Challenges in English vocabulary learning of ethnic minority grade 10 students at Muong Bi high school

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1. Rationale for the study

These days, there is no doubt about the fact that the English language is becoming something of a forerunner in global communication. It is the first and second language in most countries of the world. Almost 70% of the Internet is in English. A huge volume of the information used on the Internet is also in English. Thus, English is playing a very significant role in bringing the world together. Therefore, teaching and learning English have become the necessity all over the world. In Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject from primary schools to universities. However, the quality of learning and teaching English is different from one school to another, especially from schools in cities, towns and those from remote and mountainous areas.

In Hoa Binh mountainous province, English is a compulsory subject in the curriculum and it is considered as one of the major subjects for the high school final examination. English is taught with the purpose to give students some basic knowledge of English in order to communicate and use it as a key to science and technology. However, there still exist many difficulties facing teachers in teaching English to students, especially those from ethnic minorities. It can be observed that ethnic minority students’ scores are very low in English. Less than 5 per cent earn good marks, even in the national graduation exams (Hoa Binh Department of Education and Training, 2008; 2009). In some remote areas, lower level students understand less than 20 per cent of what teachers say in Vietnamese (“Minority Students Need”, 2008). Ethnic minority students mainly use their mother tongues – Muong, Thai, Hmong, Tay and other languages - to communicate inside their families and small communities. From first grade onward, at school and in public places, ethnic minority students have to struggle with Vietnamese to study and communicate with other people. This is why not many can understand lectures, even at high school, because they do not thoroughly comprehend Vietnamese - and very few teachers can explain things to them in their native languages (“Ethnic Schools Lack”,
Thus, studying English language in addition to Vietnamese language might be very challenging for ethnic minority students.

In addition, I find out that my pupils are not successful learners, only because they lack vocabulary. In fact they are provided with almost every word necessary for their communication inside and outside the classroom, but many of my pupils complain they forget most of learned words only a few day later. This proves that problems in learning vocabulary are undeniable. For better vocabulary teaching and learning, I have chosen Challenges in English vocabulary learning of ethnic minority grade 10 students at Muong Bi high school as the topic of the study.

2. Aims of the study

The study aims at investigating the areas of challenges in learning English vocabulary of ethnic minority grade 10 students in Muong Bi high school, Hoa Binh mountainous province. Also, it is expected that some solutions to overcome challenges encountered will be suggested. To be more specific, in realizing this study, the objectives are:

- To investigate the areas of challenges that ethnic minority grade 10 students have encountered when learning English vocabulary.
- To offer some solutions with the hope of helping English language teachers in Muong Bi high school overcome difficulties in teaching vocabulary, improve the quality of their teaching, which helps improve ethnic minority students’ language learning quality.

3. Research questions

Questionnaires and classroom observations in this study were intended to address the following research question:

What are the challenges in learning English vocabulary of ethnic minority grade 10 students in Muong Bi high school?

4. Significance of the study

The study is hoped to be beneficial to both teachers and ethnic minority students in mountainous high schools. First, the findings of the study, the challenges in learning English vocabulary of ethnic minority grade 10 students in Muong Bi high school could be shared among teachers of English to improve the quality of teaching and learning
in the coming years. Next, it might highlight the rationale for professional development programs for high school teachers of English in mountainous areas in Vietnam. Finally, the findings could be used as a data base for further study.

5. Scope of the study

The study only concentrates on problems in learning vocabulary from the textbook “Tiếng Anh 10” (by Hoang Van Van et al) of ethnic minority grade 10 students in Muong Bi high school in Hoa Binh province and some possible solutions for teaching vocabulary.

6. Methods of research

The study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected via questionnaires and classroom observations:

- A Survey questionnaire for 100 grade 10 students was used to clarify the difficulties of ethnic minority grade 10 students in learning English vocabulary.
- Classroom observations were also carried out to get information about both teachers’ ways of teaching and students’ ways of learning in class.

7. Organization of the study

This study consists of three parts:

- Part One: Introduction presents the rationale, aims, significance, scope, method of study, and organization of the study.
- Part Two: Development consists of three chapters:
  - Chapter One - Literature Review provides a theoretical basis for the study
  - Chapter Two – Methodology includes an overview of the approach used in conducting the study. It also provides a thorough description of the data collection procedure as well as the analytical procedure.
  - Chapter Three – Findings and Discussion reports the findings of the study and discusses the prominent aspects.
- Part Three: Conclusion presents the conclusions of major findings, recommendations, limitations for the study, and suggestions for further studies.

