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Teaching English Writing at the Secondary Level in Vietnam: Policy Intentions and Classroom Practice

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Abstract: The need for writing is undoubtedly important in our lives, especially in modern societies of the 21st century. When examining the everyday world, one finds people engaged in many varieties of writing such as sending a text message, writing a covering letter or a scholarship application form, composing a research paper, etc. In short, writing not only is an integral part of our social and professional activities but also determines our life chances. The growth of English as a lingua franca makes English writing more important than ever before, which results in more attention paid to teaching English writing in non-English speaking contexts. This paper reports on part of the findings of a study that investigated practices of teaching English writing at the lower secondary level in Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Vietnam. The research employed a qualitative, multi-case study approach. The findings revealed a significant gap between the English education policies of the Vietnamese government and classroom practice. The teaching of secondary English writing did not prepare learners well for the 21st century language skills as expected.

Keywords: Writing, instructional practices, lower secondary level, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed rapid development of information technology, particularly the Internet, which has made dissemination of knowledge and access to knowledge incredibly easy. Therefore, acquiring wide knowledge is not considered as important as synthesizing, evaluating, applying and creating new knowledge [1]. This requires the 21st century education to transform from passive transmission of knowledge, using memorization and imitation into training learners in creative and critical thinking.

The 21st century, an era of increased globalization promotes more international collaboration. Therefore, English, a lingua franca, is seen as indispensable for communicating with the international community, accessing scientific and technical world knowledge, and integrating with the global market economy for increased

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employability [2]. The hegemonic forces of English have strongly impacted foreign language education policies in many countries including Vietnam. In order to boost English education in Vietnam, which was seen ineffective because it focused on lexicogrammar, reading, and translation [3, 4], and thus students could not apply what they learned for real communication [5, 6], the Minister of Education and Training made considerable changes in the seven-year English curriculum issued in 2006. The aim of this curriculum was for students to be able to use English as a means of communication at a basic level of proficiency in four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing [7]. Accordingly, Communicative Language Teaching, which aims to achieve communicative competence, an approach that focuses beyond linguistic knowledge, was emphasised in the English curriculum and teacher training materials:

The English curriculum for general education is built on Communicative Language Teaching approach,… Communicative competence is the target of the process of teaching and learning; linguistic knowledge serves as the means to the end [7, pp. 7].

The target of foreign language teaching and learning does not orient students to the study of a linguistic system, but rather aims to enable them to use this linguistic system as a means of communication, that is, training students in communicative competence. Communicative competence is manifested in the ability to use the language creatively in communicative situations [8, pp. 3].

In addition, communicative competence to use English independently was emphasised in the National Foreign Languages Project, which was launched in 2008 (and revised in 2017) to enhance English education to facilitate Vietnam's integration into the global community for national development:

To thoroughly renovate foreign language teaching and learning within the national education system; to implement a new program on foreign language teaching and learning at every level of schooling and training, which aims to achieve a vivid progress on professional skills and language competence for human resources, especially at some prioritized sectors by the year 2015. By the year 2020, most Vietnamese youths who graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities will be proficient enough to use foreign languages independently in order to be able to communicate, study and work confidently in an integrated, multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. Foreign languages will become Vietnamese people's strength, in service of the industrialisation and modernisation of the country [9, pp. 1].

Vietnamese learners are now expected to use English independently to be able to function well in various communicative situations, and to integrate into the international community [9]. This goal requires innovations in teaching and learning English in actual classrooms; that is, a shift from the traditional ways of English teaching and learning, focusing only on linguistic knowledge using memorisation and imitation [10] to developing communicative competence through four language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In such a context, in response to the governmental calls for innovations in the teaching and learning of English, the Ba Ria-Vung Tau Department of Education and Training has attempted to make several changes. One of these was that in the school year 2016-2017, writing (together with listening), was officially included in semester-end English examinations across Ba Ria-Vung Tau province. Furthermore, Ba Ria-Vung Tau teachers of English were required to attend a training course on English teaching methodology in late 2017. This study was carried out (after Ba Ria-Vung Tau teachers of English finished their training) to investigate whether instructional practices of English writing employed in Vietnamese lower secondary schools, particularly in Ba Ria-Vung Tau, can meet the requirements of the English education policies.

