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Stimulating learner autonomy in English language education : a curriculum innovation study in a Vietnamese context

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CHAPTER 2

THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH

In this chapter, I will present the context of teaching and learning English in Vietnam since the national unification (1975). I will examine the socio-political and economic changes that have contributed to the decision according to which foreign language is to be taught in the educational system and the resulting foreign language policy that is supposed to promote foreign language learning. A synopsis of English language education in secondary and higher education, together with the learning results will then be discussed. The last section presents empirical results on the quality of teaching and learning English in secondary education and in English Language Teachers Training (ELTT) programs at tertiary level, discusses the communicative needs of Vietnamese learners of English, and what action is necessary to meet the learners' needs in learning English.

1. SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS AND THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH SINCE 1975

The socio-political and economic framework of the country has determined the choice of a foreign language in general and English in particular to be taught in Vietnam. From 1954 until the political changes in Eastern Europe, the principal foreign language for international communication of Socialist Republic of Vietnam was Russian. In the south of the country, French was the first foreign language up to 1954 (the end of French colonialism) and then English up to 1975 (the national re-unification). Since 1975, two big shifts in foreign language instruction have been observed: the shift to Russian (1975-1986) and then to English language (1986-present).

1.1 Russian (1975-1986)

After 1975, in the North of the country, Russian remained as the first foreign language in secondary schools and tertiary level. Russian majors always outnumbered the combined enrolments in other foreign languages (English, French, and Chinese) (Do, 2000).

The situation was different in the South, where English used to have the leading status before 1975. After 1975, Russian was introduced. The two main reasons for the decline of the teaching and learning of English in the country were (1) the nationalization of all schools that offered Russian as the first foreign language, and (2)

the weakening of all commercial transactions with capitalist nations. In higher education, English major intakes dramatically decreased.

In the late 1970s, the quota for English teacher training decreased by about two thirds (2/3) in colleges and universities in the South (Do, 2000).

In the whole country, the spread of Russian was promoted with the support from the Soviet Union. Through educational development programs, hundreds of Vietnamese students and teachers were sent to the Soviet Union to study at graduate and post-graduate level.

About a decade after the national reunification (1975-1985), Vietnam experienced an economic decline (Nguyen & Crabbed, 2000). In 1986, the Vietnamese government decided to expand relations with foreign countries and adopt the market-oriented economy. As a result, the role of foreign languages besides Russian, especially English, critical to the development of the country, began to be recognized.

1.2 English (1986-present)

The open-door policy in Vietnam attracted English-speaking foreigners to Vietnam. The influx of foreign investors from Asian countries, Australia and the European Union, strongly supported the use of English within these foreign companies in the beginning of the 1990s. Within the context of international business development, the importance of English language use increased. Its status and role were officially acknowledged and programs were initiated to promote English language learning. The acknowledgement of status and role of English has been observed in these three manifestations:

- 1) The student numbers in teaching programs for English language teachers at colleges and universities has doubled every year since 1993 (Nguyen, 1998).
- 2) For secondary education, the national English Language Teaching textbook series was written (1989-1992). Most secondary schools (except the ones in remote areas which suffer a shortage of teachers) include English lessons in the curriculum.
- 3) From 1993, foreign languages, especially English, have been increasingly chosen and command of a foreign language is required of all students (irrespective of their academic major), teaching staff and government officials. College and university students have to pass the foreign language exam as one of the requirements for graduating from a university program. For teaching staff, foreign language proficiency is a pre-requisite in post-graduate education and staff promotion. Government officials are required to learn foreign languages, especially English, by the Decree signed in 1995 by the Prime Minister.

2. ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN VIETNAMESE SECONDARY EDUCATION

The following sections present a picture of English language instruction in secondary education in Vietnam, by examining the time provided for instruction, the goals

in English learning, the materials used in English language classes, the role of teachers and learners and methods of assessment.

2.1 *The provision of time*

General education in Vietnam consists of 12 grades: *grade 1-5* (primary school for children for the age range 6-11), *grade 6-9* (lower secondary education for the age range 12-15) and *grade 10-12* (upper secondary school for the age range 16-18). Foreign languages are taught to children from grade 6 to grade 12. As far as English is concerned, it is being taught in almost all secondary schools throughout the country. Children in almost all grades have three forty-five-minute lessons per week; children in grade 6 have four.

