

Article

Primary English Language Education Policy in Vietnam's Disadvantaged Areas: Implementation Barriers

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Abstract: In the context of English as a global language, compulsory English language education at the primary level has become an inevitable trend in many non-English-speaking countries, including Vietnam. However, there have been concerns regarding how English language policy is realised across contextual settings, especially in rural and remote areas of Vietnam. Based on language-in-education goals, this article investigates English language policy implementation in Vietnam's rural and remote areas from the perspective of primary English teachers from 2008 onwards. The present paper employs a desk review of existing literature, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Data collected from multiple sources show the inequality of access to English language learning in the rural localities. The findings also indicate a significant gap between the current English language policy goals and implementation in the rural primary sector regarding slow execution, curriculum variations, limited teaching resources, inappropriate pedagogy, and assessment. These problems have been accelerated due to a shortage of teachers as well as inconsistency and limitations related to pre-service teacher training programs and recruitment. Identifying significant challenges of English language policy implementation in the Northwest of Vietnam helps shed light on primary English education in remote and marginalised regions. Therefore, the recommendations target policy makers, teacher educators, and stakeholders to assist primary English teachers in rural areas to improve and advance the success of primary English education in Vietnam's remote areas and beyond the specific context to which it refers.

Keywords: primary English teaching; English language education; policy implementation; rural/remote/disadvantaged areas



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1. Introduction

One of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals is to promote inclusive and equitable quality education for all, potentially transforming the world by 2030 [1]. Ensuring that all young people and children have access to educational equity and inclusiveness has been challenging for many remote and rural schools [2], where students have scarce access to qualified teachers and learning resources. Achieving inclusive and equitable education in these contexts can be unattainable due to multiple challenges facing teachers and students. Since the 1980s, the issuance of education policies with a specific focus on socio-economic development in disadvantaged areas has demonstrated the Vietnamese government's attempts to narrow economic, cultural, and geographical barriers to education.

Teachers are the key to making a difference in students' learning [3]. It is pivotal for teachers to be equipped with appropriate knowledge and prerequisite skills to enhance their teaching and provide timely assistance to the diversity of students coming from ethnic groups in disadvantaged areas. Teacher education programs in Vietnam have struggled to

handle access, equity, and excellence [4]. Inadequate primary English teachers (PETs) have been a significant concern in Vietnam since the promulgation of Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg in 2008, especially in the rural and remote areas where PETs work under multilayered contextual challenges [5]. Although numerous policies have been issued in support of teachers working in low-socioeconomic areas, there are concerns regarding how provincial governments implement these policies at the local level in various contexts [5].

Similarly, language policy is a fundamental factor for implementation success [6]. Investigating language-in-policy from the perspective of classroom teachers is critical to realise Vietnam's national foreign language policy goals. However, there has been limited research on the practices required to successfully implement the primary language policy in Vietnam [7], especially in disadvantaged areas. This study attempted to fill the research gap by investigating how new language policies have been implemented in primary schools in the Northwest of Vietnam—a region characterised by the highest density of ethnic minorities and rate of poverty [8]. In particular, this study aims to: (i) investigate how English language policy goals have been implemented in the primary sector in Vietnam's disadvantaged areas; (ii) identify contextual challenges that hinder the implementation of primary English education in rural and remote areas in Vietnam. Targeting equity access to English education for northwestern primary students, the findings of our study provide policymakers and different stakeholders recommendations which will provide timely support to PETs in rural and remote areas.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Primary English Education Policy

English Language policy planning and implementation in the primary sector has been a topic of discussion in various contexts. In Asia, globalisation and national development have been the major drivers of top-down English-in-education policies [9]. Language-in-policy goal planning is critical to language teaching and learning, in which the defined goals cover the form of a language learning program [10]. There has been a growing trend in Asia that language-in-policy is framed to equip learners for the global community and competitive world. However, this trend has raised many unanswered concerns to date, especially for those living in rural, underdeveloped areas [11].

