



## Turning English into a Second Language in Vietnam's Education System: A Language Policy Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** The year 2025 marks a critical turning point in Vietnam's language education policy with the official approval of the national project to transform English into a second language within the education system. This paper critically examines the policy *Making English a Second Language in Schools (2025–2035, Vision 2045)* through Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, focusing on language ideologies, language management, and language practices. Drawing on policy documents, government resolutions, and secondary sources, the study situates the policy within Vietnam's broader historical, sociopolitical, and sociolinguistic context of post-Đổi Mới reform and globalization. The analysis reveals that the policy is underpinned by a strong ideology of linguistic instrumentalism, positioning English as a key resource for national development, global integration, and workforce competitiveness. At the level of language management, the policy demonstrates ambitious, centralized planning through curriculum reform, teacher development, English-medium instruction, and digital transformation. However, language practices across educational contexts reveal persistent gaps between policy aspirations and classroom realities, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions. Uneven teacher preparedness, infrastructural disparities, exam-oriented pedagogies, and emerging equity concerns challenge the sustainable implementation of English as a functional second language. The paper argues that while the policy represents a significant shift from foreign language education toward systemic bilingualization, its long-term success depends on contextualized implementation, teacher agency, and equitable resource allocation. Ultimately, English should function as an inclusive communicative resource rather than a gatekeeping mechanism, ensuring that national modernization does not exacerbate existing social and linguistic inequalities.

**KEYWORDS:** English as a Second Language, English-medium instruction, Educational equity, Language policy, Spolsky's model, Vietnam

### INTRODUCTION

The year 2025 marks the beginning of a new phase in Vietnam's education system, particularly in English language education. As part of Vietnam's long-term national language education reform agenda initiated in the early 2000s, the policy to make English a second language represents a pivotal milestone in the country's efforts toward educational modernization and global integration.

This policy initiative originated from Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW (Politburo, 2024) and was subsequently reinforced by Resolution No. 51/NQ-CP (Prime Minister, 2025a) and Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW (General Secretary, 2025), which collectively aim to transform English into a functional second language across Vietnam's education system. On this foundation, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has developed the National Project on making English a second language in schools (2025–2035, Vision 2045). Under MOET's jurisdiction, this national policy seeks to elevate English proficiency at all educational levels—from preschool to higher and vocational education—so that English is not only taught as a subject but also used as a medium of instruction, communication, and administration within educational institutions.

The draft proposal outlines a implementation framework toward 2045 and sets out key provisions, including teacher training and retraining, curriculum modernization aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the integration of digital and AI-based tools, international collaboration, and the creation of a sustainable foreign language ecosystem within schools. Collectively, these initiatives aim to institutionalize bilingualism in Vietnam's education system, thereby strengthening national competitiveness and supporting deeper participation in global integration. The project was officially approved by the Prime Minister (2025b) under Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg, marking the transition from policy formulation to nationwide implementation and signaling the Government's strong commitment to establishing English as a second language across all levels of education.



Historically, this policy builds upon Vietnam's long-term language education reform agenda initiated in the early 2000s. Since the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms in 1986, the nation has undergone profound socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation—from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy—thereby increasing international cooperation and positioning English as a key vehicle for modernization and global participation. Before 1986, Russian, French, and Chinese were the dominant foreign languages; however, after Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 and the WTO in 2007, English rapidly became the preferred language of education, trade, and diplomacy (Ngo & Tran, 2024).

Sociolinguistically, Vietnam remains a multilingual nation with more than fifty ethnic languages, while Vietnamese serves as the national and official language. Within this landscape, English has evolved from a marginal foreign language into the most widely taught and used second language across academic and professional domains. As a result, English plays an increasingly prominent role in both national and intercultural communication. Following Kachru's (1992) concentric-circles framework, Vietnam lies within the Expanding Circle, where English functions as a *lingua franca* facilitating intercultural communication and knowledge exchange.

Politically, English has been systematically institutionalized through major legal and strategic documents—such as the Education Law (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005), Higher Education Law (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2012), and the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Prime Minister, 2008) with its 2017 extension—reflecting the government's sustained commitment to transforming English into a national resource for modernization and competitiveness (Ngo & Tran, 2024). These developments represent a strategic shift from grammar-based instruction toward communicative competence and functional bilingualism (Rahman, 2024). Taken together, the historical, sociolinguistic, and political dimensions demonstrate Vietnam's comprehensive, multi-layered efforts to reframe English as both a tool for global engagement and a catalyst for national development.