2.2 *The goals*

It is generally assumed that after 700 hours (about 50 hours per semester) of English in secondary education, children will have mastered basic English phonetics and grammar and know a minimum of 2,000 vocabulary items (Nguyen & Crabbe, 2000). A document on English language curriculum goals issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (1997), which reflects the government language policy, specifies eight goals of foreign language teaching in secondary education (Nguyen & Crabbe, 2000). I grouped the eight goals in three clusters.

- 1) *Culture goals*: English instruction in secondary education aims to develop the students' knowledge and attitudes towards using English as a tool for learning about other cultures and a method for establishing links with members of other cultures for the development of mutual understanding. Students will learn more about Vietnamese cultures through other peoples' cultures.
- 2) *Linguistic goals*: English instruction in secondary education aims to enable students to become effective language users by developing their language skills. These skills help students to gain insights into their Vietnamese language, which will contribute to a better overall linguistic competence in the mother tongue.
- 3) *Learner autonomy development goals*: English instruction in secondary education aims at the students' personal development (self-confidence, learning skills, and personal strategies), enabling students to use English for accessing information and communicating in their further academic work. These goals are motivating factors for students to continue to develop their personal language skills independently beyond the classroom.

2.3 *The materials*

2.3.1 *The ELT textbook series*

The series of ELT textbooks currently used in Vietnamese secondary education consists of seven students' books. *English 6-9* are for lower secondary and *English 10-*

12 are for upper secondary level. These books were designed and written by a group of Vietnamese textbook writers in the MOET from 1989 to 1992. There are no audio-visual resources to accompany the textbooks. In practice, teachers record their own voice or ask foreigners in Vietnam to tape the lessons in these books. The books at the lower level have a bilingual approach and at advanced level, the emphasis is on English as the language of instruction. Table 2.1 presents available textbook series package.

Table 2.1. Available ELT textbook series package

<i>Titles</i>	<i>Students' books</i>	<i>Teachers' manuals</i>	<i>Publication year</i>
English 6	√	√	1989
English 7	√	√	1990
English 8	√	√	1990
English 9	√	√	1991
English 10	√	√	1991
English 11	√		1992
English 12	√		1992

The following section will describe the aims and the allocation of time for activities in each of the four language skills in these textbooks.

2.3.2 *Aims*

No aims are stated in the students' books for lower secondary level (*English 6-9*).

A section in the introduction of *English 10* and *English 11* stated that the books are designed to provide a comprehensive course for upper secondary students who have completed the series of English books in lower secondary level. The books continue to train the students' four skills: listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, but gradually focuses on developing reading (Tu, Phan, & May, 1991). In the introduction to *English 12*, it is stated that the aim of the book is to help students review and systematize the materials they have studied and continue to train their four language skills: listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. In *English 12*, more emphasis is placed on the development of students' reading skills (Tu, May, Ho, & Phan, 1992).

2.3.3 Proportion of activities for the four skills

The opportunities for students' skills to be trained via activities are shown in Figure 2.1.

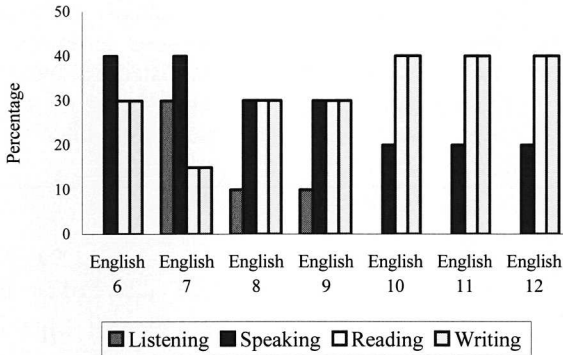


Figure 2.1. Percentage of activities in the textbook series allocated to the four language skills (Nguyen & Crabbe, 2000).

