# Vietnamese and Korean - More Alike Than Different (2)

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper is part of the results from our research project conducted here in Korea with the sponsorship of Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS) via the International Scholar Exchange Fellowship (ISEF) program in 2011-2012. It is a further development of our previous article in *VNU Journal of Science* (forthcoming) under almost the same title, which has matured with new findings and materials. That is why Number 2 has been added to the title above.

Through a considerable series of Korean and Vietnamese proverbs, idioms, and relevant literature, the first parts of the paper present the linguistic, cultural similarities and shared attitudes of the two peoples towards education, and provides more evidence to argue for the status of Konglish and Vinglish (or Vietlish) among Asian Englishes which have been acknowledged as varieties of Englishes around the world. The next part of the paper identifies striking commonalities in English Education, namely similar history and similar problems, including teacher quality, time allocation, and the learners in both countries. The paper concludes with summative recommendations to the Government of Vietnam for improving the effectiveness of English Education in the country.

**Key words:** proverbs, idioms, Asian Englishes, similarities, attitudes, education, English

Recalling a discussion at the 8th Asian TEFL conference hosted by our University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), VNU in 2010, I heard an English teacher raise such questions as “Can we speak English the Asian ways?”, “Can we use Asian idioms like *they are just pots and pans, you can’t be both the soccer player and the referee at the same time* instead of the American *they are just Coke and Pepsi* or the British *you can’t be both the judge and the jury* *at the same time* respectively?” “Can we make ourselves understood when speaking Asian English?” “What should we teach our students in this regard?” etc. These have been controversial topics of numerous debates among Asian English teachers to date, and I tend to agree with many of them that Asian English, or rather Asian Englishes have all the rights to be recognized as varieties of the English language (and they have truly been), and cross-cultural communication via the medium of English is always possible because we human beings are in fact more alike than different, as evidenced in the Vietnamese and Korean idiomatic expressions I have been able to find with my still very limited knowledge of the language.

In this paper, I would like to present my findings of the linguistic, cultural similarities, and shared attitudes towards education between Vietnamese and Korean peoples before going into further details of English education in the two countries.

## Linguistic, Cultural Similarities and Shared Attitudes towards Education

Vietnamese and Korean languages share a large number of words originated, or borrowed from the language of our common neighbor – Chinese, or Hanja, with necessary modification in pronunciation to fit our own languages, for instance, *đại học, khoa học, học sinh, công chúng, mâu thuẫn* in Vietnamese, and *tehak (대학), kwahak (과학), hakseng (학생), kongjung (공중)*, *mosun* *(모순)* in Korean. It is estimated that words of Chinese origin can account for as many as two-thirds of Vietnamese and Korean vocabularies. However, the two languages coincide in more ways than that.

From an interesting book I found in KFAS library by Choe Sang-Hun and Christopher Torchia (2002) *How Koreans Talk* – *A Collection of Expressions*, I learned that conceptually, in describing a cold, indifferent, hard-to-tempt person, the Vietnamese say *con người gỗ đá* while the Korean say *mokseok (목석)*; short but gritty people are called *small pepper [is hotter] (bé hạt tiêu, Jakeun gochuga maepda 작은고추가 맵다 )*, clothes are likened to a pair of wings (*bộ cánh, 옷이 날개다*); a daring person is one with a big liver *(to gan, 간이 크다)*, a sly woman is a nine-tailed fox (cáo trắng chín đuôi /hồ ly tinh *- 구미호*), or a powerless person may utter *they put a nose ring on me (tôi bị xỏ mũi –바가지를 쓰다 )*.

Culturally, like many other Asian nations, Vietnam and Korea rely heavily on rice, the staple grain without which almost no meals can go, and the two languages abound in terms that describe a whole variety of products made of, from, or related to, rice. It is, therefore, natural that many of their sayings center round this life-support necessity. For instance, the Korean say *Eat, eat: rice is everything*, very much like the Vietnamese with *cơm tẻ là mẹ ruột; no cơm tẻ, thôi mọi đàng (*lit. *rice is mother of the intestines; no appetite when you’re filled with rice)*.Referring to some illusionary promise or something good but unattainable, both peoples use the same image *geurimui tteok (그림의떡), cái bánh vẽ* *(rice cake in the picture)*. Describing a gray area, or a useless product, for example, they both say *jukdo anigo bapdo anigo (죽도 아니고 밥도 아니고), cơm chẳng ra cơm, cháo chẳng ra cháo (it’s neither rice nor porridge)*. Interestingly still, *siksahaetseoyo? (식사했어요)* *Anh/Chị ăn cơm chưa? (have you eaten (rice) yet?)* rarely means an inquiry as whether you’re hungry or not, but is a common way of greetings in both languages, which can shock a Westerner if so asked by a Vietnamese or a Korean. Wishing a girl to be settled in marriage soon, both peoples make a rhetoric question, normally accompanied with a smile, *국수 언제억지? Bao giờ cho ăn cỗ đây?* (lit. *When will I have a chance to eat your noodles?*) Obviously, rice and its derivatives are integral parts of the two cultures and their languages.