This paper aims to critically examine Vietnam's policy of making English a second language in the education system by applying Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, focusing on the interplay between language ideologies, policy management, and educational practices, as well as emerging tensions and equity concerns. The analysis also seeks to inform policy discussion by outlining several implications for more sustainable and equitable implementation.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy as the principal analytical framework, supplemented by ideology typologies and levels of policy analysis drawn from contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship. According to Spolsky, any language policy can be examined through the interplay of three interrelated components: language practices (actual language behaviors), language beliefs or ideologies (values and assumptions about language), and language management (explicit efforts by authorities to influence practices and beliefs). These dimensions provide a comprehensive lens for understanding both the explicit directives of the Vietnamese government and the implicit sociocultural attitudes shaping the implementation of English-as-a-second-language policy.

Spolsky's model provides a comprehensive and flexible framework for analyzing the complex relationship between top-down policy formulation and bottom-up language practices. By distinguishing between beliefs, practices, and management, the model allows researchers to identify tensions and inconsistencies between what is intended, what is believed, and what is practiced. This analytical distinction is particularly valuable in the Vietnamese context, where English language education has undergone rapid transformation under state-led initiatives. The tripartite model helps uncover how language ideologies—such as viewing English as a tool for modernization and global integration—interact with policy management mechanisms, including curriculum design, teacher training, and national assessment systems. It also illuminates how local practices in classrooms may diverge from official policy goals due to contextual factors such as resource disparities, teacher beliefs, and sociocultural norms.

## 3. POLICY ANALYSIS THROUGH SPOLSKY'S MODEL

### 3.1. Language ideologies

Language ideologies can be understood as socially shared and normative assumptions about language varieties, representing how members of a community perceive what their language ought to be (Spolsky, 2004). In the era of globalization, English has gained unprecedented significance due to its central role in international communication, commerce, and education. The



interconnection between globalization and the global spread of English has positioned the language as a crucial asset for both national development and regional integration (Shen, 2009). This association has been a major impetus for educational reforms across Asia, as many governments have sought to strengthen English language education to enhance learners' proficiency and competitiveness (Hamid, 2010).

In Vietnam, the growing prominence of English in the national education system is primarily shaped by the ideology of linguistic instrumentalism (Lee, 2024, p. 276) and the prevailing discourse that positions English as a "language for development" (p. 277). The language is often perceived as a vehicle for both individual empowerment and national progress, closely associated with employability, social mobility, and economic modernization. English has thus become a crucial competency in a globalized, knowledge-driven economy, functioning as a form of linguistic capital that facilitates educational access, professional achievement, and social prestige (Graddol, 2006). Recognizing the pivotal role of foreign languages in driving economic growth and international competitiveness, the Vietnamese government has emphasized English education as a means to foster national development and global integration (General Secretary, 2013). Consequently, English has become the most widely taught foreign language in key domains such as communication, education, trade, science, and technology. This development-oriented ideology is not unique to Vietnam but reflects broader regional trends across Asia and beyond (Liddicoat & Kirkpatrick, 2020).

In an interview with the Government E–Newspaper of Vietnam, Prof. Dr. Sci. Nguyen Dinh Duc, former Chairman of the University Council of the University of Engineering and Technology, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, stated that Vietnam is now in a highly favorable position to promote English as a second language, advance digital transformation, and integrate AI as a supportive tool in teaching, learning, and research. Equipping students with these competencies from general to higher education, along with a strong STEM foundation, is expected to enhance young Vietnamese learners' competitiveness, expand their opportunities to work in both domestic and global environments, and improve Vietnam's attractiveness to foreign investment (Thu Trang, 2025).

### 3.2. Language management

Language management refers to explicit efforts by authorities to modify or influence language behavior through planning, policy formulation, and intervention (Spolsky, 2004). In Vietnam's ongoing English education reform, language management has been characterized by a series of top-down directives and state-led planning initiatives aimed at institutionalizing English as a functional second language across all educational levels.

