – not only is it geographically dependent but it provides additional insight
into how foreign-backed policies stimulated growth in English language learning apart from Đổi Mới. What’s also worth noting is that literature on foreign language in Vietnam fails to consider the insertion of humanitarian cases in understanding foreign language in Vietnam and the H0 refugee program has yet to be mentioned in any scholarly research. This area of foreign cooperation within Vietnam can be further explored in the context of normalizing English as Vietnam’s golden standard for foreign language.

**Teachers and Resources in the Classroom**

*How did the difficulty in transition from teaching one language to another preserve the language of Westerners?*

*Shortcomings in the implementation of drastic change.* After the Vietnam War, all education institutions were brought under the government and in order to spread the communist ideology, all English teachers were to look for alternative jobs (Nguyen, 2017). During this time, scholars claim that Russian became the most widely taught foreign language taught in the country, but from the small subsample of interviewees, this seems to have varied by region in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2019). Perhaps in the North of large cities with aid from the former Soviet Union, teachers had the opportunity to be sent and trained in the former Soviet Union, but in the outskirts of large cities like Ho Chi Minh, the only teachers available were French and English. It seems improbable that teachers can completely transition thoroughly from one language to another seemingly overnight. Additionally, given the country’s recovering economic health after the war, the implementation of eliminating a language like English in such a short time span may have left rooms for gaps. These gaps mean that even when Russian has been proclaimed the most favored and privileged foreign language in Vietnam, without instantaneous training or the means to do so, English still lingered in classrooms.
Proportion of teachers teaching English. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, French-Vietnam relations began to weaken as demonstrated by the foreign language curriculum offered in schools. One interviewee, Hue, from the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City noted the influence of French through the concentration of embassies and adoption of the metric system. She enrolled in French from 1976-1982 because everyone seemingly chose French over other options, but noted that, “every year, English seemed to be used by more and more people, so it became more applicable.” A few years later in the same location, even before the implementation of the economic reform Đổi Mới, another interviewee, Duc, voiced how English came to dominate the foreign language landscape – he estimated that in the late 1970s, 70% of students in his school enrolled in English whereas 30% enrolled in French. For Hue, there were similar sentiments as she mentioned the split became more skewed toward English language learning. When prompted with if she had considered switching her choice of foreign language, she answered matter-of-factly that since she was on the French track, it was not possible to change after her initial choice in 6th grade.

Burning books and morale. Even after the Vietnam War when the government ordered all English textbooks to be burned, some southern Vietnamese hid their books to preserve their working knowledge of English. For example, QT whose father secretly taught English to the schoolchildren in the neighborhood after the war, exclaimed that,

“When we left Vietnam, there was a luggage allowance. One of the things my father took was a big Oxford English book that was dear to him after the war. A lot of people had to burn their books because of the ban.”

There seems to be a lot of sentimental values attached with English for South Vietnamese military veterans who interacted with American soldiers. For Hang’s father, along with other
southern veterans, they seemed to have remember the American-supported regime quite vividly – and in a positive light given they are willing to rebel against government orders and the communist cause. The preservation of the Oxford English book, in some sense, is symbolic of individual resistance to communist, linguistic policy.

*If the Vietnamese government was monitoring and silencing southerners, is there a need to teach them a language used for political interaction?*

Considering how the mission of teachers who taught Russian was to strengthen the political and trade ties with the former Soviet Union and most Southern Vietnamese were blacklisted from the political sphere, who is to say the rebellious nature of Southern Vietnam did not transcend after the Vietnam War. While the political stigma of English was discernible, the political climate during the reunification made it so that Russian could not open any doors for Southern Vietnamese who were still viewed as suspicious. Overall, this made learning Russian much less useful than the language of westerners.

*New generation of teachers from retired soldiers.* With the Đổi Mới reform, substantial withdrawal of Soviet support and its collapse, and the accumulation of foreign investments from western countries, the generation of teachers began to rapidly change. As noted in the economic opportunities section, ex-military veterans from the South Vietnamese army utilized their English skills to become teachers. For the daughter of an ex-veteran turned English teacher, QT reflects that, “it’s interesting many of the teachers were South Vietnamese who had served in the South Vietnamese military … who had English language knowledge that they had picked up during the Vietnam War era.” The teacher gap filled by past soldiers with some resentment for the communist regime points to a new generation with discontent.