Discontinuity or unsuccessful language provision is the consequence of stand-alone language-in-policy planning. Language-in-policy planning in any education system should consider the three problems impacting the implementation. These issues include: (i) “slow dissemination”, denoting long-term language dissemination through the education system; (ii) “limited audience”, meaning restricted agencies, depending on schools, teachers, and functions; and (iii) “lack of resources” relating to under-resourcing for the tasks the education sector fulfills [12] (p.1013). Examining some common fallacies related to educational language planning, Kaplan et al. [11] identified twelve fundamental reasons which may lead to the failure of primary English language planning. They include inadequate time, inappropriate teacher training, insufficient/appropriate materials, inappropriate methodology (in light of desired outcomes), inadequate resources for student population needs, insufficient commitment continuity, uncertainty related to language norms, ineffective international assistance, unprepared primary students, unconsulted community, and minority language marginalisation. Consulting different stakeholders involved in school-based language policy has been indicated as one useful way to respond to misalignment between policy and implementation [13]. This is because of various stakeholders' perceptions regarding what will work best to implement the policy, with a focus on teachers' roles as key in the changes.

It has been argued that in the contexts characterised by the dominance of the culture of compliance, teachers are considered mere policy recipients, or more specifically, as subordinates; they follow and implement their leaders' mandates [14]. Investigating primary English teachers' agency in a disadvantaged area in Vietnam, Le et al. [15] found that although the teachers were expected to strictly implement the policies under the super-

vision and inspection of their stakeholders, these teachers adapted the policy mandates to suit their interpretations, preferences, choices, and current teaching conditions. Teachers resisted or adjusted the language-in-policy in how the policy was interpreted and to what extent they were trained to accommodate the increasing demands and responsibility [16]. However, their resistance, particularly for those who work with diverse students of ethnic backgrounds, needs to be considered thoughtfully. They require leadership support to cope with contextual challenges within their teaching contexts to meet the expectations of the policy [5,13].

A comprehensive framework for successful language policy and planning has been proposed by Kaplan & Baldauf [12]. This framework includes seven implementation goals: (i) Access policy, meaning “Who learns what when?”; (ii) Personnel policy, denoting “Where do teachers come from and how are they trained?”; (iii) Curriculum policy, referring to “What is the objective in language teaching/learning?”; (iv) Methodology and material policy, involving “What methodology and materials are employed over that duration?”; (v) Resourcing policy, indicating “How is everything paid for?”; (vi) Community policy, meaning “Who is consulted/involved?”; and (vii) Evaluation policy, meaning “What’s the connection between assessment on the one hand and methods and materials that define the educational objectives on the other?” [12] (p.1041). Policymakers should consider these requirements, especially personnel issues, including training and ongoing professional development to prepare teachers for their changing roles as innovative teaching practitioners [5,17]. Kaplan & Baldauf’s [12] framework provides the basis for examining how language policy goals have been implemented within the Vietnamese context; more specifically, the language policy goals from 2008 onward regarding English learning programs in the primary sector in Vietnam’s rural and remote areas.

2.2. Primary EFL (English Foreign Language) Teacher Training

As any educational changes depend on teachers’ changes [3], language teachers play a fundamental role in language learning and implementing changes in the expected direction as stated in the policy. Insufficient consultation with classroom teachers was reported to be partly the reason for the unsuccessful implementation of the new primary English curriculum reform in the Malaysian context [18]. It has also been highlighted that macro-level planning alone may not produce any changes regarding desirable outcomes; therefore, different stakeholders’ lived experiences should be considered to realise policy goals in the micro reality [19].

Teaching English to young learners in the school setting has been an issue of discussion in different contexts worldwide, and teacher training has been identified as a significant problem since the 2000s [20]. In EFL teacher education, English fluency and the ability to implement age-appropriate methodology are considered most critical [21]. From the results of research conducted in mainstream schooling in Europe, Bland [22] highlights the role of language learning as a potential tool to broaden young language learners’ horizons. However, there are more concerns in implementing reflective practices amongst English teachers of young children, especially in EFL contexts where educational goals and learning outcomes seem to be neglected by large-scale empirical research [21]. In addition to EFL teacher education, issues related to curricula, assessment, equity, outcomes, and young learners’ transition to higher stages of education are significant challenges in various educational contexts [23].