The national orientation toward transforming English into a functional second language is rooted in Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW (Politburo, 2024), which emphasizes enhancing students' foreign language competence and gradually institutionalizing English as a second language in schools. To translate this ideological vision into concrete mechanisms, the Government issued Resolution No. 51/NQ-CP (Prime Minister, 2025a), mandating the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to design and implement the National Project on Making English a Second Language in Schools (2025–2035, Vision 2045) through comprehensive reforms in curriculum design, teacher development, assessment, and digital transformation. This policy direction was further reinforced by Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW (General Secretary, 2025), which identifies education as a strategic driver of national development and highlights English proficiency—alongside artificial intelligence integration and digital transformation—as key breakthroughs for enhancing Vietnam's global competitiveness by 2045.

Within this framework, language management exhibits a high degree of centralization, clear objectives, and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. The Draft National Project (2025–2035, Vision 2045) conceptualized English as a second language to be both taught and used in schools where Vietnamese remains the official language, while English functions as a subject and a medium of instruction, communication, and administration. Eight major task groups were identified: (1) raising public awareness, (2) refining policy and regulatory frameworks, (3) developing the teaching workforce, (4) designing curricula and materials, (5) innovating testing and assessment, (6) applying technology and artificial intelligence, (7) strengthening international cooperation, and (8) promoting emulation and recognition. Implementation was structured into three phases—initial (2025–2030), expansion (2030–2040), and consolidation (2040–2045)—corresponding to progressive levels of integration (Ha Giang, 2025).

As reported by Thanh Xuan (2025a) from Nhan Dan Newspaper, the draft project outlined six levels of educational institutions where English would be implemented as a second language, aiming to promote its widespread and regular use in communication, learning, research, and management. Specifically, by 2035, all preschools were expected to provide English exposure for children aged 3–5, while all general education students (Grades 1–12) would learn English under Levels 1–3 of the



national framework. By 2045, English programs at Levels 4–6 would be implemented across schools and universities, marking full integration of English as both a subject and a medium of instruction. In vocational and continuing education, English-for-specific-purposes programs were to be expanded to meet labor market demands domestically and internationally. Additionally, according to Ha Giang (2025) from the Vietnam Journal of Education (MOET), to realize this long-term vision, the ministry plans to recruit and retrain approximately 22,000 English teachers and upskill over 200,000 existing teachers capable of teaching in English. Reforms in policy mechanisms, curricula, facilities, technological infrastructure, and public awareness are emphasized as essential conditions for sustainable language policy implementation.

Most notably, this draft framework was officially approved under Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2025b), marking a pivotal shift from policy formulation to nationwide implementation. Reported by Thanh Xuan (2025b) from Nhan Dan Newspaper, the approved Project—Developing English as a Second Language in Schools for the Period 2025–2035, with a Vision to 2045—sets out comprehensive, level-specific goals. At the preschool level, it aims to help children experience and become familiar with English through playful interaction. At the general education level, it seeks to foster students' English competence for learning, communication, and cross-cultural engagement, thereby nurturing well-rounded global citizens. At the tertiary level, universities are tasked with creating English-medium ecosystems in teaching, research, and administration, establishing higher education as the national core of English-language innovation and internationalization. For vocational and continuing education, the project focuses on improving learners' communicative English competence and professional language use to meet the demands of an increasingly globalized workforce.

### 3.3. Language practices

Language practices refer to the actual choices of language varieties made by members of a community (Spolsky, 2004). Within the Vietnamese education system, these practices reveal a significant shift toward positioning English as the dominant foreign language (Denham, 1992), replacing Russian, Chinese, or French (Nguyen, 2012). This transition accelerated after the *Đổi mới* reform in 1986, when English was recognized as essential for modernization and international integration (Do, 2006). By 1995, approximately three-quarters of high school students were studying English (Nguyen, 2012), and by 2005, English accounted for 99% of foreign language instruction in lower secondary schools. Although ethnic minority students often faced difficulties in learning English, studies suggest that they still valued English highly, challenging the common assumption that minority students lack motivation to learn the language (Sunuodula & Feng, 2011).