From figure 2.1, it is clear that at beginners' level (except grade 6), the emphasis is on activities devoted to listening and speaking, and at the more advanced level, the proportion for reading and writing activities take up almost two thirds of the time in the textbook. It should be noted that in these ELT textbooks, building sentences by using suggested grammatical structure(s) under exploration are perceived as *writing*. In fact, it can be considered as *grammar instruction* if we define "writing" as writing for communicative purposes. Though labeled as *writing*, these activities largely focus on conscious and analytical study of structure (Le, 2000). This effect is the result of the exam-oriented approach, which has been traditionally rooted in the culture of learning in ancient Vietnam. At the end of grade 12, students have to take the final secondary exam, in which English is a compulsory subject. In this exam, reading (i.e., reading comprehension and answering questions) and "perceived" writing (i.e., combining sentences with the knowledge of grammatical structures) are areas that are supposed to be tested.

Nguyen & Crabbe (2000: 8) observed how these textbooks have been used in secondary schools,

.... Materials are used as script when they dictate the order and content of what is to be covered. The teacher typically works through one activity after another in the textbook and although some variations from the script may occur, the result is nevertheless a linear coverage of the agenda set by the book....

Nguyen (2000: 8) adds,

... The dominant model of materials use in Vietnam is a materials-as-script model.

The grammar-based and norm-referenced examinations result from the use of materials-as-script model. This could explain why teachers of English focus more on language knowledge rather than language use and more on receptive skills than productive skills (Le, 2000).

Since the academic year 2002-2003, a new textbook series for lower secondary schools (English 6, 7, 8) has been piloted in some urban schools in Vietnam. English 9 will be piloted in the academic year 2005-2006. The book series place equal emphasis on the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In terms of the topics, these textbooks are Vietnamese-based. The researcher has not so far been informed of empirical results from the pilot of this new textbook series.

2.4 Teachers' and learners' roles

The major philosophical tradition that has influenced the culture of teaching in Vietnam is Confucianism. The basic Confucian teachings provided a model for social relations (Mar, 1981 cited in Ellis, G., 1994), which have shaped teacher-student relationships in the Vietnamese educational system. The position of the teacher is highly respected both inside and outside school. At school, students are supposed to learn how to behave first and then learn the subject. It would be very rude to misbehave to a teacher verbally or non-verbally.

The English learning environment in Vietnamese classrooms could be described as a "cultural island" (Le, 2000) in which the teacher is supposed to be the *provider* of knowledge of the target language. The focus of instruction is on the language structure more than on its use. It means that a comprehensive mastery of grammatical structures of the English language is an expected pre-requisite for teachers in teaching their students. Another role the teacher is supposed to assume is a *feedback giver*. Whenever a student makes a mistake, the teacher is expected to interrupt the student at once and correct it. If the teacher does not correct the student's mistake, it is seen as a shortcoming and the teacher is deemed incompetent. Students' learning outcomes are evaluated within a product-oriented framework, so teachers assume another role of an *evaluator* who grades students' performance on tests and exams and makes the final decisions on a students' grade, which in turn are an indicator of success or failure in learning. As mentioned earlier, English teaching and learning is examination-driven, which leads to another role of the teacher as a *high-pass-rate guarantor*. As is to be expected, what and how the teacher teaches is dictated by the requirements of the examination and is not linked to the learning needs of individual students.

In such a teaching context, students are expected to be the good *listeners* and good *imitators* of their teacher. In Kennett and Knight (1999)'s words, sitting in rows of immobile tables and chairs, students' learning follows the hierarchy of first listening to the teacher, then repetition and then copying models. Most of the time, classroom interaction is one-way, between the teacher and the individual student.

Students will answer the teacher's question when asked. Interruptions, arguments and asking for clarification are hardly observed. At the end of the semester, students are expected to "return" (Le, 2000) what they have learned in their lessons in examinations. This requires *rote learning*.

It has been observed that teachers hold a key role in the transmission of knowledge and as a learning quality guarantor. With such roles of the teachers, students are not provided with the opportunities to take an active role for their learning.

2.5 Assessment

In Vietnam, learning is strongly examination-focused. Examinations in English are composed to test the students' knowledge of grammatical structures and vocabulary. The final score during a semester in lower or upper secondary level is generally the combination of the scores of one oral test, two fifteen-minute in-class written tests, one one-hour in-class written test and one two-hour in-class final semester written examination. In the oral test, the teacher normally asks students the meanings of words or comprehension questions after having read a text. Sometimes in oral tests, students are expected to build sentences using given cued words they construct on the basis of their knowledge of grammar. The paper tests or examinations are largely grammar-based. The grammar section is most often tested in the form of multiple-choice. Reading a text and answering the questions, or giving the synonyms or antonyms of the words and writing (sentence building) are the most common formats used in testing and examinations.