Appendice

References
PART TWO: DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 1: Literature review

1.1. The importance of vocabulary in language teaching and learning

1.2. Principles of vocabulary teaching

1.2.1. Criteria for selecting vocabulary

1.2.2. Vocabulary teaching

1.2.2.1. Forms of a word

1.2.2.2. Meaning

1.2.2.3. Use of a word

1.3. English vocabulary learning

1.3.1. Factors Affect Vocabulary Learning

1.4. Methods in vocabulary teaching

1.4.1. Repetition and attention

1.4.2. Relationship with other words

1.4.3. Exceptions

1.5. Proficiency in the native language and the second language and the acquisition of a third language

1.5.1. Definitions

1.5.2. Influence of proficiency in the native language and the second language on the acquisition of a third language

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes a justification for the approach the author used in conducting the research. It also provides a thorough description of how the author collected the necessary data as well as the analytical procedure to draw conclusions based on the collected information. In the first section the author gives detailed description of the research setting where the study was conducted. In the next sections, the author puts forward an explanation of the author’s understanding of the methods used in this research and their advantages.

2.1. Research setting

2.1.1. An overview of research setting

2.1.2. The materials of teaching and learning

2.2. Research questions
2.3. Participants

2.3.1. Description of the teachers of English
2.3.2. The students

2.4. Data Collection Instruments and procedures

2.4.1. The questionnaire
2.4.2. Classroom observations
2.4.3. Data Collection Procedure

According to Selinger and Shohamy (1989) once the researcher has selected a specific design for the study which is consistent with the objectives of the research, the next step is to collect the research data. In collecting the data it is important to use procedures which elicit high quality data, since the quality of any research study depends largely on the quality of the data collected and the data collection procedure.

As stated above, the study was carried out in Muong Bi high school. The reason for the choice was that 100% students at these schools were ethnic minorities; that might be useful to give rich information for the data collection of the study. Among the teachers of three schools, five were selected for interviews on voluntary basis and all of them were observed while teaching.

The observations were conducted in five selected teachers at the beginning of the school year.

2.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The strengths of qualitative data rest very centrally on the competence with which their analysis is carried out. According to Hatch (2002), interpretation, as interpretation of interview data, is a defining element that permeates all qualitative research through making inferences, developing insights, attaching importance, refining understandings, drawing conclusions, and extrapolating lessons. Since researchers carry out interpretations in the research process, they make sense of the phenomenon under investigation. This interpretive analysis was intended to link interpretation to the data in order to result in meaningful data.

The analysis of the observation data in this study involved careful readings of the researcher’s field notes of sample lessons. Following the observation guide, the researcher conducted the analysis as follows. In the first stage, the researcher examined the field notes of all the lessons of the five observed teachers. In the second stage, the researcher reviewed the detailed field notes coupled with questionnaire. In the third stage, through analysis of
field notes of the sample lessons, the researcher demonstrated how the teachers of English organized classroom activities in English lessons and how they dealt with the challenges in teaching to ethnic minority students.

This chapter has examined the approach used in the study to illuminate its research questions about the challenges in learning English vocabulary of grade 10 ethnic minority students. It also described the data collection as well as the analytical procedure which leads to the results of the research as presented in the next chapter – Results and discussion.
CHAPTER 3: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results and discussions from the questionnaires for students

3.2. Results and discussions from the observation

The researcher observed four teachers’ ten English lessons on language skills and language knowledge at grade 10 with their permission. The analysis of the observation data indicated that difficulties emerged in the actual classrooms such as lack of various types of classroom activities associated with CLT, too many new words and structures were given in each lesson, students’ preference of using their native languages or Vietnamese language, a large amount of teachers’ using Vietnamese in class, and students’ passiveness in learning.

In general, all the teachers’ lessons the researcher observed followed the basic steps of the lesson: warm-up activities, presentation, practice and consolidation and homework. The lessons on language skills included three stages namely pre-, while-, and post-stage. In the pre-stage, teachers introduced the new language inputs to their students, often new words or phrases, students learned both spelling and sounds in class, in chorus or individually. However, what follows is a discussion of some prominent challenges.