While the national policy envisions English as a second language across the education system, its practical realization is most evident through the increasing adoption of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), particularly in higher education. In an article published in Thanh Nien Newspaper, Ngoc Long (2025) reported that Ho Chi Minh City University of Education has introduced bilingual teacher training programs in Mathematics and Primary Education, with plans to expand to other science disciplines. According to Dr. Nguyen Thi Thu Trang, these initiatives aim to prepare teachers capable of delivering subject content through English and to build human resources for EMI. In a separate article also published in Thanh Nien Newspaper, Ha Anh (2025) observed that EMI has expanded nationwide, evolving from international joint programs into mainstream curricula. Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education has enhanced lecturers' English proficiency and recruited overseas-trained faculty, while Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology now offers 27 programs taught entirely in English. Ton Duc Thang University and the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City have similarly internationalized their curricula through English-based materials and global collaboration. Furthermore, Ha Anh (2025) highlighted that institutions such as Vietnam National University–International University and the Vietnamese-German University have adopted English as their official medium of instruction, requiring students to attain IELTS 6.0 and lecturers to hold postgraduate degrees from English-speaking institutions. Collectively, these developments signify Vietnam's gradual institutionalization of EMI in higher education.

Beyond higher education, English has also been promoted in preschool and K–12 education. According to Thuy Hang (2025) from Thanh Nien Newspaper, the city's English promotion efforts have reached early education, with 2,093 out of 4,942 preschools introducing English familiarization programs by the 2024–2025 academic year, although participation remains uneven across school types. At the school level, Ba Diem High School (2025) and Tran Quoc Tuan Primary School (2025) have integrated bilingual instruction in Science and Mathematics, alongside extracurricular English clubs and technology-based classrooms. Similarly, Ha Linh (2025) from Tien Phong Newspaper reported that the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training (DOET) has strengthened English education through English libraries, festivals, AI-assisted learning, and an English diversification project in



which subjects such as Mathematics and Science are taught by native English-speaking teachers in 68 schools. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate how Ho Chi Minh City has become a pioneering model in translating national English language policy into practice through technology integration, teacher capacity building, and innovative instructional design.

Nevertheless, the implementation of English education policies continues to face challenges. Although policy efforts aim to institutionalize English nationwide, a gap persists between policy intentions and classroom realities. Many primary schools began teaching English from Grade 1 as early as 1998, often without qualified instructors (Nguyen, 2011). By 2013, 83% of primary English teachers still fell below the B1 proficiency level, indicating that many students were taught by underqualified teachers (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015, as cited in Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). Moreover, while the CEFR was introduced to standardize assessment, its Vietnamese adaptation remains superficial, providing only reference tables without pedagogical guidance, which limits its practical use in curriculum and assessment design (Nguyen, 2014). These discrepancies highlight that, despite ambitious policy goals, aligning national initiatives with consistent classroom practices remains an ongoing challenge in Vietnam's English education system.

## 4. TENSIONS, GAPS, AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

### 4.1. Policy–Practice gaps and systemic barriers to implementation

Despite its ambitious vision, Vietnam's policy to make English the second language in education reveals persistent mismatches between goals, beliefs, and classroom realities. Although the policy aspires to institutionalize English as a functional second language across all levels, in practice, instruction remains largely exam-oriented and grammar-focused rather than communicative or bilingual (Ngo & Tran, 2024). While policymakers associate early English exposure with national competitiveness, the centralized management system has yet to provide adequate teacher training, localized curricula, or equitable support, leaving rural regions particularly disadvantaged (Pham, 2021). Consequently, the urban-focused curriculum, limited technological access, and uneven teacher distribution have widened educational disparities (Chang & Wang, 2024; Li et al., 2023). Students in under-resourced areas often face low motivation, minimal exposure to authentic English, and outdated facilities that hinder language acquisition (Kumar, 2024; Ngamsom & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025).

According to Do Hop (2025) from Tien Phong Newspaper, Prof. Nguyen Quy Thanh, Rector of the University of Education (Vietnam National University, Hanoi), emphasized that English language training must be integrated with the development of critical thinking, cultural awareness, and reflective reasoning, rather than focusing solely on linguistic performance. He also warned that although ages four to seven represent the “golden period” for language acquisition, introducing English too early could affect children's Vietnamese proficiency and cultural identity formation. Similarly, at the local level, Tran Thi Huyen, Acting Director of the Can Tho Department of Education and Training, acknowledged the enthusiasm following Conclusion 91-KL/TW (Politburo, 2024) and Resolution 71-NQ/TW (General Secretary, 2025) but expressed concerns about teacher competence, infrastructure, and local diversity. In areas with large ethnic minority populations where many students are not yet fluent in Vietnamese, immediate nationwide implementation could unintentionally deepen inequities unless localized plans are developed.