Furthermore, behavioral norms, life experience, advice, and Confucian moral rules, etc. in the two cultures are also vividly reflected in their idioms and proverbs. Similarities are found not only in the images/objects used as metaphors in these idioms and proverbs, but also in the literal and figurative meanings conveyed. For example, in a wedding, the newly-wed couples receive a wish like *Until your hair turns into leek roots 머리가 파뿌리가 되도럭, Sống đến đầu bạc răng long / bách niên giai lão (until death do you part)*. A weak, poor commoner may rise to overthrow the ruler when cornered with oppression, *even an earthworm wiggles when someone steps on it (a treaded worm may turn), 지렁이도 밞으면 꿈들, Con giun xéo lắm cũng quằn.* An inexperienced youngster who dares to do things beyond his ken is referred to as *the blood has hardly dried on his head* or *He still reeks of milk 머리에 피도 안마른놈, Chưa ráo máu đầu / miệng còn hơi sữa; Chưa học bò đã lo học chạy*. A broken marriage is likened to *Pakyeong 팍영, gương vỡ (a broken mirror)*. Advising people to hold their reputation in esteem, the Korean say *호랑이는 죽으면 가죽을 남기고 사감은 죽으면 이름을 남긴다,* precisely the same as the Vietnamese *Hùm chết để lông, người chết để tiếng (When a tiger dies, it leaves its fur. When a man dies, he leaves his name*.*)*  A narrow-minded person yet believing he knows everything is *Umul an gaeguri 우물 안 개구리, ếch ngồi đáy giếng (a frog in a well)*. A useless venture is described as *Sajokeul danda 사촉을 단다, vẽ rắn thêm chân (adding legs to a snake)*; fighting with an invincible rival is merely *Dangranggeocheol당랑거헐, châu chấu đá xe (a mantis kicking a horse-cart wheel)*; a fight that benefits only a third party is *Eobujiri 어부지리, Trai cò tranh nhau, ngư ông đắc lợi*. Asking someone to stop flattering is *Bihanggi taeuji mara비행기 태우지 마라 Đừng cho tôi đi tàu bay giấy nữa (stop giving me a paper plane ride)*; a salesperson cheating customers is criticized *as Yangduguyuk 양두구욕, Treo đầu dê, bán thịt chó (Sheep/ goat’s head and dog’s meat)*; interpersonal intimacy is like that between lips and teeth, as in*입술이 없으면 이가 시리다 Môi hở răng lạnh (If you lose your lips, your teeth get cold)*; *욱시할 눔*or*욱장낼 놈, Cho voi giày ngựa xé / xé xác phanh thây or Đem bỏ vạc dầu* is a curse on a scoundrel. Unpredictable luck in life, good or bad, is just like a man who lost his horse: *Saeongjima 새옹지마 Tái ông mất ngựa*. Another good advice is “do not exercise punishment on a person at meal time, just like your dog – do not beat it while it is eating”, *Bap meokeul ttaeneun gaedo an ttaerinda 밥 먹을 때는 개도 안 때린다 Trời đánh tránh miếng ăn*. A man of forty years of age is *Bulhok불흑, Bất hoặc (tứ thập như bất hoặc)*, or fleeing a danger is the best strategy - *Samsipyukgye삼십육계, Tam thập lục kế, tẩu vi thượng sách.* There are countless examples of this sort in the two languages.

Similar to several other Asian countries, in Korea and Vietnam, Confucian moral rules for long laid contempt on women while paying respect to men. *Man is the seed*, and a woman who ventured outside her duties and status would bring ruin to the family, *If the hen cries, the household will collapse, 암탉이 울먼 잡안이 망한다, Gà mái gáy*. Women were required to conform to*삼종 지도, tam tòng tứ đức (three types of obedience and four types ethical attributes, namely obey their father, husband and son; diligence, appearance, language and dignity)*, and so, *you should break in your new daughter-in-law when she is still in a rainbow dress, Dạy con từ thuở còn thơ, dạy vợ từ thuở bơ vơ mới về*, as the Korean and Vietnamese sayings go. A daughter-in-law is truly your daughter, but a son-in-law is not, so treat him like a special guest, *Sawineun baeknyeonjigaek사위는 백년지객, dâu là con, rể là khách*. However, things have changed, women’s status has ameliorated, and now the Koreans have such a saying as  *딸 하나 얼 아들 안 부럽다 – one good daughter is worth ten sons* rather than the Vietnamese *nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô (you are considered fertile even if you have one son, while having ten daughters means you have no children at all)*.

Another interesting finding I would like to share is what is commonly referred to as the “envelop culture”, a social evil in both nations. I have not been able to investigate the current situation in Korea, but most probably this “cultural phenomenon” still persists. Corruption is everywhere, in developed as well as in developing countries; yet bribing traffic police, government officials and teachers in the form of a small envelope with *chonji 촌지, chút quà mọn/ chút tiền trà nước* in the hope to get better treatment to oneself or their children at school is, or once was, prevalent in both cultures. Definitely, this “envelope culture” will continue to take years of efforts before it can be substantially reversed in both countries.

