



The current state of English education in Vietnam and potential solutions to reduce educational disparities in the country

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Article History

Received: 15/03/2024

Accepted: 25/03/2024

Published: 28/03/2024

Vol –2 Issue –3

PP: - 19-22

Abstract

The preference given to employees who speak English proficiently has no longer been an abnormal practice in Vietnam's current 4.0 revolution, instigated by the increasing shifting of manufacturing facilities and business locations of international companies to this country. As a result, there has been a recent increase in funding and investment in foreign language education, specifically in English. This is thanks to the growing interest from both the government and households in this area of development. The Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam also shows a strong focus on this field by annually publishing data on English high school graduation test scores. This data, along with real survey reports on the learning conditions of students in provinces and cities with low average scores, can be used to analyze the current state of Vietnamese students' English learning. It is evident that due to disparities in income, tuition costs, quality of education, and parental support, there is a growing inequality in accessing English learning for disadvantaged student groups. What is even more concerning is that many educational policies further worsen this imbalance, such as giving precedence to international English credentials when applying to local universities. Reducing inequality is the aim of various programs and policies that the government and social organizations have been trying to put into place. However, these undertakings are costly, time-consuming, and resource-intensive. One potential alternative to tackle this inequality is through student-led volunteer initiatives that aim to provide free English classes to underprivileged students - an easy and effective short-term option that has not been commonly applied by young people from major urban locations. One advantage of this approach is that student leaders can easily form clubs, groups, and projects by coming together. They have had access to English from an early age, allowing them to speak and express in English fluently, even though they may lack certain teaching training. This remedy has been implemented by myself and my friends through the Wise Worm project - a project that aims to teach English to underprivileged students. Our initial steps have made some contributions to narrowing inequality, but the project still requires support from businesses and social organizations in terms of finance and communication to expand and bring benefits to more students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As the United Nations calls for sustainable development goals, it is crucial to prioritize education in creating equality for everyone, especially vulnerable groups.

1. Introduction:

During the ongoing 4.0 revolution in Vietnam, having fluent English skills can provide employees with significant advantages in terms of job opportunities and support. This trend is largely driven by the increasing number of foreign corporations relocating their manufacturing facilities and business locations to this country, although there are other contributing factors to consider. Additionally, the government and general public in Vietnam have also placed a greater emphasis on foreign language education in recent years, and it is undeniable that having a good command of the English language allows us to tap into a wealth of information from all over the world. However, according to a press release from the Vietnam General Statistics Office on the 2021 living standards survey, the average monthly income per person for

the wealthiest households in Vietnam was 9,184 million VND, which was more than eight times higher than the average for the poorest households. As a result, the cost of education, particularly for learning foreign languages, varies greatly between these two income levels. Furthermore, students from low-income and marginalized backgrounds face significant barriers in accessing resources for learning foreign languages, such as qualified teachers, learning materials, and educational media. This has resulted in a noticeable disparity in foreign language proficiency among underprivileged children, particularly those living in rural and mountainous area. The UN has, in turn, strongly urged all nations to take action toward the sustainable development goals of ensuring that everyone, especially the most disadvantaged, has equal access to education. So how can the increasing disparity in disadvantaged kids' access to foreign languages be rebutted,

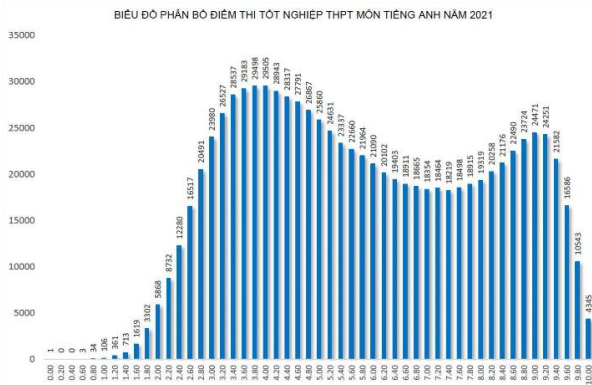


particularly for those children who live in isolated and mountainous regions? The government, companies, social groups, parents, and society as a whole hold the key to the solution.