These challenges reflect broader societal inequalities, where English, though widely viewed as a tool for social mobility, remains unequally accessible, reinforcing socioeconomic hierarchies and creating an “English divide” (Huang, 2024; Karim et al., 2023). At the tertiary level, English Medium Instruction (EMI) further exemplifies the tension between policy and practice. Although English-only instruction is promoted to internationalize higher education, lecturers' varying English proficiency, limited pedagogical support, and inconsistent policy communication often lead to divergence in classroom practice (Tri & Moskovsky, 2021). Many instructors pragmatically code-switch between English and Vietnamese to ensure comprehension—a translanguaging practice that, despite contradicting English-only policy ideals, enhances inclusivity and learning effectiveness (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Tekin, 2023). Recognizing translanguaging as a pedagogical resource rather than a deficiency is therefore essential for sustainable EMI implementation and for bridging macro-level policy with micro-level teaching practices (Pomat et al., 2024).

Finally, systemic constraints—such as teacher shortages, overcrowded classes, outdated materials, and limited coordination between central and local authorities—continue to hinder effective reform (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). As a result, while policy discourse emphasizes communicative competence and inclusivity, implementation remains constrained by exam-driven practices and structural inequities. Achieving the policy's ambitious goals will require not only sustained investment in teacher development and infrastructure but also a more decentralized management approach to align policy aspirations with classroom realities.



## 4.2. Equity issues

The turning English into the second language policy (2025–2045), though progressive in vision, raises critical questions about equity and inclusion. In practice, the policy disproportionately benefits urban, middle-class, and elite learners who already possess access to high-quality English education, well-trained teachers, and advanced learning facilities. In fact, schools in major cities, particularly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, often implement enhanced English programs supported by digital technologies and foreign teachers. These advantages allow students in privileged areas to develop strong English proficiency, positioning them competitively in higher education and the job market (Emilia et al., 2025). By contrast, learners in rural, remote, and ethnic-minority regions face persistent barriers. Limited funding, teacher shortages, and inadequate infrastructure restrict access to effective English instruction. Many schools lack exposure to authentic language input and up-to-date teaching materials, leaving students at a structural disadvantage (Huang, 2024). This unequal access reinforces the urban–rural divide and entrenches socioeconomic hierarchies, as English proficiency increasingly determines educational advancement and employability. As a result, the policy risks widening the gap between the privileged and the marginalized, turning English into a social gatekeeper rather than a tool for empowerment.

Moreover, the emphasis on English as a second language may inadvertently devalue local and minority languages, reducing linguistic diversity and weakening community identity. This concern becomes particularly evident when English is used as the primary medium of instruction, often lowering participation and confidence among students who speak other native languages (Tai, 2021). The prestige associated with English tends to overshadow the pedagogical and cultural benefits of mother-tongue education, gradually eroding learners' sense of belonging and identity (Siregar & Ajmi, 2023). As English increasingly symbolizes success and modernity, students with limited proficiency face restricted academic and professional opportunities, reinforcing class-based inequalities (Alfarhan, 2016). Modern market-driven thinking makes the situation worse by treating English as the only key to success, while overlooking the value of local knowledge and cultural identity (Hopkyns et al., 2024). Parents, influenced by dominant discourses, often prioritize English learning for their children even at the expense of their ethnolinguistic heritage (Poudel & Choi, 2021). Consequently, minority languages risk gradual erosion as globalization and urbanization amplify the dominance of English in education and commerce. This linguistic hierarchy perpetuates subtle forms of postcolonial inequality, where English continues to embody prestige and privilege (Lachini, 2025). Without careful policy intervention that balances English proficiency with the preservation of linguistic diversity, Vietnam's pursuit of modernization may inadvertently undermine its rich cultural heritage and deepen existing social divides.