Overall, English in secondary schools in Vietnam demonstrates the teacher-centered approach to teaching. Here, the teacher, constrained by the curriculum (in this case, the textbook), decides the learning purposes and learning paths and evaluates the learning outcomes of transmitted knowledge via norm-referenced examinations.

The following section will present the context of teaching and learning English in the English Language Teachers Training (ELTT) programs in universities in Vietnam. The *provision of time for training, the training goals and the materials used in these programs, the roles of teachers and students and types of assessment* will be examined.

3. ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN ELTT PROGRAMS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

3.1 Provision of time for training

ELTT programs in universities grant a Bachelor degree in English Language Teaching. After graduation, graduate student teachers will work as teachers of English within the secondary school system. It normally takes students in these programs four academic years (eight semesters) with about 2.400 in-class study hours to complete all courses required for graduation. In semester 6, arrangements are made for students to visit secondary schools and observe how English is taught and in semester 8, they will be "practicing teachers".

Besides courses offered in Vietnamese during the four years, students are required to finish about 1.800 study hours for courses in English. These four-year programs normally consist of two phases. It should be noted that the MOET has decided that at tertiary level each university can develop and adapt its own curriculum *within the national curriculum framework* (Pham, 2000). This could provide an explanation for some variation in time distribution and course options in ELTT programs in the whole country. Table 2.2 summarizes the two main variations in course options in ELTT programs.

Table 2.2. The two main variations of course options in ELTT programs

Semesters	Types of courses offered	Variation 1	Variation 2
Semesters 1 to 3	Language skills	√	√
	English grammar	√	√
	Courses in Vietnamese	√	√
Semesters 4 to 8	Language skills	Not offered	√
	Courses in Vietnamese	√	√
	Linguistics, Literature, Culture and society and Translation	√	√
	English Language Teaching methodology	√	√
	School visits	√	√
	Teaching practicum	√	√

With the presumption that one should master basic language skills in English before one can take content courses in English, most ELTT programs in universities are designed so that in phase 1 (the first three semesters) the emphasis is on courses on language skills and grammar. These are intended to develop students' language skills by providing knowledge of the structure of the language. Students also take content courses in Vietnamese (e.g., philosophy). In phase 2, content courses (e.g., Linguistics, American and British Literature, American, British Culture and Society and ELT Methodology, Translation: Theories and Practice) are offered in English.

For other ELTT programs in universities, working on the philosophy that 'skills' should be given the opportunity to be trained and developed over a longer period than the first three semesters, courses on language skills (no longer with the emphasis on grammar) in these programs are offered throughout the Bachelor's program. However, a decrease of in-class study hours for language skills has been observed in the curriculum of these universities. The underlying reason for this decrease is that upon completing phase 1, students are supposed to have mastered basic language skills. In the second phase, courses on language skills focus more on helping stu-

dents to develop their foreign language skills rather than continuing to teach basic skills. Together with advanced language skills courses, second phase courses including ELT methodology, British/American Culture and Society, British/American Literature, Linguistics, Translation: Theory and Practice are offered.

The study hours English students can achieve in each semester vary from 165 to 300, depending on the amount of content courses in Vietnamese offered in individual semesters. The amount of study hours of all courses in Vietnamese and English together in one semester will not exceed 420.

3.2 *The goals*

From descriptions of some ELTT programs and from my personal communications with individual teachers teaching in ELTT throughout Vietnam, the goals of ELTT programs in Vietnam, besides providing moral, physical, aesthetic and country-loving educational aims, English language learning in particular can be summarized under two main headings:

- 1) *Language skills and professional skills development goals*: The overall goals of ELTT programs are to develop students' language skills and equip them with knowledge of English linguistics, American/British literature, American/British culture/society and especially the professional skills (teaching skills), which help serve their teaching career in secondary schools.
- 2) *Learner autonomy development goals*: The programs aim to develop students' personal and independent learning skills, which they will continue to use after their graduation from the programs.