First, there was lack of various types of classroom activities associated with CLT in English classes, the teachers commonly organized only two types of activities such as group and pair work in their vocabulary teaching, and left other activities out of account. Some teachers often let students take part in mechanical practice such as repetition drills and substitution drills in class. This monotonous ways of teaching might be one of the reasons to make English lessons tedious to ethnic minority students and reduce their interest in participating in classroom activities. Jacobs and Ball (1996) noted that “more emphasis should be given to active modes of learning such as pair or group work in problem-solving tasks, nevertheless, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature used all the time, and may well be inappropriate in some contexts”. Besides, some teachers were not creative in carrying out groups or pair works, especially in arranging pairs or groups. Sometimes, many students were reluctant to join in activities when being put into the same groups or pairs in class.

The next challenge was that too many new words and structures were given in each lesson. Teachers spent too much time in presenting new words, especially in reading and listening lessons. Two of the lessons the researcher attended were reading lessons, after the lessons, the researcher even could not know what was going on, what objectives of the
lessons were, because the teachers presented too many new words and structures, students had to write down and learn the words, whereas the reading passage was so long that both teachers and students had to “race” to finish the lessons on time.

Another challenge was that a large amount of Vietnamese language used by the teachers in teaching in English classes. The classroom observations revealed that most of teachers hardly used English in teaching language skills and language knowledge lessons. They used Vietnamese when introducing the topic of the lesson, analyzing grammatical structures, checking multiple answers in students’ book, explaining students’ assignments, and translating some difficult sentences, etc. Although English was encouraged to be maximally exposed to language learners (MOET, 2006), the English language environment in classes was limited in the observed lessons. Thus, in such a poor learning environment like that, it was difficult for students to acquire a foreign language effectively.

Besides, students’ preference of using their native languages or Vietnamese language during group work or pair work caused challenges for teachers in their teaching. When students were asked to have a discussion or joined in communicative activities, some students often discussed in Vietnamese or their native languages instead of English, they only shifted to English when the teachers approached them. Limited English vocabulary and sentence structures, even limited Vietnamese language skills prevented ethnic minority students from communicating with each other efficiently. They felt too it hard to express themselves in English. However, in some English classes, the teachers did not offer any solutions to the case of students’ using native or Vietnamese languages during group or pair works, others even did not realize this existing problem.

One more problem which was also concerned with the students was the habit of studying of students in remote mountainous areas, especially those from ethnic minorities. About half of the students in the class were passive. They depended on the teachers and their partners in learning and practicing the language they were learning. Some students even did not know how to do the work given by teachers or looked for help from partners. Some completed the tasks quickly; however, when teachers checked their understanding, they kept silent; This wasted the time of the English lessons and that was one of the reasons why the lessons could not be finished as planned.

3.3. Findings and discussions from the questionnaire

Based on findings from the questionnaire, the researcher described the challenges of ethnic minority students in learning English such as students’ low level of background knowledge, low level of English proficiency, the textbook, teachers’ failure in applying
communicative approach and classroom activities. Below is a discussion of details of these challenges.

The first challenging problem was the students’ level of English. It’s the fact that many ethnic minority students possessed nothing after four years of learning English at lower secondary schools while the textbooks were developed on the basis of English syllabuses for 6, 7, 8, 9 grades. The reasons were varied, both subjective and objective. However, as they said, their students were ethnic minorities with limited literacy or Vietnamese language skills and low level of background knowledge; in fact, the students entered the Muong Bi high school and other schools in remote districts with much lower grades than those entering schools in the central parts of the province. In addition, students’ motivation in English learning was very low; their students saw little benefit in learning English while they were still struggling with their Vietnamese, and they saw no future outside their home villages and thus, no need to communicate with English speaking people. Most of them learnt English just to get marks because it was an compulsory subject at school. They spent no time learning English except for some lessons at school. As a result, many of the students were very bad at English; some could hardly speak even the simplest sentences about themselves in English. It was the students’ poor vocabulary, little knowledge of grammar structures that prevented teachers from running the lesson effectively. The students could not absorb what the teachers presented or take part in activities in class. The teachers, therefore, had to follow the schedule provided strictly, and they had to revise the learnt knowledge at low speed.