## 4.3. Agency and resistance in policy implementation

Although the policy is officially designed as a top-down initiative, educators and institutions across Vietnam have demonstrated varying degrees of agency in adapting—or even resisting—its implementation. Many teachers, faced with limited professional training and unrealistic language proficiency benchmarks, reinterpret the policy's goals to suit actual classroom conditions. Rather than strictly following prescribed methods, they modify lesson plans, simplify materials, or incorporate code-switching between English and Vietnamese to ensure students' comprehension, especially when dealing with complex content (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Such adaptations reflect teachers' practical understanding of learners' linguistic capacities and local realities, turning a rigid policy framework into one that is more accessible and effective. Similarly, schools in rural provinces have localized the policy by integrating more contextually relevant English programs, such as vocational or tourism-based courses, that align with their communities' economic and social needs. These locally driven adjustments stand in contrast to centralized directives that often assume uniform conditions nationwide (Nyoni et al., 2023). They reveal the importance of flexibility, contextualization, and bottom-up participation in policy enactment (Pomat et al., 2024). Moreover, these efforts underscore a growing recognition that educational reform cannot succeed through mandates alone but must acknowledge teachers' professional judgment, institutional diversity, and community context. Ultimately, while the national agenda emphasizes English for modernization and international integration, effective implementation depends on empowering local actors to adapt the policy meaningfully, ensuring that English education becomes inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to Vietnam's diverse sociolinguistic landscape.

Certain elite institutions in major cities extend the policy beyond its mandate, branding themselves as bilingual or international schools to attract higher-income families. This trend reflects a broader marketization of education, where institutions leverage perceived globalized competencies, often tied to English proficiency, as a commodity to differentiate themselves and appeal to an affluent demographic seeking pathways for international mobility (Francis & Le, 2024). This phenomenon is not unique to



Vietnam, with similar patterns observed in other developing nations like Bangladesh, where English-version education systems have emerged as a marketable commodity driven by parental aspirations for global opportunities (Roshid & Sultana, 2023). This diversity of adaptation reveals that teachers and schools are not passive implementers but active agents who negotiate between national directives and local conditions. Such agency, while sometimes seen as resistance, actually reflects a pragmatic attempt to balance policy ideals with contextual realities in Vietnam's complex educational landscape.

## 5. COMPARATIVE AND REGIONAL REFLECTION

### 5.1. Comparison with the National Foreign Language Project 2020

The 2008 Project on Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008–2020 (commonly known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020) marks an earlier milestone in Vietnam's foreign language policy development. Approved under Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2008), this project aimed to improve national English proficiency as a driver of modernization, economic competitiveness, and global integration (Pham, 2021). It represented one of the first comprehensive attempts to institutionalize foreign language education across all levels of schooling. Both share the same instrumental view of English as a key to development; however, they differ in scope and ambition. The earlier project primarily focused on language teaching reform within the education sector, whereas the 2025 policy moves further toward language normalization—promoting English as a functional second language across multiple domains, including education, administration, and technology. While Project 2020 was largely a top-down initiative emphasizing teacher training and CEFR alignment (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017), the 2025 policy adopts a broader, socially oriented framework that integrates technology, public participation, and private partnerships to achieve nationwide bilingualism.

When compared to the Turning English into the Second Language Policy, the National Foreign Language Project 2020 can be seen as its foundation. Although both policies share the overarching goal of improving English proficiency to support national development, they differ significantly in orientation, scope, and implementation. The National Foreign Language Project 2020 was primarily pedagogical in nature, focusing on enhancing teaching quality (Nguyen, 2011), developing CEFR-based curricula (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017), and retraining teachers within the formal education system. In contrast, the Turning English into the Second Language Policy (2025–2045) represents a broader and more ambitious agenda. It reframes English as a functional second language and expands its coverage across all levels—from preschool to higher education—reflecting a shift from instructional reform to systemic bilingualization. The policy also emphasizes technological integration, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), and collaboration between public and private sectors, moving toward a more participatory and decentralized model. Moreover, while the 2020 Project focused on improving educational outcomes, the 2025 policy envisions English as a working language for administration, innovation, and international cooperation. This marks a conceptual transformation in Vietnam's language planning—from a foreign language policy centered on education to a comprehensive national strategy aimed at achieving bilingual competence by 2045. In short, the 2025 initiative extends the achievements of Project 2020 by expanding its scope from classroom-based instruction to nationwide bilingualization.