2. Vietnamese students' current English-language learning situation

2.1. An evaluation of Vietnamese students' English language competency in recent years using the results of the national high school graduation exam in the English subject test

The following chart illustrates the analysis of subject scores for the 2021 High School Graduation Exam from the Ministry of Education and Training on July 26, 2021:



Distribution chart of 2021 High School Graduation Exam Scores, English subject test (source from reference (2))

Brief analysis (the points are awarded on a scale of 1-10):

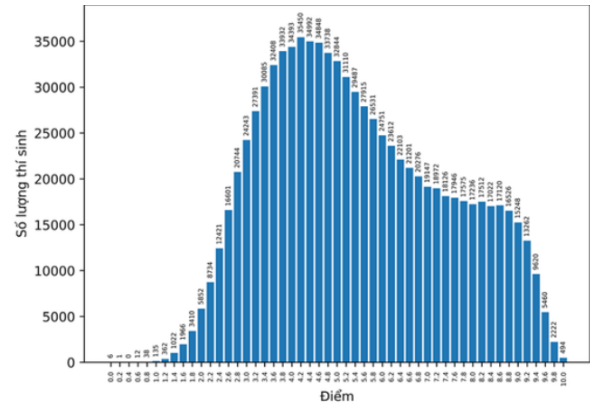
- Total number of candidates taking the exam: 866,993 students.
- Average score: 5.84
- Median score: 5.60
- The number of candidates scoring less than 1: 0.02%
- The number of candidates below the average score: 40.27%
- The score that most students receive: 4.0

According to the 2021 Ministry of Education and Training's statistical data shown above, the provinces and cities with the highest average English scores included Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, Ba Ria Vung Tau, Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, and Hanoi; whereas the top five provinces and cities that scored the lowest on average compiled of Dien Bien, Cao Bang, Son La, Hoa Binh, and Ha Giang. Large, affluent, and well-suited to education provinces and cities made up the group of provinces and cities with high average scores. On the other hand, the provinces with the lowest average scores were those that had challenging economic circumstances, were located in isolated and mountainous regions, had challenging educational environments, and lacked educational facilities.

Looking at the distribution chart for English test scores in 2021, it is evident that there are two mod peaks. The first peak falls between 3.4 and 4.2 points, while the second peak falls between 8.8 and 9.2 points. This type of distribution is uncommon, as distributions typically follow a normal or skewed pattern. Possible explanations for this anomaly could

include variations in English proficiency among different regional groups, differences in economic status, access to resources, teaching quality, and family investment in English education in 2021, ultimately resulting in significant inequality.

As per the Ministry of Education and Training's report released on July 18, 2023, the distribution of English test scores for 2023 is as follows:



Distribution chart of 2023 High School Graduation Exam Scores, English subject test (source from reference (3))

Brief analysis (the points are awarded on a scale of 1-10):

- Total number of candidates sitting the exam: 876,102 students.
- Average score: 5.45
- Median score: 5.20
- The number of candidates scoring less than 1: 0.022%
- The number of candidates below the average score: 44.833%
- The score that most students receive: 4.2

In 2023, provinces with strong economic conditions such as Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, Ba Ria Vung Tau, Hanoi, Da Nang, and Hai Phong continued to rank among the top provinces and cities with the highest average English scores. On the other hand, the top cities and provinces with the lowest scores included Bac Kan, Dien Bien, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Ha Giang, and Lai Chau.

The distribution of English scores in 2023 shows two mod peaks, although they were not as prominent as in 2021. This indicates that there is still a gap in scores between the two regional groups, although it has narrowed compared to 2021.

Observing the distribution of English test scores announced by the Ministry of Education from 2019 to 2023 reveals a unique pattern, especially in 2021, the first year after the COVID-19 pandemic. The prolonged period of online learning, with limited access to resources, has worsened the learning gap between two regional groups (Northern and Southern), particularly in foreign language acquisition.

2.2. Some practical survey reports on the learning conditions of students in provinces and cities with low average English graduation test scores

In the Summary of Vietnam Education study published in 2022, a group of experts from the UNICEF Vietnam office

examined learning and equitable elements using data from the MICs (Middle–Income Countries) survey. They found that rural areas accounted for about nine out of ten students without access to computers, TV, or the Internet. Most pupils who did not have access to educational resources come from the most impoverished areas.

Additionally, as reported in the article “*Khó ...như dạy Tiếng Anh ở vùng cao*” (“Difficult... like teaching English in the mountainous regions”) published by the Education and Times newspaper on August 25, 2022, teachers who were instructing English in some challenging areas of Thua Thien Hue Province believed that the paucity of various learning resources, including books, newspapers, and English stories, as well as challenging economic conditions and a lack of teachers, makes teaching and learning English extremely challenging for this particular area.