2. Literature Review

To provide theoretical background, this section first explicates the notion of *communicative competence,* which has been promoted in Vietnamese schools. Then it moves on to the presentation of three major approaches to teaching writing that helps to shed light on teachers' instructional practices of English writing.

2.1. Communicative Competence

The term communicative competence was coined by Hymes [11] to show his disapproval with Noam Chomsky's [12] notion of language competence that is purely grammatical knowledge. Hymes suggested that the socio-cultural aspects should not be ignored in any study of language use, and introduced "communicative competence", which includes not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use this knowledge in a variety of communicative situations. Elaborating on Hymes's proposal, Canale and Swain [13] defined communicative competence as a synthesis of three inter-linked components needed for communication:

i) Grammatical competence refers to knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, grammar and phonology. This competence involves the ability to use linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation to express the literal meaning of utterances;

ii) Sociolinguistic competence refers to knowledge of socio-cultural rules of language use and of the rules of discourse. Both rules help learners to interpret the social meaning of utterances. This competence involves the ability to use language appropriately to achieve communicative purposes in a variety of social contexts;

iii) Strategic competence refers to verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication, for example, using fillers (e.g. "Let me think").

These components are closely related and equally important, and need to be developed simultaneously to produce an overall improvement in communicative competence [14].

2.2. The Product-based Approach

The product-based approach to teaching writing sees writing as a static object or textual product - a coherent arrangement of words, clauses and sentences formed according to a system of rules [15].

This method of teaching composition has a linear form. The teacher introduces a model text and helps students analyse it by highlighting its grammatical structures, organisational patterns, and general stylistic characteristics. Next students do controlled practice of identifying the highlighted features. The teacher then assigns a composition based on the source text, instructing students to prepare a linear outline. Finally, each student produces a writing product that is evaluated by the teacher alone [16]. There is no space for students to interact and discuss their writing with their peers and teacher to receive guidance or feedback during the processes of developing their writing.

A major critique of the product-based approach is that it pays undue attention to linguistic or rhetorical features and does not take purpose, audience, and the process of composing into consideration [17, 18]. Students are required to unquestioningly apply the organisation of model texts to a similar piece of writing. Writing is seen as "simply imitation of input without any active involvement of the students in the formation of the written text" [19, pp.12].

2.3. The Process-based Approach

The process-based approach emerged as a reaction to the product-based approach and was highly influential during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. This approach focuses on composing processes through which writers formulate ideas to create texts, rather than on textual features. There are two broad teaching perspectives: expressivist and cognitivist [15, 20]. The expressivist view encourages teachers not to impose their views on or give models to students, but to invite learners to write freely through pre-writing tasks such as freewriting, brainstorming and journal writing [19]. This approach is more concerned with helping learners generate ideas

by providing meaningful content for writing tasks than with producing grammatically correct prose. The reliance on individual expressiveness has received much critique, largely because it tends to assume student writers possess all the inner recourses necessary to write well and, once these have been awoken, little else is needed [21]. However, besides knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, writers need sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence if they are to be successful [22].

By contrast, the cognitivist view goes beyond notions of creativity and self-expression in learning writing and focuses on the cognitive aspects of the task. Counter to the expressive approach, cognitivism draws on the planning-writing-reviewing framework of Hayes and Flower [23], which suggests that writing is a "non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" [17, pp. 165]. The "non-linear" or "recursive" nature of this approach is manifested in the fact that writers can move back and forth between the stages of writing. The stages of revising and editing are not individual but collaborative; when a rough draft has been created, it is polished as learners revise their writing based on peer and teacher feedback. Cognitivism gives students opportunities to improve their drafts to produce stronger final papers [18].

The process-based approach, according to Hyland [15], offers "a useful corrective to preoccupations with 'product' and student accuracy,… raising teachers' awareness of what writing involves" (pp. 17). However, this approach neglects the social dimension of writing, seeing text construction as asocial and decontextualised [15, 24].