Primary English teaching has gained momentum in Vietnam and elsewhere globally, and there remain many challenges facing different stakeholders and primary teachers of English. The significant lack of PETs has become pressing in Asia, Europe, the United States, and Australia [24], and in Vietnam as well [5,7–27]. Vietnamese PETs have been trained inappropriately, and they are not qualified and confident to teach English to primary students [5,28,29]. It was estimated that if all primary schools in Vietnam provided English from Year 3, the country would need 5000 more PETs in the school year 2020, but over 30% of current Vietnamese PETs do not meet the requirements stated in the General Education

Program 2018 [30]. The quantity and quality of training programs are issues of concern as they impact the quality and quantity of primary English teachers. Many teachers have been found inadequate in their expertise and professional knowledge in teaching English to primary learners [5,31,32]. Adding to these existing challenges is the quality of primary English textbooks [33].

2.3. Primary English Education Policy in Disadvantaged Areas: A Gap to Be Filled

Teaching English to young learners has attracted the interest of international scholarship [34]. However, research on how to teach young learners English effectively remains scarce compared to other fields [35]. Research has addressed particular components of primary teachers' knowledge and skills [24,36–38], primary teacher's pedagogy [18], and teachers' pedagogical knowledge in concurrence with their beliefs and language policy implementation [39]. Recent scholarly attention has been drawn to the context of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Northern Vietnam [4,40,41]; however, there remain limited research studies on primary English teacher education in complex multicultural settings in Vietnam in terms of number and scope. Other available studies have explored English teachers' beliefs and practice [42,43], primary English teachers' practice and identity [44], primary English teachers' agency [45], and assessment practice on the implementation of the pilot primary English language curriculum [46]. These studies focused on secondary and primary teachers in urban areas, leaving remote and rural areas under-researched.

Investigating the policies of Asian countries, Baldauf et al.'s [47] cross-national study identified the issue of misalignment between policy requirements and implementation. In the context of Vietnam, Nguyen's [7] study, which was conducted in two primary schools in Hanoi capital city, also indicated a significant gap between government policy and what happened in practice. One notable concern raised was that while urban primary schools in privileged contexts still struggled with implementing the new English curriculum, the question of how the Government's policies have been implemented in rural and remote areas was still unaddressed. In addition, Nguyen's study revealed many language planning issues regarding teacher supply, teacher training, and professional development, resources, pedagogy, and materials. Using a combination of document analysis, observations, and interviews, a more recent study investigated Vietnamese primary teachers' agency in response to language policy [45]. The findings highlighted that primary English teachers in various contexts of urban, suburban, and rural areas exercised their agencies differently during language policy implementation. A study conducted by Bui [40] addressed English language teachers in rural areas, but it did not comprehensively discuss the alignment between language policies and EFL practice.

A review of the literature supports our argument that there is a dearth of rigorous research literature providing insights into primary English education in Vietnam's disadvantaged areas. Prior Vietnamese studies did not comprehensively discuss how the new language policies have been implemented at the primary level in disadvantaged areas. The Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg aims to achieve education equity. Therefore, conducting research into how the language-in-policy has been implemented at the primary level in disadvantaged areas from PETs' perspectives and offering recommendations at a policy level is vital for the equity of access to primary English education in Vietnam.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study design was selected to gain insight into the implementation of the primary English language policy in the rural and remote areas in Vietnam. A combination of a desk review of existing literature and policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews were undertaken. More specifically, this study employed a desk review of existing literature and research in Vietnam on primary English language policy implementation; a policy analysis mapping the Vietnamese national policy scope in relation to primary English education; and in-depth interviews with six PETs. These combined

methods provided a rich set of explanations about how primary English language policy goals were being realised in the rural and remote areas of Vietnam.

3.1. Selection of Research Sites and Participants

Our study was conducted in the Northwest, one multi-ethnic region with the highest percentage of minority ethnics coming from 32 groups of six mountainous provinces. This mountainous area, along the borders of China and Laos, includes the six provinces (mentioned later in this paper as NW1, NW2, NW3, NW4, NW5, and NW6). This region is associated with the “highest density of ethnic minorities” but Vietnam’s “poorest region” [8]. The ethnic minorities living in the Northwest region confront with a lot of challenges such as poor infrastructure, low-quality education, and limited access to health services and employment opportunities. For example, in terms of health services, compared with the national average of 60%, the rate of this region’s communities having access to doctors is only 23% [41]. In education, the Northwest can be categorised as a disadvantaged region due to a shortage of teachers who can speak minority languages and the lowest literacy rate of the six regions in Vietnam [48]. However, compared to other regions in Vietnam, this region plays a vital role in geography, politics, and culture [5]. Human resource development concurrent with foreign languages competence is critical for the region’s development, and it has been prioritised in the Vietnamese Government’s Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg [49].