The second hindrance in learning English was a triangular language environment. In Tan Lac district, minority students mainly use their mother tongues - Muong language - to communicate inside their families and small communities, while at school they had to learn Vietnamese to study and communicate with other people. Students were still not fluent in Vietnamese, let alone English. At home, most students in remote areas said they communicate with their parents in their native languages. Therefore, there was too little use of Vietnamese or English. Some students forgot almost everything related to English language because they lived and spoke only their native languages with their parents and relatives during summer vacation. Furthermore, minority students found it more difficult to pronounce English words because their minority languages were greatly different from it. They always mispronounced /d/ with /t/, /v/ with /b/. It was really challenging them to change their pronunciation habit.
Finally, the other challenge most of the students face was the material. The textbook on the whole seemed to be too difficult for most of ethnic minority students, many topics in the English textbooks were strange to their daily lives and background such as “Undersea world”, or “Technology and You”, “Cities” etc, therefore, difficult to comprehend. The students were not interested in these topics, but felt overwhelmed by the amount of new vocabulary in each unit. The teachers even stated that they were trained in the light of the Communicative Language Teaching, which showed that not all the words could be equally taught. However, they complained that their students’ vocabulary was so poor. If they did not teach most of the words appear in the passage, most of the students could not understand or take part in the tasks in class. It meant that the objectives of the lesson would not be achieved by the students.

From these above difficulties, the researcher introduces some vocabulary teaching techniques and some suggestions for solutions to help students overcome their situations. The researcher suggests some techniques, which she believes that they will be effective to ethnic minority students such as adapting the textbook and selection of vocabulary teaching…If these techniques are used in Muong Bi high school, the difficulties could be reduced and English teaching situations in general, English vocabulary teaching situations in specific will be better.

3.4. Recommendations

Based on the findings discussed above, in order to improve the quality of English teaching to ethnic minority students, the researcher would like to draw some points of recommendations such as adapting the textbook and selection of vocabulary teaching…

3.4.1. Motivating students to learn

3.4.2. Adapting the textbook

3.4.3. Selection of the vocabulary teaching

3.4.4. Practising the vocabulary

3.4.5. Improving learning and teaching conditions

3.4.6 Having local teachers to teach English for students in their communities
PART THREE: CONCLUSION

1. Conclusion

Vietnam is a developing country, the teaching and learning situation is improving day by day. There are various opportunities for people to improve their knowledge, even though, the difficulties still exist in many places in our country, especially, in the mountainous and remote areas like Hoa Binh.

The research finds out that due to the lack of background knowledge ethnic minority students at the school face too many difficulties in acquiring English vocabulary. The difficulties are caused by the material and the teachers’ method of teaching. In order to improve English vocabulary learning in a high remote and mountainous school, the study suggests some implication for teaching: teachers should vary their teaching techniques and activities; textbooks should be adapted; extra practice activities for language learning should be organized; learning and teaching conditions should be improved; and local teachers should be available to teach English for students in their communities.

This minor thesis has been completed with the author’s best efforts with the hope that it could, to some extent, help teachers raise their awareness of teaching English vocabulary for the ethnic minority students. However, she is fully aware that shortcomings and mistakes are inevitable and thus it is she who stands entirely accountable for those weaknesses. Every constructive comment and criticism from readers is highly appreciated.

2. Limitations of the study

Although the study has been seriously and intensively carried out, like many other studies, there are still some limitations.

Firstly, in term of methodology, the study is limited in the fact that the data may not fully reflect all aspects of English vocabulary teaching and learning in this remote and mountainous school. Secondly, the interviews are carried out mostly in Vietnamese, then translated into English. The translation may loose some intention of both interviewer and interviewees.

4. Suggestions for further studies

Followings are some directions that should be taken into consideration in the further research. Firstly, further longitudinal studies are recommended to carry out at secondary and primary schools in the province. Secondly, it would be interesting to
investigate more challenges in teaching English in other aspects such as listening and speaking to ethnic minority students and to find out the possible solutions.

It is hoped that from the findings and limitations of the study, further studies would be conducted in helping to improve the quality of English teaching to ethnic minority students in mountainous areas.