2.4. The Genre-based Approach

While the process-based approach views writing as "lonely, autonomous cognition" [25, pp. 6], the genre-based approach sees it as a socially recognised way of using language [26]. Classroom applications of the genre-based approach are an outcome of communicative approaches to language teaching that stress the role of language in helping learners achieve

particular purposes in context [26]. The concept genre is based on the idea that members of a community have little trouble understanding each other thanks to their shared culture. "This is, in part, because writing is a practice based on expectations: the reader's chances of interpreting the writer's purpose are increased if the writer takes the trouble to anticipate what the reader might be expecting" [26, pp. 149]. In other words, writing is social; to achieve their communicative purposes, writers present their ideas in ways that connect with readers and make most sense to them [26].

Each genre has its own organisational pattern and linguistic choices, examples being *descriptions* and *recounts*, whose structure and specific linguistic features are distinctly different from each other. While descriptions make use of 'be', 'have' and tend to use present tense, recounts usually use more action verbs and past tense [24]. Genre-based writing instruction helps raise learners' awareness of how language is structured to achieve communicative purposes in different contexts [26]. This approach has led to the development of the teaching and learning cycle (TLC), which can be seen as a scaffolding approach to teaching writing [27]. Recent versions of the TLC consist of four stages, generally labelled as building the field or building topic knowledge, deconstruction or modelling, joint construction and independent construction [27, 28].

The first stage, building the field or building topic knowledge, emphasises the importance of building up background knowledge, that is understanding of the topic [29]. This stage aims to provide learners with enough knowledge of the topic that they are going to write about by activating their prior knowledge; that is, experience, information, and skills previously acquired [29]. The focus is on gathering relevant content or information through speaking, listening, reading, and researching, including the use of technology [28].

The second stage, deconstruction or modelling, emphasizes the importance of providing models of the genre to be learned and

of raising learners' awareness of the characteristics of a focus genre. This is crucial because each genre has its own characteristics and communicative function. At this stage, the teacher guides learners to analyse model texts to identify the purpose, overall structure, and language features (e.g. vocabulary and grammar structures) of a target genre. When deconstructing the text, the teacher first guides students in thinking about the purpose of the text, asking questions such as *Where have you seen texts like this before? What is the purpose of the text? Who is the intended reader or audience?* The teacher then draws attention to the overall structure and function of each stage of the text. Finally, the teacher introduces vocabulary and grammatical structures that are important in the text [28, 30].

At the third stage, joint construction, the teacher and students work together to create a text in a topic similar but not identical to the topic the students will write about independently. Finally, independent construction is the stage when students apply what they have learned to plan, draft, then discuss drafts with peers or the teacher, and produce their own texts individually or in pairs/groups. At this stage, they write about a topic that is similar but not the same as the one used in stages 2 and 3 [28, 30]. It is noted that the TLC is a flexible procedure: teachers can return to any stage where necessary for the purpose of best meeting students' needs [27].

Some scholars have criticised genre-based instruction for inhibiting students' creativity through conformity and prescriptivism [31]. However, Hyland [26] points out that genre-based instruction does not dictate the way we write, instead "it enables us to make choices and facilitates expressions" (pp. 152). Second language (L2) learners would be disadvantaged without explicit teaching of genres because they are often unfamiliar with L2 rhetorical conventions and the expectations of L2 readers [16]. According to Hyland [22], the various approaches to teaching L2 writing should be seen as complementary rather than as exclusive of each other. Hyland suggests that

teachers should incorporate the strengths of each approach, that is, providing students with an understanding of language forms, writing processes, and social aspects of writing. Similarly, Badger and White [32] state that an effective methodology for teaching writing needs to incorporate the insights of product-based, process-based, and genre-based approaches.

3. Research Design

The research employed a qualitative, multi-case study approach. It took place in a rural, a suburban and an urban school located in Ba Ria - Vung Tau province, Vietnam. The study was conducted after teachers of English finished their teacher professional development course on English Teaching Methodology in late 2017. Six teachers participated in this study, two from each school (one from grade 8 and the other from grade 9). Thirty classroom observations were audio-recorded, six consecutive writing lessons for each of the grade 8 teachers and four consecutive writing lessons for each of the grade 9 teachers. Each of the lessons, which lasted for 45 minutes, dealt with one genre.