*How did the Đổi Mới reform change what teachers taught in the foreign language curriculum?*
After the implantation of the Đổi Mới, Russian teachers didn’t have many students left to teach. For Phuong who observed some Russian teachers getting retrained to teach English, she recalls, “Teachers who taught Russian before went out of the country to get retrained to teach English … but with their different pronunciation, I could distinguish their Russian shells.” In viewing the dynamic between English and Russian as the most privileged foreign language in Vietnam, the political and socio-economic backdrop of the country's unification is emphasized here. While domestic policy aimed to emphasize Russian as a foreign language in school, we can see that non-urban Southerners were discriminated against as demonstrated by the lack of Russian teachers, and once Soviet support diminished, English was quick to fill in the gap and even expedited by new foreign opportunities.

**Part six: Conclusion**

This capstone project traces the linguistic landscape in Vietnam during a period where the evolution of English language learning was at a critical juncture in history. From 1975–2000, the shifting political landscape induced abrupt variation in foreign language education policy. Through interviews with the generation who lived through the experience, their personal and immersive narratives offer us a look into the cultural context surrounding the curricula, courses, methodology, and materials of foreign language and the eventual dominance of English.

Today, English is undeniably the most popular foreign language, taught as a compulsory subject from the start of secondary school and even introduced in primary school (Vu & Peters, 2021). With an increasing emphasis on foreign integration and international economic development, English has continued to be used as training to make Vietnamese children into global people with the toolkit to communicate for survival needs, move abroad, travel, etc (Ca & Danh, 2021). However, the quality of English language teaching in Vietnam is low. With the
recent completion of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project, a multimillion-dollar initiative by the government to improve the quality of English language learning and teaching in Vietnam, scholars have analyzed its failure by citing its traditional pedagogy, shortage of appropriate teaching materials, and lack of qualified teachers (Nguyen, 2017). The low quality of deployment and implementation in English language learning and teaching can potentially be attributed to the period before English became an undeniable aspect of Vietnamese society and normalized in diplomatic relationships. In connecting the lack of effectiveness of English language pedagogy in Vietnam today, we must first begin to understand how English has been pushed and pulled by national sovereignty and solidarity as well as foreign forces.

Through extensive interviews documenting people’s experiences with foreign language learning during schools, economic opportunities, as echoed in past literature, dictated people’s decision to learn a certain language. However, rather than the overly generalized conclusion that Russian was the most widely taught foreign language shortly after the Vietnam War or that English quickly filled in the space left by Russian after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the interviews illuminated the geo-political landscape often overlooked by schools using the top-down approach. In the South, especially the non-urban area, the presence of Russian was minimal given the intended use for transactional affairs and blacklisting of Southerners from political office. Coupled with Southern ex-veteran’s proficiency in English from interactions with Americans in the Vietnam War, their willingness to profit off the newfound skill, and captious feelings toward the communist regime, differences in foreign language education across the country reflected tension after the reunification period.

Additionally, while it was true that English had reincarnated after the enactment of Đổi Mới, the interviews highlighted how humanitarian cases can be used as a lens into foreign
language in Vietnam. The expanding influence of English can be owed to foreign-backed policies that allow for immigration and resettlement. Finally, the status and presence of the teacher and resources in the classroom is another creative way to analyze the adaptive nature of people during 1975–2000 and the language education policy enacted.

Through the interpersonal lens and photographs of the interviewees, this paper brings not only stories of their foreign language curriculum but also the role of international integration, pressured development, moderation with foreign influences, and the enhancement and setbacks of adapting to an English-dominant reality.
Appendix

Interview questions

[1] Tell me about the foreign language you chose to study in high school.
   a. What did you see as the importance of your foreign language when you choose it?
   b. Was your choice common at your school, did your friends also choose the same foreign language? What percentage of the school would you say choose English versus French versus Russian?
   c. What were your teachers / family / peers' reaction to your foreign language?

[2] Can you talk about the role of outside school influences that may have affected your decision to learn that particular language?
   a. How was that shaped by popular culture, i.e. movies, music, etc.
   b. Were there any foreseen social drivers of being literate in your choice of foreign language?
   c. Were there any foreseen opportunities you saw with picking your language?
   d. Did government immigration policies affect your decision?

[3] Was there a point where you decided to change your choice of foreign language; why?
   a. Was this shift popular with the people around you?
   b. Did you think it was worth it?

[4] Did schools ever express that one foreign language was more favored than another?
a. What does that look like? Were there more teachers teaching a particular language, did the curriculum differ?

[5] What was the impact of the Đổi Mới Policy on your foreign language study?
   a. Did this affect the perception of your choice of foreign language?
   b. Were there any changes in how your school valued English versus Russian versus French?

[6] Since the early 2000s, there have been hundreds of English centers established everywhere. Did you anticipate this during your school years?
   a. What do you think is the future of English?
   b. Will English Language Learning ever slow down or go into decline again?
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