My final point in this section is similar attitudes of the Korean and Vietnamese towards education, which has caused high pressure to the Governments and peoples alike, especially the youths. Under Confucian influence, both nations crave for education, and parents may pay all costs to get their children a good education. A university degree is a passport to career success, and seems to be the only way to secure a good job and a good life, therefore youngsters study real hard to get a place at university, although “it is highly competitive, particularly the [Korean] national university entrance examination. Taking extra classes outside school is common… many high school students return home after such extra classes well after 11pm” (Bui, 2011:3). Similarly, Professor Nguyen Minh Thuyet, our teacher and a former National Assembly delegate, remarks, “Possibly the highest pressure that causes tension in [Vietnam] education is that general education seems to have only one outcome: a place at college or university. Since children’s first days of schooling, parents already have to worry which school is good for their kids, which special school of the upper grades they can proceed to, and then what degree courses they can take at university so as to secure a decent job, a good income and a brighter prospect”[[1]](#footnote-2). It is actually a perpetual stress to children and their parents throughout their school life, especially in more developed cities in the country. “It seems that in the city, many parents are over worried, and they may have better incomes, so they exert pressure on their children’s schooling, which is more or less justifiable, because if children cannot gain entry into colleges, chances can be rare for them to get a job”, Professor Nguyen Minh Thuyet adds[[2]](#footnote-3). This is quite similar to Koreans’ *cosmopolitan striving* discussed by Park and Abelmann (2004).

It is good that education is well respected, and everyone is entitled with the right to access to education. Yet universities are not the only place where education can be acquired, and a country needs not only doctors, professors, researchers, but also engineers, high-skilled technicians, drivers, artists, mechanics, builders, cooks, etc., all equally important and respectful.

It is said that all the 3H’s: Head, Hand and Heart are equally essential, but how to ensure proper balance among them is a difficult question, and, like corruption and bribery, it will also take both nations a long time to change their peoples’ attitudes and practices so that pressure on the Governments, the educational sector, the peoples and their children can be abated to a far less worrisome extent.

To conclude the section, I would like to reiterate that despite being some thousand miles apart, the two nations possess more similarities than differences, linguistically, culturally and mentally, as has been seen through their languages and ways of life. Cross-cultural communication between us is not only possible, but always smooth thanks to what we share.

We not only communicate in our own languages – Korean now is among the most popular foreign languages to Vietnamese students and people, partly because Korea is one of the biggest investors in Vietnam; and Vietnamese is one of the foreign languages Korean high school students can choose as a curricular subject. We can also communicate using the global language – English, or rather, Englishes, i.e. English spoken in Korea and English spoken in Vietnam. What is the status of our Englishes in the world Englishes? Following are my arguments as an answer.

## Korean-English and Vietnamese-English in Asian Englishes

I am not going to discuss at length the issue of pronunciation, because definitely all non-native learners of English, in order to ensure intelligibility, should aim at getting their pronunciation as close as possible to a particular, established vernacular of English, such as “standardized” “the Queen’s English” in London, or Standard American English, or Australian English, to name just a few. (In learning a foreign or second language like English, mother tongue’s influence is naturally inevitable, but that should not be allowed to result in some pronunciation so far away from, or causing so much distortion to, the target language that serious misunderstanding occurs, and even communication totally fails). What I am trying to support here is the Englishes used by Asian people in Asian ways with Asian words via the medium of English.

Language is a means of human communication, we all know, and the people with whom we communicate every day, more often than not, are our fellow people, those who speak the same mother tongue as we do. Even when we speak English with speakers of other languages, we are usually not trying to express what the English natives think and do and how they do it; rather, we use English to express our own thoughts and deeds. As Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) puts it, ‘at the end of the upper secondary (high school) level, students will be able to …. better inform the world of the Vietnamese people, their history and culture, and to take pride in Vietnam, its language and culture’ (MOET, 2007, cited in Hoang, 2008:11). Thus, a tourist guide showing foreign visitors around a scenic beauty, telling them the history behind the mossy bricks of a ruin, explaining to them the rituals associated with some type of music and/or singing; a scientist presenting his/her research results at an international conference; a waitress explaining what ingredients make up the traditional dishes to foreign diners at a local restaurant - these are common scenes in any country. English then is no longer the sole unshared treasure of the natives, but has become the world’s language and is used at the disposal of the non-natives. They use it in their own ways, for instance, “The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid. Turn to her straightaway” in an announcement in a Yugoslavian hotel, “When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your passage, then tootle him with vigor” in a warning to motorists in Tokyo (Bryson, 1990:11), or a notice in an unidentified non-English speaking country as seen in the picture below[[3]](#footnote-4):



The Vietnamese are no exception. We have used English in our ways which outsiders are obliged to accept. Take the word *socialization* as an example. In “pure” English, the meanings of the original verb *socialize* are explained as follows:

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| **Verb** | **1.** | **socialize** - take part in social activities; interact with others; "He never socializes with his colleagues"; "The old man hates to socialize" |
|  | **2.** | **socialize** - train for a social environment; "The children must be properly socialized" |
|  | **3.** | **socialize** - prepare for social life; "Children have to be socialized in school" |
|  | **4.** | **socialize** - make conform to socialist ideas and philosophies; "Health care should be socialized!" |

Based on WordNet 3.0, Farlex clipart collection. ©2003-2011 Princeton University, Farlex Inc[[4]](#footnote-5).