### 5.1. Regional reflection

The adoption of English as a Second Language (ESL) varies across nations in terms of scope, implementation pace, and policy orientation, reflecting each country's unique historical, political, and socio-economic background. Several international models listed by Nguyen (2024, as cited in Dinh et al., 2025) demonstrate diverse approaches and offer important lessons for Vietnam.

Singapore stands out as a model of sustained success in bilingual education. Its deliberate choice in 1966 to establish English as the primary medium across educational, administrative, and economic spheres—while preserving ethnic mother tongues including Chinese, Malay, and Tamil—has proven remarkably effective. By mandating English throughout the curriculum and setting rigorous standards for teacher competency, Singapore has achieved global leadership in English proficiency among non-native populations, as measured by the EF English Proficiency Index. English functions simultaneously as a unifying force across diverse communities and a catalyst for international commerce.

Malaysia presents a more complex trajectory marked by policy reversals and ongoing recalibration. Positioned as the secondary official language after Malay, English receives compulsory instruction from primary grades and serves as the teaching medium for selected STEM disciplines. The controversial Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI)



initiative, though intended to strengthen technical English proficiency, ultimately faced termination amid public resistance centered on cultural preservation concerns. The subsequent adoption of the Dual Language Programme (DLP) reflects Malaysia's continuing effort to reconcile English advancement with linguistic nationalism. This experience underscores the delicate negotiation between global integration and cultural identity.

Hong Kong offers another variation, where British colonial influence established enduring bilingual structures, though implementation has yielded inconsistent results (Hamid et al., 2013). China has charted a distinctly different course, maintaining Mandarin dominance while positioning English as an essential academic skill. Through mandatory English requirements in the Gaokao national examination and university admissions, coupled with substantial investments in materials, technology, and native-speaking instructors, China has elevated English proficiency without displacing the national language as the primary instructional medium (Luo, 2024). This approach demonstrates how English can be strategically embedded in education and professional sectors while preserving linguistic sovereignty.

The Philippines exemplifies how historical circumstances can generate unexpected advantages. Its bilingual framework, balancing Filipino and English, designates English as the principal language across education, legal systems, and commerce. With English-medium instruction in mathematics and sciences beginning at the elementary level and dominating textbooks and media, the Philippines has cultivated a workforce that fuels its thriving Business Process Outsourcing sector. This case illustrates the potential economic dividends of early and comprehensive English integration.

India navigates extraordinary linguistic diversity, managing over twenty official languages while positioning English as a crucial second language spanning education, business, and governance. However, this policy generates both opportunity and inequality—English proficiency opens economic doors while simultaneously deepening educational disparities. Similar tensions between aspiration and capacity emerge in Thailand and Bangladesh, where ambitious reforms encounter constraints in funding and educator preparation (Rahman, 2024).

These diverse national experiences, while reflecting vastly different starting points and priorities, converge on a common theme: the pursuit of global connectivity through English while managing the preservation of national identity (Nyoni et al., 2023). As Nguyen (2024, cited in Dinh et al., 2025) notes, this comparative landscape offers Vietnam valuable reference points—from Singapore's unwavering commitment to bilingualism, through Malaysia's adaptive experimentation, to the Philippines' transformation of linguistic inheritance into economic asset.

Vietnam's engagement with this regional dynamic reflects both shared aspirations and familiar obstacles. The elevation of English to second-language status signals Vietnam's commitment to educational modernization and global participation, positioning English proficiency as fundamental to competitive advantage (Rahman, 2024). Policy frameworks emphasize competency-oriented reform and continuous learning. Yet actual outcomes reveal persistent gaps: metropolitan and private institutions consistently outperform rural counterparts, benefiting from superior teacher preparation, resources, and opportunities for authentic language engagement, while rural schools grapple with conventional pedagogies and limited English exposure (Pham, 2021). These inequities mirror the broader regional pattern of uneven educational access documented across neighboring countries.