3. Assessments and Solutions:

3.1. Assessments:

A review of the current situation reveals that underprivileged student groups, primarily from remote areas, are not receiving equal treatment in education, especially when it comes to learning English. These students face numerous challenges due to a lack of educational resources and parental support. In underprivileged areas, there is a significant shortage of English teachers.

As of 2017, foreign language credentials have become a mandatory requirement for admission to certain Vietnamese universities. Additionally, the majority of universities will continue to accept English certificates as a means of direct entry or test score conversion by 2022. While this reflects the trend towards international integration, it also raises concerns about unequal admissions practices.

3.2. Recommended solutions:

Numerous programs have been implemented by the Vietnamese government and social organizations, both domestically and abroad, in an effort to reduce educational inequality for underprivileged populations. One of the most recent programs is the "Assistance for Enhancing Foreign Language Proficiency and Worldwide Integration for Vietnamese Juveniles between 2022 and 2030," which was approved in Decision 1477/QĐ-TTg on November 25, 2022. This program aims to improve English teaching and learning in remote areas. In addition, the Sonta Foundation has also established free English programs, but its reach to students, especially those in rural areas, has been limited. On the other hand, programs in developed countries are of very high quality. For instance, “Teach for America” is a nonprofit organization that recruits the best and brightest recent college graduates to teach in underfunded high schools in the US. Similarly, “Teach for Vietnam” follows the same model as “Teach for America”, recruiting recent college graduates from Vietnamese universities to teach in poor, remote areas. If “Teach for Vietnam” were more empowered and scaled even further, it could greatly benefit rural students in Vietnam. Another example of a highly potential program aiming at narrowing the English barrier in Vietnam is the Peace Corps.

The Peace Corps is a US government program that also sends recent college graduates to different countries around the world to work on various projects, including teaching English. These Peace Corps volunteers often end up in very remote villages in Vietnam. If their impact in rural Vietnam were greater, it could greatly improve the English proficiency of children in the country.

However, carrying out such massive undertakings is costly, time-consuming, and resource-intensive. Therefore, an alternative solution to narrow down this inequality, which has not been commonly applied, is student-led initiatives aiming to eliminate the burden for vulnerable children’s groups. One advantage of this approach is that individuals who are interested can easily form clubs, groups, and projects by coming together. These students have had exposure to English from a young age, allowing them to speak and express it fluently even without formal teaching training. In addition to gaining new knowledge, students involved in these initiatives not only contribute to society but also develop valuable employment skills and a greater inclination to share and promote societal progress, in line with one of the UN's sustainable goals.

3.3. Practical experiment:

This solution was implemented by myself and a group of high school students in Vietnam through a project called “Wise Worm”, which has yielded positive results. The Wise Worm initiative was born from my observation of my cousins' struggles with learning English every time I visited my hometown village, a remote area in Thanh Hoa Province. Along with two companions, we decided to put our project into action, with the goal of teaching English to underprivileged children. As of August 2023, 30 students from challenging locations in Thanh Hoa and Dien Bien Province have enrolled in our online classes. Today, approximately 100 students between the ages of 9 and 15 are involved in our "school". Starting with just three teaching members, we have received over 60 volunteer applications to contribute to our cause within just a month of operation. Our first step is to help students learn English by fostering a love for the language and eliminating any fear they may have. However, many children use their parents' phones instead of computers for studying. To address this issue, we are seeking to collect outdated computers from businesses to provide a more comfortable studying experience for these students. Additionally, we hope to secure investments from organizations to offer financial assistance, connect with other groups to form a larger, more professional community, and reach even more underprivileged children with our initiative. For the last four months of operation, our project has made progress in fostering the love and engagement for learning English in our students, with the hope that this community will further expand in the time to come. However, despite all of our accomplishments, it is indisputable that, in contrast to full-time teachers or volunteers from “Teach for Vietnam” or The Peace Corps, we high school students lack the training and the time required to organize a comprehensive lesson plan and run a year-round program for the less fortunate students.

It is, thus, hard to believe that high-school-student-led initiatives can significantly alleviate the lack of resources and education in rural provinces. Therefore, the most important factor in minimizing disparities in education in Vietnam is still the collective effort and commitment of the entire society, from the experienced to the novice, from governments to regular citizens.

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