It has nothing to do with the cost-sharing mechanism of projects/programs for social development between the government and the citizens, or the collection of funds from people for a community activity, or the mobilization of social forces to engage in a certain campaign, which is expressed in the Vietnamese language as *xã hội hoá*. This term well corresponds to verb formation rules in both Vietnamese and English with the addition of the word/suffix *hoá/ize*; hence *socialize* and its derivative *socialization*. “New wine in an old bottle”, as the Vietnamese saying goes – the English word has acquired a new meaning in the Vietnamese context. When the word was first used, few foreigners would understand what it meant, and it took us quite a while to get them understand its Vietnamized usage. Now, that new meaning is well-established in the lexicon of non-Vietnamese English speakers who maintain frequent contacts with the Vietnamese, though it will continue to take several more years to find ways into standard English dictionaries.

*Socialization* is just exemplary at word level. At phrase, sentential and textual levels, English use is overwhelmed with Vietnamese grammatical rules and rhetorics. Following is an English verse-like creation in conformation to the Vietnamese poetic rules supposedly credited to some *xích-lô* (cycle rickshaw, pedicab) pedalist in Hanoi who wants to invite foreign visitors to take a ride:

*One dollar, one you*

*Two dollars, two you*

*You okay, you sit*

*Not okay, thank you.*

Among my students’ writing assignments, I found “*People want to have equality in position, employment ..., especially gender equality, one of the hottest problems attracting many people’s notice”; “start seeing 3 types of family with different works of Female which are shown in the table below”; “The Arab was luxurious and extravagant life in town, had wide commercial dealings but no culture contact with Christian. There was 3 months no fightings. The society was powerful political and religion formed by Muhammad called Muslim and Muslim grew strongly among areas”.* They violate English grammatical rules, they may not be straightforward in presenting ideas as the English rhetorics dictates, but does such violation or divergence seriously block understanding and communication?

The answer is yes, but not of high frequency. Sharing the same mentality, ways of thinking, speaking and writing, it is not always difficult for us to understand one another while communicating in English this way, although it can be a chore on the part of other unaccustomed English users. They will soon learn, I believe. For successful intercultural communication using the global English today, both sides have to make efforts – the non-natives have to improve their English in the direction of the standard while the natives have to acquire better understanding of the language and culture of the non-natives, and in so doing, they may come to a point of convergence. Many native speakers of English have now arrived at the recognition that they simply cannot ‘colonize’ the world with their language (although they did *cocacolanize* the world[[5]](#footnote-6)); they cannot require all English speakers in the world to speak it like they do. That is to say different varieties of English, or Englishes, are accepted as natural, as in the case of Indian English. We have long heard of Franglais (French English), Phinglish (Philippino English), and more recently, Singlish (Singaporean English), Chinglish (Chinese English), so surely Vinglish (Vietnamese English, or Vietlish) and Konglish (Korean English) have a pride-worthy place among our Asian Englishes. As a Japanese author puts it, “Students of English should realize that Japanese English is not an inferior form of English but one variety of the “various” language, or world Englishes. They should be guided so that they could be confident in becoming speakers of Japanese English that is a fine output of the English education in Japan” (Takeshita, 2000). We Vietnamese and Korean should feel the same pride.

We should feel the same pride because to both nations, English is the language of an Other, because our attitudes towards English are very much the same, as are the ways it is taught and learned in both countries, and, as anyone may expect, we share almost the same problems. The following section will describe such similarities in this regard.

## 3. Similarities in English Education

### 3.1 Similar History

There are no official documents to define with certainty when English was first introduced into Vietnam, although some historical sources indicated certain contact between the Vietnamese and English speaking people as far back as the 17th – 18th century. It can only be inferred from a few books available such as *L’anglais Vivant: Classe de sixième, L’anglais Vivant: Classe de troisième* (1942) and some bilingual English-Vietnamese dictionaries compiled by two Vietnamese scholars Le Ba Kong and Le Ba Khanh (Hoang, 2008:8) that English was actually taught in Vietnam as a truly minor foreign language during the French occupation of the country, i.e. by the end of the 19th and the early half of the 20th centuries, the time while French was the official language in the French Indochinese colonies and the use of the native language was restricted[[6]](#footnote-7), much similar to the situation in Korea during the Japanese rule. In 1954, after the Geneva Agreement, Vietnam was divided into North and South Vietnam. While Northern people started to learn Russian and continued with modern Chinese for communication with their Soviet and Chinese supporters, English learning flourished in the South with the involvement of the United States for the same reasons as in Korea (Nguyen, 2009). English was also taught in the North; however, it was restricted to some piloting efforts or to a small number of students who, upon graduation, could be used as spies or interpreters in the diplomatic front, particularly during the peace-talk process towards the Paris Accord. Another important purpose for the learning of English in the North is ‘in order to fight the enemy, we need to understand them’.