As this study reported qualitative data of a larger project which used document analysis, survey, and semi-structured interviews, a careful consideration was made to ensure that the selected PETs had participated in the previous survey. We ensured the inclusion of representatives with a variety of teaching experience, with novice-teachers categorised as having fewer than five years of teaching, and experienced teachers as having five years of teaching or more. We also ensured the participants were from six provinces in the Northwest mountainous region: NW1, NW2, NW3, NW4, NW5, and NW6.

There were six PETs teaching in rural mountainous primary schools in the Northwest who participated in the interviews (see Table 1). They each had received three to four years of undergraduate training under various modes (including part-time, full-time, and upgrading). They were trained in different teacher training models, distinguished by format and duration. Four undertook 4-year training while others completed three years of education and training to be qualified for a teaching degree/diploma. Five out of six were female. Five of them were early-career teachers, having less than five years’ experience teaching English at primary school, with only one, who used to be a high school English teacher, having 10 years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Participants’ Demographic Information.

	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age Group	Years of Experiences	Languages	Qualification	Province
1	Hoa	Female	35–40	5–10	Vietnamese & English	Bachelor (4 year part-time)	NW1
2	Ngoc	Female	20–25	0–5	Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai	Bachelor (4 year full-time)	NW2
3	Mai	Female	25–30	0–5	Vietnamese & English	Bachelor (3 year full-time)	NW3
4	Tung	Male	20–25	0–5	Vietnamese & H’mong	Bachelor (up-grading)	NW4
5	Lan	Female	20–25	0–5	Vietnamese & Thai	Bachelor (4 year part-time)	NW5
6	Ha	Female	20–25	0–5	Vietnamese & English	Bachelor (3 year full-time)	NW6

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This paper focuses on data collected from document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Themes, keywords, and time were the criteria for the selection of policy documents. About 20 documents were collected to address language-in-policy implementation issues regarding access, personnel, curriculum, method, materials, time, and resources. These policy documents (including laws, decisions, circulars, instructions, and guidelines) were issued by the Vietnamese Government, its Ministries, and the NFLP 2020. Qualitative content analysis was chosen because this method focuses on the language features of the content of each text in the corpus [50]. These documents were loaded into Nvivo using different categories based on a policy level, content, and themes relevant to primary English policy goals. The coding scheme, including keywords, phrases, and themes in terms of Vietnamese policies for these above themes, were identified and analysed. Patterns, in terms of English language policy implementation, were identified by counting the frequency of keywords and phrases.

Semi-structured interviews with both structured and open-ended questions were used to collect data regarding PETs' perceptions about the implementation of Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg in their local contexts, as well as factors that impacted their teaching practice. The six PETs who had answered the survey agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese in a two-way conversation so that interviewees' experiences were represented in their language, which facilitated the researchers' data interpretation [51]. The interviews were conducted online, each for approximately between 50 min and one hour. The questions were formed around the predetermined themes suggested by Kaplan & Baldauf's [12] such as primary language policy, primary English curriculum, new English programs, teaching resources, teaching methods for young learners, coursebooks, Supplementary Materials, assessment, teacher supply, and teacher training programs, etc.

We used cross-checking to ensure the accuracy of the content of the interviews. Interview transcripts were emailed to the participants. As soon as receiving the participants' feedback, the data were ready for proceeding to the further stage—using the inductive approach; that is, the data were transcribed and coded to identify emerging themes. Once the raw qualitative data was collected from the interviews, they were translated into English. As interview transcripts were sizable data, Nvivo software was adopted. This application enabled the researchers to identify emerging major themes and subordinate themes, which were then identified, compared, and contrasted with the predetermined themes suggested by Kaplan & Baldauf's [12].