3.3 *The materials*

We should emphasize again that the MOET has decided that each university may develop and adapt its own curriculum within the national curriculum framework. Nevertheless, the curriculum at many tertiary institutions is not needs based (Pham, 2000). Textbooks are considered "curricula": "The curriculum in Vietnam is just the textbooks associated with the teachers' books" (Brogan, 1998 as cited in Pham, 2000: 5). The new arrival or the recommendations of "pre-packaged knowledge" textbooks (Wessner, 2001, personal communication) for language skills and content-courses from America, Britain and Australia brings along frequent changes in "curricula" in these programs. It is certain that these textbooks do not consider the Vietnamese learners' needs.

3.4 *Teachers' and students' roles*

The influence of the traditional philosophy of learning and teaching of Confucianism, even in higher education, implies that there are few observable differences between learning and teaching in universities and secondary schools.

It is generally believed that it is almost impossible to change the *perceived students' passiveness in learning*, while language classrooms in Vietnam remain

teacher-centered, focusing on grammatical items (Pham, 2000). Therefore, the main role of the teacher is *the planner of the lessons* and *transmitter* of knowledge. Communication is usually from teacher to student or students to teacher. Pair work and group work is sometimes observable. Students coming to class expect the teachers to explain the vocabulary, grammatical or sentence structures. They usually believe they can barely say anything before acquiring “enough” grammar rules and vocabulary (Nguyen, 1998; Pham, 1998). At this level, students also expect teachers to correct their mistakes or errors in speaking and writing as soon and often as possible. So teachers assume the role of *linguistic correctors* in students’ oral and written performance. And at the mid-term or/and the end of the semester, the teacher will *write the questions for the exams, grade the students’ exam papers and decide on students final scores* by assessing the finished product in the students’ examinations. The final scores are considered as indicating students’ achievement level.

Similar to learning and teaching in secondary schools, learning at university level is generally considered to be the process of accumulating knowledge, analyzing and memorizing information in books rather than the acquisition of practical skills. What students are expected to do is *attend class, listen to the teacher’s explanations and take notes*. Learning is characterized by “meticulous attention to linguistic and stylistic details rather than communicative skills” (Pham, 2000: 4). In this process, *finishing the assignments (classroom participation) and passing the final examinations* is the final role a student is expected to assume.

3.5 Assessment

Types of assessment are largely determined by institutional policy. Two types of assessment are dominant.

In most ELTT programs, students are assessed by a combination of the score in the in-class mid-term examinations (30% of the final grade) and final examinations (70% of the final grade). Assessment in this type of program is totally product-oriented (type 1).

In some ELLT programs, students’ classroom participation will account for 30% of the final grade and the in-class final exam will contribute 70% of the final grade. The final grade awarded for the course will be the combination of these two and it is clear that assessment in this type of program is a combination of process and product orientation, with more emphasis on the product (type 2).

Whether or not students are able to pass a course depends on their production during these exams. A students’ progress in improving performance during the semester is not taken into account (Ton, 2002) in a type 1 assessment, and only partially in a type 2 assessment.

Having reviewed *the provision of time, the goals, the teaching materials, the teachers’ and students’ roles and assessment* in teaching and learning English at secondary schools and ELTT programs in Vietnam, it is now time to turn to the empirical results (learning outcomes and communicative needs) from the two contexts of teaching and learning English, at secondary schools and ELTT programs at universities.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

4.1 *The learning outcomes*

Secondary level. Empirical results from a questionnaire survey conducted in an urban high-quality secondary school by Nguyen (2004) showed that grammar and vocabulary are what these students learn most often in their lessons of English and listening and speaking the least, while *perceived writing* (i.e., combining sentences, using grammatical rules) and reading are in between these two. The results also revealed that 57.4 % of students do not agree that they can use English for communication. Four reasons given for their communicative incompetence are (1) shyness, (2) shortage of vocabulary, (3) a lack of opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills, and (4) the absence of an English-speaking environment. During the years of learning English at secondary schools, students experience listening and speaking least often. Though grammar and vocabulary are taught more often than language skills, students do not have the opportunity to communicate in English for genuine purposes and use their vocabulary in real communication, which could explain the incompetence in using English to communicate as reported by the participants in the study.