After the country’s reunification in 1975, Russian predominated the scene all over the country, while English sharply declined for a simple reason that it was the language of ‘the enemy’, ‘the imperialist’, or ‘the boat people’ (Nguyen, 2009) – those Southern losers in the war (and a lot of Northerners, too) emigrating to other countries, and that people who knew English could have access to foreign and/or ‘reactionary’ materials and such anti-communist broadcasts as the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation) or VOA (the Voice of America) which may politically harm the country and destroy the hard-gained unity. This is a major difference between English learning in Vietnam and English learning in Korea.

Fortunately, this conservative and hostile extremist yet somewhat naïve view was short-lived. Realizing the need to improve people’s quality of life through socio-economic development, and be friend with countries around the world, regardless of social regime and political inclination, Vietnam officially opened its door in 1986 with the *doi moi* (renovation) policy. English learning re-gained its momentum, and soon overtook all other foreign languages, even Russian. I was one of the lucky students to benefit from those radical changes. When I started university as an English major in the early 1980s, both teachers and students had very few materials to work with, except some books and tapes, most of which were published in, and provided by, the Soviet Union. Books published earlier in South Vietnam or in the UK, the US or Australia were either rare or used to a limited extent **not because** of political restriction, but merely due to the lack of re-printing or copying facilities.

After 1986, however, as a junior, I witnessed the huge influx of such interesting materials as the Streamline English series, English-speaking movies and other sources of valuable reference. Previously, only a few Vietnamese teachers of English were selected to be trained overseas, mostly in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries; by this time, teachers trained in Australia, the UK and the Soviet Union under various programs of international assistance returned in greater numbers, and in-country English teacher training programs were delivered, professional development workshops and conferences were organized, bringing in new waves of innovation and improvement to the teaching and learning of English. Native teachers also came in increasing numbers to help teach us English, and with more foreigners arriving in the country for a variety of purposes, we had more opportunities to practice our English both on formal and informal occasions.

Upon graduation in 1988, I became a teacher right at the University where I used to study (and have remained ever since), and given the low salary paid (not only then, but even now), life would have been much harder had I not exhausted myself teaching extra hours in mushrooming English centers around the city and private classes tailored to specific groups of learners. English learning movement was and is truly widespread all over the country, and will continue on its rise for years to come, allowing us to earn extra income, yet sadly at the expenses of other pursuits or necessities. This is also one of the problems in relation to English education in the country, similar to those in Korea, which I am going to discuss in the next section.

### 3.2 Similar Problems

**3.2.1**  **Teacher Quality**

Vietnam educational system has been facing with the problem of English teacher quality for several decades not from the very beginning but only since English learning began to flourish. The first generation of English teachers in the North in the 1950s and 1960s, small in number though, were well-trained and qualified; they were knowledgeable about the language and relevant subjects. These teachers well satisfied the demands at the time when the number of students they had to teach was also small – the teacher:student ratio was merely around 1:10-15, more or less, and the prevalent method was grammar-translation with little focus on communicative competence. Thanks to them, their students could learn a lot and acquire in-depth command of English. Upon graduation, most of these students became teachers of English in different universities and colleges in the country, and a number went to work in foreign relation agencies or Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the North, Hanoi College of Foreign Languages and Hanoi Foreign Language Teacher Training College were the sole providers of foreign language teachers to high schools and tertiary institutions in the North, with the addition of a small number of graduates produced by the Hanoi University’s Department of Foreign Languages established in 1978[[7]](#footnote-8). Meanwhile, English teachers in the South were supplied by Colleges of Foreign Languages in Hue, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City or Can Tho, after the Americans had gone.

In the early 1980s, especially after 1986, English learning became more and more popular, in and out of schools. It was introduced into middle schools from Grade 6, and the afore-mentioned universities/colleges could not supply enough teachers of English to the system. The responsibilities were shared with provincial teacher training colleges. With sudden rocketing demands, supplies naturally fell short. Teacher training programs overseas at graduate level supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) and then Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) between the 1970s and the early 2000s, could only award financial support to “approximately 40 Vietnamese teachers and interpreters annually” (Hoang, 2008). The Government Program of sending Vietnamese to pursue graduate studies overseas launched in 2000, including TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), commonly known as Program 322, can cover only a small part of the huge contingent of English teachers at all levels of schooling in the country. Other development assistance donors do support the educational sector in Vietnam, but TESOL teachers may not be their focus and hence cannot benefit much from such aids.