The researchers reached a consensus on the themes that emerged from their analysis of documents and interview transcripts. After the analysis was completed, the findings were grouped into five main themes: Primary English access, English curriculum, and programs, teaching resources, personnel issues, teaching, and assessment. The findings were compared with previous literature on how English language policy goals were implemented in Vietnam's rural and remote areas. For anonymity, all identifiable names of people, institutions, or places were deleted, and the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Primary English Access

The study indicates that rural areas lack the necessary conditions for a successful primary English implementation, as a consequence, primary students received English instruction of varying curriculum, quantity, and quality. The importance and role of primary English teaching were only acknowledged in official documents in 1996 when the Ministry of Education and Training's (MoET) initial policy for primary English teaching was issued. Between 1996 and 2003, the MoET's Directive (No 6627, on 18 June 1996) provided general instruction for teaching English at the primary level. However, interviewees reported that

English language teaching in the Northwest was slower and more unstable than in other Vietnam regions. One interviewee, Mai, stated as follows:

In 2005, I was one of a few PETs teaching English in this province. Our schools were central, and the students were offered two periods per week, starting from Year 3 or Year 4, depending on our availability. At that time, English was an optional subject, and most students were not interested in learning it as students' parents did not see the importance of learning a foreign language in these rural and mountainous areas where hardly any foreigners visit.

(Mai)

In the Northwest, only some urban primary schools could offer students the amount of English stated in the policy. While the Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg [49] required English as a compulsory subject starting from Year 3 with a minimum of two periods per week (each period is 35 min), it was an elective subject at rural and remote schools as they were struggling with a critical shortage of PETs. In 2015, approximately 30% of primary students in the Northwest were offered English, and it was 50% by the end of 2021 (Pham, personal communication, 2021). However, of these English learners, nearly 20% were offered four English periods per week, and the rest had from two to three periods per week. English attainment at the end of primary schooling was mentioned as a concern by the six PETs when asked about the level of English that students are officially expected to reach by the time they leave primary school. With the aim of realising 2017 Decision 2080's goal that 100% of primary students learn 10-year-English program from Year 3 to Year 10 by 2025 [52], another foreign language will be offered to Year 1 students [53,54], there should be more action taken in the rural and remote areas in responding to equity in education that no child left behind. In other words, primary students in rural areas should be able to access the same quality English education as their urban counterparts.

4.2. English Curriculum and Programs

Guidelines regarding primary English education have been clearly described in policy documents since the promulgation of Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg [49]. However, policy enactment concerns and challenges at the provincial level have resulted in the misalignment between policy goals and practice in the local contexts. Comments from the interviewees suggested that they, especially those working in more remote schools, were not aware of the new language curriculum being applied at the primary level. They assumed the table of contents in the textbook as the curriculum. As Ngoc said:

I heard that we were following the new curriculum and primary students should be able to communicate in English, but I have no ideas about specific goals or pedagogy. With only two to three periods per week, I do not think my students, 75% from ethnic minority groups, can be at level A1 when they finish primary in Year 5. It is too hard for them to learn English while still struggling with their Vietnamese. In other urban schools where there are enough English teachers, students have four periods weekly, in addition to extra English after school. I just refer to the book map on the front pages of the new textbook, it shows different units in each semester in the sequence, so I know what section/parts I have to finish each day. I think we all know about the curriculum after some years of teaching.

(Ngoc)

With a focus on primary English teaching and learning, a new primary English curriculum [55] was issued in 2010 (Decision 3321/BGDĐT-GDTH, dated 12 August 2010), highlighting the need for teaching primary English. The curriculum also listed the objectives, principles, methods of teaching and assessment, and other requirements for policy implementation. The focus of this curriculum was the established link between English curricula of different levels and the mandatory teaching of four periods of English per week. Also, primary students must achieve level A1 (CEFR) by the end of Year 5 [56,57]. Primary schools which joined this program had to satisfy some conditions: sufficient facilities for

effective English teaching, a full-time curriculum, and qualified PETs. Teachers need to be qualified in terms of at least a 3-year degree in English language education and achieve the required English proficiency: 550 in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or 6.0 IELTS (International English Language Testing System) [58].

However, the Northwest has followed its own path in implementing the 2010 primary English curriculum (T. T. Pham, personal communication, 5 February 2022). Some primary schools have implemented the program regardless of their failure to meet the conditions of PETs and teaching facilities. These schools felt the need to initiate the new program because they assumed that any delay would put them at risk of being left far behind by the rest of the nation. In the case of rural and remote areas, primary students face double obstacles when dealing with learning a foreign language and struggling with Vietnamese at the same time. Due to the lack of qualified PETs in many Northwest primary schools, only primary schools in urban areas could deliver four 35-minute periods per week.