University level. A study conducted by Tran (1996) indicated that only about 35% of students graduating from ELTT programs at a university are qualified for teaching at secondary schools. The result is even less positive when considering an estimate from teachers at various institutions that in an ELTT class just 10 out of 50 students are qualified to teach in secondary schools (Pham, 2000).

The result of Pham's (2000) case study showed that most graduates from ELT programs lack confidence in their professional skills and their great need is to be trained not only in teaching skills but also in language skills.

The result of teacher-students roles in the classrooms, the lack of genuine communication (in terms of input and output) and examination-oriented instructions are that (1) many students earn good grades in their exams as a "reward" for their knowledge of language structures, linguistic details or knowledge of linguistics but fail to communicate effectively in real life (Le, 2000) and (2) the concept of learner autonomy or learner independence seems to be new (Pham, 2000). In the newsletter "Studying abroad: What have I learned?", Phan (2004:1), after his learning experience in a graduate program in the US, states,

... Studying abroad, I have learned much. I have learned what I have not learned during my 12 years of secondary education and years at university.... I have learned how to learn independently. Students have to exploit the resources in the library to their utmost, which helps develop autonomy in studying and doing research. Working by this way, when knowledge has been constructed, they are in learners' mind. In Vietnam, we do not even have enough time for rote learning, let alone going to the library for doing searching. As a result, after the exam, knowledge "goes back" to the teachers.

4.2 *Why do students wish to learn English?*

The most significant foreign language research project, a questionnaire survey (Do, 2000) on a national scale ($N = 641$) contributing to the foreign language policy in the country, was conducted from September 1995 to February 1996. It aimed to investigate university students' attitudes towards foreign language education policy, their attitudes towards the choice and use of English, their motivation for English language learning and the impact of English language on higher education. The result showed that 68.6% of the participants believed that English is the most important foreign language and the most frequently used language, so it should become the most important foreign language taught in Vietnam. The study also disclosed three main reasons for students to learn English as a vehicle for communication: (1) *access to the world's knowledge and skills in science and technology*, (2) *better jobs* and (3) *overseas study*. The study also shows that learning English for personal reasons like *enjoying more entertainment, having more fun and satisfaction or because of interesting English lessons* did not appear to be motivating factors for the learning of English.

These three main reasons have implications for the curriculum. If learners aim at *getting access to the world's knowledge and technology*, they need especially to be competent in reading and listening in English. If one aims at *having a better job*, all four language skills are required: speaking, listening, reading and writing. *To study abroad*, learners must be equipped with competences in listening, reading, writing and speaking. So, what learners need is communicative competence to use English for professional purposes. The goals of foreign language instruction at secondary schools and at university level in the Vietnam both emphasize the "learner autonomy" goal. Language learning is a life-long endeavor and it is a fact that no foreign or second language classrooms can teach students all that they need in their lives for communication outside the classroom. Learner autonomy in foreign language learning plays a pivotal role in meeting the learners' communicative needs.

Taking the goals of ELTT programs as a guide, future secondary teachers of English are supposed to be competent in English to use the language to communicate with secondary students. To deal with improving the communicative competence, teachers have to be autonomous in learning English for their own personal and professional development.

5. SUMMARY

An examination of the goals of English language instruction at secondary level and ELTT programs at university level, teaching and learning practices, the communicative needs of Vietnamese learners of English and the results from the empirical studies revealed that graduates' communicative competence is far from satisfactory and that they lack learner autonomy.

Learning materials creating opportunities for learners to use the foreign language in purposeful communication and with the emphasis on learner autonomy as a key to successful learning are of crucial importance to remedy this situation. This corresponds with the issue President Tran Duc Luong addressed in his newsletter to

teachers and students at the beginning of the academic year 2003-2004, concerning the main task of education,

... Attention should be paid to renewing the curriculum and innovating teaching methods to develop students' activeness, creativeness and independence in learning. (Tran Duc Luong, 2003: 2)

What should an English language curriculum for developing Vietnamese students' autonomy and communicative competence look like? The next two chapters will attempt to explore this question.