Recent years have seen increasing numbers of self-financed Vietnamese studying overseas, mostly taking hot courses like business administration, economics, but TESOL is not their choice. While some universities can sometimes retain the best of their graduates as replenishment to their faculty and thus are able to maintain and improve quality, others from elementary schools to higher education institutions suffer great shortage of competent English teachers, either because not many are available, or a teaching job is not attractive to the top graduates. They have to recruit less able teachers from various sources, many of whom have never had a chance to speak English with a foreigner, let alone visiting an English speaking country to get some first-hand experience of the language and its culture. A number of previous teachers of Chinese or Russian, despite their expertise in these two languages, experienced a time of under-employment when Chinese and Russian went ‘out of fashion’ due to the troublesome relation between Vietnam and China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and most of them had to attend a special training program to convert to English teachers. This is very much like the situation with teachers of other European languages in Korea, as Finch (2011) points out.

Now that English has been piloted on a number of elementary 3rd graders before it goes nation-wide, the problem of teacher quality even worsens. Before my trip to Korea, I was involved in administering tests of English proficiency for teachers of English in around 10 provinces in North Vietnam, and sadly enough, not a small number of English teachers at elementary, middle and high schools, especially in rural and remote provinces, could barely say what their names were in English.

English teacher’s proficiency is only part of the problem. A more important attribute of a good teacher in general is their pedagogy. In some selected institutions or ‘most favored groups’ (normally one such group for each grade in every school), for special programs with priority investment and facilities, and the top ‘cream’ of gifted students, the able teacher can apply various modern approaches and activities in language teaching, and success rates are high. But such ‘genteel’ programs are only for a humble minority. For the majority, with large class sizes, normally 35-45 students each, rigid classroom arrangement and facilities, the teacher cannot try out much CLT (communicative language teaching) even if they know it. What they eventually have to resort to is the traditional grammar-translation, or audio (if they are lucky enough to have a cassette/CD player for use in the classroom), or “structural method with a focus on lexicogrammar, reading and translation skills” (Hoang, 2008). The conclusion in Pham’s paper (2007: 200) can further illustrate this difficulty:

… many teachers embrace CLT, not simply because CLT represents a modern and progressive way of language teaching. Neither do they embrace it simply because they want to please the educational policy makers. The teachers in this study espouse ﬁrmly the primary goal of CLT — to teach students to be able to use the language — believing that this is consonant with the students’ ultimate goal of learning English in their context. However, when it comes to the level of practice, teachers often encounter many difficulties. Their desire to implement CLT, which is manifest through efforts to promote common Western CLT practices such as pair work and group work, conﬂict with many contextual factors. These factors range from systemic constraints such as traditional examinations, large class sizes, to cultural constraints characterized by beliefs about teacher and student role, and classroom relationships, to personal constraints such as students’ low motivation and unequal ability to take part in independent active learning practices, and even to teachers’ limited expertise in creating communicative activities like group work.

Not only Vietnamese teachers of English are faced with methodology problems, but native or native-looking teachers of English in Vietnam as well. International education providers such as the British Council, Language Link, the American Apollo, the Australian Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) can most of the time ensure that their English teachers are qualified, but the number of such institutions is quite small. Attracted by a large and expanding English training market, with gigantic numbers of centers inside and outside the formal educational sector comparable to Korean *hagwons*, many foreigners have come to Vietnam, first with a tourist visa as ‘backpackers’, and then converted it to some form of long-stay permit so as to teach English, even though the pay in Vietnam is not as handsome as in Korea or other Asian countries. These foreigners may enjoy a natural advantage compared to local teachers, merely because they are not Vietnamese. A number of them are ‘round-eyed’, but recent years have seen many from countries around the region or other non-English speaking European nations, and many do not have any teaching certificates or qualifications whatsoever, the same situation as Park (2009:53) reported, “Cramming schools have to pay $3,000 monthly in order to employ a native speaker of English, and often have to hire unqualified native speakers of English in order to meet the expectations of Korean parents”. Such foreign teachers are simply out of the Government’s control, which adds severity to the problem.

As has been said, the staffs in our Faculty of English, and our University in general, are replenished by the best of our graduates, so we can be assured of teacher quality. However, like all our sister institutions in the country, we are always overloaded, since the 150 staffs in our Faculty have to deliver English training to more than 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students at the same time. It is difficult for us to organize regular professional development training for them, and they may not have enough time to devote to other required academic pursuits, such as conducting scientific research, reading more methodology books, attending workshops to learn and share experience with their peers in order to improve teaching quality, or merely continuing studies for higher degrees[[8]](#footnote-9). Also, we all have to do extra work for generating incomes to support ourselves and families in times of inflation as high as 14% by March 2012 (Vietnam General Statistics Office GSO, 2012). *Teaching* quality, not *teacher* quality, therefore has to be compromised, and this is the sacrifice referred to in the previous section.