The grade 9 and grade 8 textbooks [33, 34] used in this study consists of 10 units and 15 units respectively. (These books were prescribed by Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training.) Each lesson unit consists of seven sections in the following order: *Getting started*; *Listen and Read*; *Speak*; *Listen*; *Read*; *Write*; and *Language focus.* The section *Write* is designed according to three patterns. The first pattern is that *Write* consists of three components: a model text, controlled and/or guided practice, and independent practice. Drawing on Doff's [35] and Lopez's [36] classifications, controlled practice refers to the practice where learners focus on the accuracy of language forms, for example, completing incomplete sentences. Guided practice refers to the practice where learners are provided with support, for example, in the form of outlines and/or words/ideas cues. Independent practice is concerned with the practice where learners apply what they have

learned to the new situation, without types of support such as words/ideas cues, or outlines. The second pattern is that *Write* starts with a model text, followed by controlled and/or guided practice. Model texts in both textbooks are provided in isolation; that is, without accompanying questions. The third pattern is that *Write* provides only controlled and/or guided practice.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from the careful examination of observational data. The analysis of 30 lessons delivered by the six teachers suggested common patterns across the three schools, which are classified into two main categories as presented below.

4.1. Focus on Product Rather than Process and Social Nature of Writing

Careful examination of the six participants' teaching sequences reveals that they all followed a linear approach to teaching writing. First, they generally introduced the purposes of lessons through a small dialogue ending in "Today we learn,…". Then they provided their students with vocabulary and/or grammatical items relevant to the writing topic by activating their prior knowledge which was concerned mainly with the knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar the students had learned previously. Next, the teachers analyzed model texts provided in the textbook in terms of organisation, vocabulary and grammatical features. After that, they asked students to do the writing tasks provided in the textbook, most of which were controlled and guided practice, e.g. completing sentences or writing using outlines. Finally, the teachers nominated one or two students to write their responses to the textbook tasks onto the board. The teachers then corrected these pieces of writing, focusing on correcting errors at the word and sentence level, and asked the students to correct their papers themselves if they had made similar mistakes. The observational evidence showed that brainstorming for ideas by drawing on learners' prior knowledge/experience before

writing was missing and that the students produced a single and final copy at one sitting in class. They were not asked to revise their writing. This means processes of writing were not taken into consideration in this study context. All the six teachers focused on form rather than meaning. They drew their students' attention to textual or linguistic aspects of writing alone without considering the purpose and audience of the text, as seen obviously in the illustration excerpt 1. This excerpt occurred in a 9th grade teacher's unit 4 writing session.

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6. WRITE
A letter of inquiry is a request for information or action. In all formal letters, you must include the addresses of the writer and the recipient.

                                25 Le Duan st., District 1
                                Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam
                                April, 7th , 2003

Dear Sir,
I saw your school's advertisement in today's edition of the Vietnam news.
I am interested in learning Vietnamese and I would like some information about your school. I speak a little Vietnamese, but I want to learn to read and write it. Could you please send details of courses and fees? I can complete a spoken Vietnamese test if necessary.
I look forward to hearing from you.
Yours faifully,
J. Robinson

OUTLINE
Introduction:
- Say how you come to know about the Institution (advertisement on newspaper / watch on TV)
- Express your interest (want to know more information)
Request:
- State how good your English is; exactly what kind of information you want
- Further information: Say you are ready to supply more information about your English / study (record of study) if necessary.
Conclusion:
- End with a polite closing

Box 1. Model text and guided practice
Source: English 9, 2008.

In this unit, the textbook provided a formal letter of inquiry and guided practice based on an outline as shown in Box 1. The outline shows the overall structure of the body of inquiry letters, which consists of four parts: introduction, request, further information, and conclusion.

```
                    Matching
1. Heading          A. Yours
                       Faithfully/Yours
                       sincerely
2. Opening
3. Body of the letter  B. The content of
                          the letter
4. Closing          C. Write's address
                       and the date
                    D. Dear,…
```

Box 2. The teacher's PowerPoint slide1.