There is a discrepancy between the curriculum requirement and what is happening in classrooms. This misalignment can be partly attributed to teachers' variations in curriculum distributions and their confusion about the curriculum distribution implementation. Tung explained: "We have to follow the curriculum distribution that indicates which parts must be done on which day, and also the table of contents in the textbook. But it changes every year depending on the availability of English teachers" (Tung).

The policy expected eligible primary schools to adopt the new textbooks and deliver four periods a week. An eligible school was one that had qualified PETs and sufficient teaching and learning facilities, but many primary schools, despite their eligibility, did not follow the directives. In this study, PETs' lack of understanding of curriculum is consistent with the findings of Nguyen [7] (p. 232) that PETs in Vietnam "are not clear about the aims or goals or the pedagogical direction of English language education at the primary level". It is crucial to ask how different stakeholders should be involved in this implementation to provide PETs with the requisite knowledge during their education and professional training.

4.3. Teaching Resources

There is a great deal of variation regarding the primary English textbooks used from one province to another, and even within a region. PETs have to use one of the approved textbooks, and completing assigned parts/sections is reported to be their priority. Although they are free to choose any additional materials, their excuses for not making any changes include limited time, inappropriate teaching resources, obsession with tests, and their own beliefs about primary English language learning. Hoa commented:

Completing the textbooks is too much for my ethnic students from low social economic backgrounds. To be honest, I do not see why my students have to learn English while they are not fluent in Vietnamese, English for what in this remote area! While most primary schools use the new textbooks, we still use the old ones because of their low cost. Now I am familiar with this coursebook, so teaching primary students is less difficult compared to last year (as I used to be a high school English teacher). Adapting is impossible because I hardly have any time left, and it is too hard for me to find additional materials here. So I just follow the textbook; I often skip listening because my CD player has been broken for a while. I remove parts that may not be used in the final test.

(Hoa)

Since 1996, two textbooks have officially been used for primary students, namely Tiếng Anh 3, 4, 5 (Education Publisher; General Editor- Hoang Van Van), and Let's learn English 1, 2, 3 (Education Publisher; General Editor- Nguyen Quoc Tuan). While these two books are popular among most public schools, other books published by foreign publishers are used more in private schools. A list of these books includes Let's go (Oxford University Press), Family & friends (Oxford University Press), Dyned (A&D), Next stop (Macmillan), and UK English program (Learning Box). The "Let's go" series has been more prevalent in private

schools because of its diverse activities, visual aids, and colourful materials. Although the textbook series of Tiếng Anh 3, 4, 5 is recommended for the 10-year pilot program and is only to be used at eligible boarding schools, that is, schools satisfying the requirements of sufficient English B2-proficient teachers and appropriate facilities [58], many ineligible northwestern primary schools still did not follow the directive. They adopted this series to deliver two or three periods per week as an elective subject. It can be seen that, there is a great deal of variation regarding primary English learning.

In the disadvantaged contexts where there is a lack of expertise in primary English education, and primary English teachers generally do not have the knowledge and skills to develop the materials themselves [5,7], textbooks are often considered the only effective teaching resource. PETs' teaching practices are affected not only by their local contexts but also by their beliefs about primary English learning. It is expected that PETs play a role in deciding the textbooks to be used. Despite being encouraged to combine textbooks with Supplementary Materials, they strictly follow the unit order without adapting irrelevant units or elements. Their teaching practice is shaped by their assumption about their role as textbook deliverers. While urban primary students have a variety of access to English learning at schools and extra time at language centres, the textbook challenges their rural counterparts. In addition to addressing the significant shortage of available teaching resources and study facilities, how PETs perceive teaching English to young learners is critical to improving English education in disadvantaged areas.