Given these quality problems, the need for the Government’s control and for teacher training has become more imperative than ever in Vietnam, and to do so, enormous amounts of financial, institutional, time and human resources will have to be in place.

**3.2.2 Time Allocation**

Thecurrent time allocation to English education in Vietnam is shown in Table 1.

As the table shows, after middle school, Korean and Vietnamese children have enjoyed roughly the same length of English education. When it comes to high school, differences occur: Korean high school leavers study English for substantially larger amounts of time than their Vietnamese counterparts since English is a critical part in Korean high school graduation and college entrance exams.

**Table 1. Designated English Classes**

**in Vietnam Educational System**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level of Education** | **Instructional hours** | **Subtotal** | **Total after each level** |
| Elementary or Primary School | | | |
| Grades 3-5 | 2/week/35 weeks | 210 | **210** |
| Lower Secondary or Middle School | | | |
| Grades 6-8 | 3/week/35 weeks | 315 |  |
| Grade 9 | 2/week/35 weeks | 70 | **595** |
| Upper Secondary or High School | | | |
| Grades 10-12 | 3/week/35 weeks | 315 | **910** |
| Tertiary Education | | | |
| Undergraduate | vary across institutions and programs | minimum 210 | **1120** |
| Graduate – Master level |  | 105 | **1225** |
| Graduate – Doctoral level | self-study equivalent to 45 instructional hours | | **1270** |
| **TOTAL** | **1270** | | |

*(Source: Hoang, 2008)*

For Vietnamese students, English is also one among 6 compulsory subjects in the high school graduation exams, but it is not as rigorous as in Korea, and the passing rates are normally high. However, the college entrance exams in Vietnam, equally competitive as the Korean CSAT, are categorized into several groups. Group A, for instance, consists of exams in Math, Physics and Chemistry; Group B Math, Chemistry and Biology; Group C Literature, History and Geography; Group D Math, Literature and English; etc., therefore only those who have to take the English exam must study hard day and night, both at school, *hagwon-type* institutions and teachers’ own classes in preparation for it.

The time devoted to English as a compulsory subject in all undergraduate and graduate programs also differs from that in Korea. While SNU students have to earn 2 – 4 credits with College English 1, College English 2 or other suitable courses, depending on their TEPS score, VNU undergraduates and graduates must respectively spend 10% and 14% (14 out of 140 credits, and 7 out of 50 credits) of their university course on English. Now that CEFR is beginning to be applied widely in Vietnam educational system, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) decides that once English introduction program with 3rd graders is in full-fledge, for an average child, the outcome levels of English should be A1, A2, B1 and B2 after elementary, middle, high school and university education, i.e. after 1120 hours in 14 years of English learning. Special programs naturally apply higher requirements.

In a country with as many as 75 - 80% of the population living in rural and remote areas, a country with 54 different ethnic groups, 53 of which speak Vietnamese only as their second language, given the English proficiency of teachers reported earlier, these outcomes may only be attainable to a small percentage of urban dwellers in more developed parts of the few major cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, Da Nang, Hue, Nam Dinh or Can Tho. The SMART objectives intended for English Education (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound) seem to lack their vital A, which is a headache to educational policy makers, teachers and learners of English in Vietnam, as much as it is to Korean counterparts.

Another aspect of this time distribution which contributes to low effectiveness of English education in Vietnam is the low frequency of exposure and practice. In an EFL context, it is difficult for learners to practice English outside the classroom, so 2 or 3 hours a week is merely sufficient for them to receive certain amount of lexicogrammatical knowledge, practice a bit of speaking in class, do some listening and reading exercises while writing is often assigned as homework. For less self-disciplined or busier learners (in fact, they are all always busy with heavy learning schedules and exercises in and out of school, like Korean children), practicing English everyday may not always be possible. “Practice makes perfect”, and without it or with too little of it, their English learning definitely falls below expectation.

Aware of such pitfalls, in the last three years, at VNU, all the students of the ISP (International Standard Program) of different majors have been gathered together for one year intensive English training at our ULIS, with at least 20 class hours a week instructed by the best of our staffs, plus extra-curricular activities and self-study resources for English practice and development at their disposal. We have strived our best to create a highly enabling environment for their English learning and practice. The result is quite promising: by the end of the year-long training, as much as 95% achieved Level C1 of CEFR, with some even higher. They then returned to their respective colleges and pursued their academic studies in the discipline of their choice, with many, if not all, courses using English as a medium of instruction. As a matter of course, there remain different pros and cons to the use of English as a medium of instruction in Vietnam and Korea; yet at least, these students know that their English will continue to be used and further developed, and if they fail in the English training program, they have to move to another program in a discipline they do not favor or may not perform as well. ISP students also can be assured of better employment and further study prospects upon graduation. These ‘bait-like’ factors have helped intensify their motivation in English learning, which turn them into some of the success factors of the English training part of the ISP program at VNU.