The teacher first introduced the overall structure of letters by asking her class to do a matching activity taken from the textbook (see Box 2). After checking the answer with the whole class, she explained how to organise the body of an inquiry letter using the outline provided in the textbook, as illustrated in excerpt 1. (Due to the constraint of space, part of excerpt 1 is omitted. Three dots […] symbolises omission).

Excerpt 1

T: Now, look at page 37. [T read the guidelines as shown in Box 1 above] Introduction: Say how you come to know about the institution (e.g. advertisement on newspaper/watch on TV); express your interest (want to know more information). How did the writer of the letter know the school's advertisement, S1?

S1: He saw the school's advertisement in today's edition of Viet Nam News.

T: Yes, how did he express his interest, S2? What sentence?

S2 [reading from the letter]: I am interested in learning Vietnamese and I would like some information about your school.

T: Right, so, this is introduction, do you understand?

[…]

T: [reading the guidelines in the textbook] Conclusion: End with a polite closing. What part of the letter is conclusion, S4?

S4 [reading from the letter]: I look forward to hearing from you. Yours faithfully.

T: Right, now look at the screen, please [Box 3]. These are expressions you need to use when doing the writing task in your textbook. Remember that the body of the letter has four parts, i.e. introduction, request, further information and conclusion. When writing each part of the letter, you can use these structures. To make a request, you use "Could you please",… To close the letter, you use "I look forward to hearing from you" and "Yours faithfully".