The Asian experience makes evident that language policy extends far beyond pedagogical considerations—it operates at the intersection of national identity formation, political ideology, and socioeconomic ambition. Vietnam's second-language initiative embodies a paradox recognizable across the region: the imperative to engage global discourse while maintaining distinctive local voice. The Vietnamese case reveals that policy effectiveness depends less on governmental mandates than on how educators, institutions, and communities interpret and operationalize these directives in specific contexts. Successful language planning must transcend ambitious target-setting to encompass educator capacity building, contextual sensitivity, and ensuring English serves as an enabling bridge rather than an exclusionary barrier. Ultimately, sustainable linguistic reform emerges from cultural awareness, equitable access, and empowering local stakeholders to shape how English integrates within their particular educational realities.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The successful integration of English as a second language in Vietnam requires coherent alignment between policy objectives, teacher competence, and curriculum design. Despite significant policy investments, research indicates persistent gaps between top-down intentions and classroom realities, particularly regarding teacher preparedness and pedagogical innovation (Tri & Moskovsky, 2021). This gap largely stems from the limited opportunities for teachers to engage in continuous professional



development and the mismatch between policy expectations and the realities of classroom resources. Many teachers continue to rely on grammar-translation or exam-oriented methods, reflecting inadequate exposure to communicative or task-based teaching practices. To address these issues, reforms should prioritize comprehensive teacher training that strengthens both linguistic proficiency and pedagogical agency (Le et al., 2020), while curriculum design should incorporate formative assessment and self-assessment strategies to foster learner autonomy and continuous improvement (Phuong et al., 2023). This approach has proven effective in the Vietnamese context, where Phan (2021) found that self-assessment serves as a practical mechanism for enhancing students' self-directed learning ability in tertiary English education. By encouraging learners to evaluate their own progress, such practices not only increase engagement but also cultivate a reflective learning mindset essential for sustained language development.

Recent empirical work in Vietnam supports this paradigm shift. For example, Yen and Thao (2024) found that Vietnamese EFL instructors are increasingly recognising and enacting competency-based assessment practices that emphasise communicative competence and critical thinking over rote knowledge. Similarly, Bui (2023) reports that Vietnamese university EFL teachers move towards assessment for learning rather than purely summative testing, indicating a latent shift to learning-oriented assessment frameworks. Such an approach should integrate affective factors—including growth mindset and emotional intelligence—to promote holistic learner development. Furthermore, given Vietnam's traditional teacher-centered system, teacher training must emphasize student-centered and constructivist pedagogies that cultivate independent learning and higher-order cognitive skills (Phuong et al., 2023). Besides, developing learner autonomy remains a key challenge. While students often express positive attitudes toward self-learning, they lack goal-setting, resource management, and feedback-seeking skills (Duong, 2025). Therefore, policies should embed structured training in self-regulated learning across all levels of education, enabling learners to plan, monitor, and reflect on their progress.

In addition, technology-enhanced language learning tools can effectively support self-regulation by offering personalized feedback and adaptive pathways. However, this requires parallel efforts to improve digital literacy among both teachers and students. The government should ensure equitable access to digital resources and collaborate with technology providers to develop localized materials (Boudouaia et al., 2024). Integrating strategy instruction and personalized learning within blended models can further enhance engagement and learning outcomes (Wei, 2024).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Vietnam's policy to transform English into a second language stands as a landmark reform reflecting the nation's vision for modernization and global integration. More than a linguistic initiative, it represents a profound sociocultural transformation toward bilingualism and international participation. Drawing on Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model, the analysis reveals that while the policy is ideologically grounded in linguistic instrumentalism and economic pragmatism, its long-term success depends on effective governance, local adaptation, and teacher engagement. Despite remarkable efforts in curriculum reform, English-medium instruction, and teacher retraining, gaps between policy design and classroom implementation persist, especially in rural and disadvantaged regions. These disparities highlight the urgency of strengthening teacher capacity, investing in digital infrastructure, and ensuring equitable access to quality education. To sustain progress, the policy must emphasize competency-based and learning-oriented assessment, promote learner autonomy, and integrate technology to enhance engagement. Equally important, English education should advance alongside the preservation of Vietnam's linguistic and cultural heritage. Ultimately, English must serve as a bridge to global opportunity rather than a symbol of privilege—empowering all learners to participate confidently and equitably in a rapidly globalizing world.

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