Such ISP model has worked at demonstration level, though. VNU in particular, and Vietnam educational system in general, are now trying to find ways to replicate this success story on a wider scale so as to improve the general level of English proficiency of their human resources, which is not easy, given the current financial, infrastructure and other major constraints.

**3.2.3 The Learners**

So far, I have been discussing the issues of teacher quality, teaching methods, time of exposure, facilities, or supportive policies and enabling environment, the factors which are instrumental yet more or less external to the success of English learning in particular, and language learning in general. Internally, the actor and manufacturer of this success is the learners themselves.

There are several aspects of the learners which determine success: motivation, needs, learning methods, self-discipline, etc. As with the ISP students described above, high motivation and clear, immediate needs have enabled them to achieve satisfactory results in the English training program. However, generally inside schools, the need for learning English may not be clear or imperative to many learners, so their only motivation is learning English as a compulsory subject and trying to pass exams, which comprise more writing, grammar, reading and vocabulary than listening and speaking. They do not practice English actively, particularly speaking. Their passive learning style culturally conditioned and cultivated during the 12 years of general schooling continues to university, which is hard to change and hinders their learning at tertiary level, not only in English but also other subjects. The result is they may pass the test, their written test scores can be satisfactory, but they are by no means good at speaking English, i.e. their communicative competence is low. This is another weakness shared by many Korean and Vietnamese learners of English.

Now that the Credit-Based Modular System (CBMS) similar to the American style has been applied more widely in Vietnam higher educational institutions, students are required to do more independent studies. Therefore, their passivity has reduced, and hopefully this reduction will help them learn English better, too.

## 4. Concluding Remarks

This paper has presented a number of linguistic, cultural similarities and shared attitudes toward education between the Korean and the Vietnamese peoples, and discussed the status of English in Korea and English in Vietnam among our Asian Englishes, which are considered the pride of our nations.

Nevertheless, we should be aware of the same problems we are both facing with, the biggest of which include the quality of English teachers and their teaching pedagogy, the learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and their learning needs and methods. Solutions for these problems cannot come over night; they will take years to be reduced before eventually reversed. Yet for the immediate future, from the Korean experience, I believe the Vietnamese can learn a number of lessons and carry out certain solutions with regards to the Early English Introduction Program; teacher training; teaching, learning and testing; teaching English for Specific Purposes vs. teaching subject matter courses in English; and the need for long-term foreign language policies.

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<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/socialize>, accessed 05 March 2012.

1. Reported by Vinh Ha and Ngoc Ha, tuoitreonline, <http://tuoitre.vn/Giao-duc/486194/Day-them-hoc-them-khong-xau.html>, April 9th, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Reported by Vinh Ha and Ngoc Ha, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <http://www.thomasthetankshop.com/thomas-the-tank-shop-232-143-metal_sign_teapots_and_hot_bottoms-replica_metal_signs.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/socialize>, 05 March 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This pun was used by an American professor from the University of Indianapolis at a workshop on American Popular Culture at our VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities in 1997. *Coke* and *Pepsi* have become two of the most popular beverages to billions of people, especially children virtually everywhere in the world, hence *colanization*, or *cocacolanization*, which sounds much the same as *colonialization*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Vietnam modern educational system established by the French in these colonies of course used French as the medium of instruction, while Vietnamese scholars continued to use spoken Vietnamese and Chinese or Nom (demotic) characters to impart Confucian learning before *quoc ngu (국어)* – the Romanized writing system initiated by the French Jesuit missionary Alexander Rhodes and other Vietnamese missionaries in the early 17th century started to be learned more widely. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Hanoi College of Foreign Languages (HCFL) has recently been expanded into a multidisciplinary tertiary institution under the new name of Hanoi University, while Hanoi Foreign Language Teacher Training College officially established in 1967 as a development of its smaller predecessor is now a VNU constituent bearing the name University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS). Hanoi University, to which this Department of Foreign Languages belonged, was merged with some other institutions in 1993 to become our Vietnam National University, Hanoi. This Department ceased to produce English graduates and focused solely on English training for students of other majors. In 2009, it was relocated to ULIS and merged with some other groups of ULIS English teachers to become the Faculty of English, of which I am the Dean. Currently, our Faculty with about 150 permanent staffs is responsible for English training for all VNU undergraduate and graduate students of majors other than English Teacher Education. Precisely because of this move I had to cancel my KFAS-awarded research program as one of the ISEF 2009-2010 laureates.

   Also note in passing that there may be other translations of the names of these institutions, which certainly causes confusion, e.g. Hanoi University or University of Hanoi, with its predecessor HCFL or Hanoi University of Foreign Studies, while ULIS was formerly known as VNU College of Foreign Languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. VNU faculty is required to earn doctoral degrees to achieve VNU target of 65% doctoral degree holders among its staff by 2020 (80% with regards to science, technology and economics), which is truly ambitious (*VNU Development Strategy until 2020*, [http://www.vnu.edu.vn/ home/?C1918](http://www.vnu.edu.vn/%20home/?C1918), accessed 24 April 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)