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1- Introduction
* I saw/heard/watched,… in newspaper/on TV,…
* I am interested in learning,…
2- Request
I speak a little,… But I want to learn to read/write,…
Could you please.… fees.
3- Further information
I can complete a test/supply my school report/,… if necessary
4- Conclusion
I look forward to hearing from you
Yours faithfully
```

Box 3. The teacher's PowerPoint slide 2.

It was found from excerpt 1 that the teacher did not explain that this letter of inquiry is a formal letter that is characterised by no contraction and formal language such as *Dear Sir* (formal opening), *Could you please* (formal request), *Yours faithfully* (formal closing). She just introduced these without emphasising that these are the typical features of formal letters, which cannot be used in informal letters. The teacher's questions did not take the context of the text into consideration. Questions like *What is the purpose of the text?* and *Who is the intended reader or audience?* were not discussed. She focused on showing the learners

how the text was structured, but not on explaining why it was written this way. In addition, the teacher did not compare this letter of inquiry with the personal letter that her students had learned at grade 8 to help them see the various language choices required for different purposes and audiences. For example, while letters of inquiry use formal language such as *Dear Sir*, *I look forward to,...* and *Yours faithfully,* personal letters use informal language such as *Dear* plus *first name* and *Love*. This suggests that the teacher was not aware of the importance of guiding the students to identify the connection between language choices and the context of the text.

It is important to mention that genres are specific to particular cultures [26, 30], so L1 (first language) and L2 texts of the same genre may vary. In this case, the salutations of English and Vietnamese formal letters are completely different. In English formal letters, the salutation can be *Dear Sir/Madam*, or *Dear* plus the addressee's surname and title, depending on the context of situation. However, the salutation of Vietnamese formal letters includes *Dear* plus the addressee's full name and title. The teacher could have strengthened the students' sociolinguistic competence by highlighting the differences in L1 and L2 salutation. Learners' unawareness of how such differences in language choices are influenced by the context of the text would result in their failure in written communication. The evidence presented above confirms that the teacher did not equip her students with the socio-cultural rules of language use that form sociolinguistic competence, integral parts of communicative competence. It is undeniable that the teaching of organisational patterns and key language features is helpful to Vietnamese learners because they have little exposure to English texts outside the classrooms and because L2 learning results from conscious noticing [37]. However, this was insufficient because writing is not just a textual product [20], it is also social in nature - to achieve their communicative purposes, writers must use appropriate language to meet their readers' expectations [35].

4.2 Students as Mimic Writers

A close examination of the student sample written on the board (Box 4) and the associated model text (Box 1) reveals that the student copied the model text and changed only three words/phrases in it. Specifically, *school, edition of the Viet Nam News* and *Vietnamese* from the model text were replaced by *institution, local newspaper* and *English* respectively. For example, the first three sentences of the model text, I saw your *school*'s advertisement in today's *edition of the Viet Nam News*. I am interested in learning *Vietnamese*,… I speak a little *Vietnamese*, were reworded as I saw your *institution*'s advertisement in today's *local newspaper*. I am interested in learning *English*,… I speak a little *English*. The remaining sentences of her letter and of the model text were exactly the same.
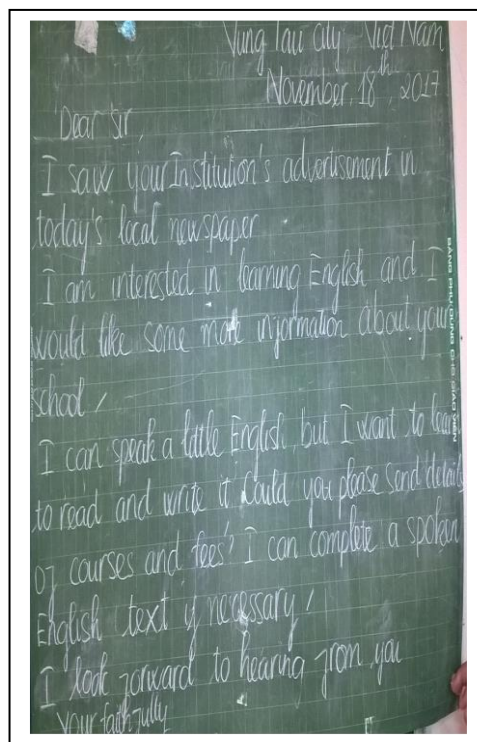
Box 4. Student sample on the board.

It can be seen from the student sample presented above that the student followed the same flow of idea development and used grammatical structures similar to the model texts, and even exact sentences from the model

texts. This practice was seen in all six teachers' classes. The student writing samples displayed on the board were structured and mechanistic, showing a mastery of linguistic features rather than the effective communication of meaning in a particular context of use.

That the teachers asked their students to look at what was corrected on the board to correct their papers implies that these student samples, which were similar to model texts, were seen as "good enough" to follow. This suggests that the learners in this study were positioned as mimics rather than independent or creative writers. It can be argued here that the learners seemed to be unable to write creatively and independently.

5. Conclusion

Despite great changes in English education policies, instructional practices of teaching writing in Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Vietnam seemed to be of little change. The traditional ways of English teaching and learning, i.e. focusing only on linguistic aspects of writing, remained obvious in classroom practices. Although the teachers just finished their training course which was organised in response to calls for innovative teaching, as the observational data suggested, the teachers still saw writing as a textual product, a product-based approach to teaching writing which was used ages ago. They did not give explicit attention to the socio-cultural rules of using language appropriately in context, and to processes of writing such as brainstorming for ideas and revising. Grammatical competence is definitely necessary but not sufficient to produce communicative competence. Writing was regarded as simply imitation of input. Arguably, this approach to teaching writing did not enable learners to be creative, independent users of English. This is in sharp contrast to the aim articulated in the English curriculum and the National Foreign Languages Project; that is, learners are expected to use the target language creatively and independently and to be able to achieve communicative purposes in different situations.

It is obvious that communicative competence cannot be gained by adopting the product-based approach. This approach does not equip learners with enough skills to be able to function well in real-life written communication. Also, it cannot prepare learners well for the 21st century, which requires employees to think creatively and critically. It is recommended that teachers should have a comprehensive view on the nature of writing. Writing is not only a textual product but it also involves composing processes and interaction with readers. This suggests that teachers should provide students with an understanding of lexical and grammatical features, social aspects of writing and writing processes.

A question raised here is why English education policies seemed not to translate well into classroom practice. What hindered innovations in English teaching and learning (in terms of writing)? Does the problem lie in deep-rooted, traditional teaching and learning practices, teacher training, curriculum or other issues? The answer to this question requires further research. Future research in this area may provide Vietnamese policy makers, particularly Ba Ria-Vung Tau ones, with useful information on work required for successful implementation of the revised National Foreign Language Project.

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