4.4. Teaching and Assessment

The data analysis indicates a mismatch between the requirement of primary level pedagogy and what happens in the classroom or PETs' teaching practices. When asked about teaching primary students language skills for communication, all the interviewees reported that they were not confident to integrate the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. More specifically, their foci were on activities related to vocabulary, sentence structures, reading, and writing. Their excuses included their limited English language proficiency, shortage of time and teaching resources, students' test results, and diverse students coming from ethnic minority groups who were not fluent in Vietnamese-the official language. Lan emphasised:

I am aware of teaching four skills as indicated in the textbooks, but I do not have time; most of my time is spent on introducing new words, teaching structures, reading aloud, and completing sentences. I want to make sure that my students know the required knowledge for the midterm tests and final tests. If any time is left, I let my students read after the recording (if nothing happens to my CD player) because I am not good at speaking. It is not good for them to copy my English. Many times I could not complete the sections in the textbooks because of my ethnic students. Seventy-five percent of them are from minority groups; they have a lot of learning difficulties, including language barriers. It takes me time to explain, but sometimes I think they do not understand what I am talking about.

(Lan)

This finding confirms Baldauf et al.'s [47] study, which pointed out a gap between the curriculum planning and the implementation: Communicative language teaching (CLT) was required and prioritised but not successfully implemented. According to Sullivan [59], CLT approaches, which have a Western origin, are not always culturally attuned to the Vietnamese cultural context. CLT techniques were recommended by the MoET and introduced into the curriculum. In both 2003 and 2010 primary English curricula, students' communicative competencies were targeted, including the four macro skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, of which listening and speaking were emphasised. Teaching primary students should involve communicative activities such as games, songs, role-plays, and story-telling [56] to communicate effectively in English. However, PETs adopt traditional approaches, characterised by teacher-centredness, rote learning,

whole-class drills, and an absence of communicative activities [5,7–29,60]. This is because teaching practice is affected by not only teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs but also by different social and cultural factors in the local context. Over obsession with students' test results was described as a kind of disease existing in the Vietnamese education system [5].

Focusing on students' test results was reported as an important factor affecting PETs' teaching. All six PETs reported that what students would be tested on in light of the mandated textbook was the most important because students' achievement was linked to their prestige, future careers, and time. Ha shared:

It is more secure to stick with the textbook, especially how to prepare students for midterm and final tests. In this region, primary students of several schools take the same test, I think it is provided by the Department of Education and Training, but my students are not good at English, most of them do not like learning English. So I spend lots of time on consolidating vocabulary and sentence patterns to make them familiar with the final tests. If they do not have average marks, I might be in big trouble because of my school's achievement criteria, and I have to spend my summer on reteaching these students. If they have bad results, ultimately it is the teachers' fault.

(Ha)

As a requirement of the MoET, assessments should be ongoing, formative, and summative, focusing on evaluating students' communicative competence. Also, assessments should be conducted for supporting teaching. While learning English at the primary level should be an awareness-raising and motivating activity to prepare young learners for a better transition to high school, in such a rural context, the assessment methods seem to "drive" teaching and attract teachers to test-oriented teaching practices" [37] (p. 215). The MoET expects primary students to reach the A1 (CEFR) level, which seems an issue of concern in rural and remote areas where the focus of teaching and assessing at the primary level is the knowledge of the English language for ongoing tests.

4.5. Personnel Issues

Rural and remote areas in Vietnam experience a critical shortage of PETs in terms of both quantity and quality. The issue of inadequate quantities of PETs have been addressed by several studies [5,34,35,61–63]. The shortage of PETs has been attributed to a small number of training institutions for primary English teachers. Most PETs received their training by part-time mode [5], which is considered less standardised than the full-time mode. Those conducting this training program are not qualified for mainstream education and training and cannot access appropriately delivered courses [42]. Tung described it as follows:

We did not learn much, and what we were taught was not "standardised". We had to study the same subjects as a full-time training course but shorter. While English-majored students have four years, we only had three evenings per week, lasting for two years.

(Tung)

The gap between part-time and full-time training quality has widened due to the low quality of both training courses and trainers. Due to such complaints, part-time training has come to be considered solely as a training institution's business or money-making venture [64].

The Northwest is greatly challenged by the lack of PETs. In 2017, about 70% of primary schools in the Northwest had no PET. Adding to the difficulty of teacher quantity, the quality of teaching raises some concerns. In policy, Vietnamese PETs have to meet the following requirement: (i) a degree from an EFL teacher training university or college; (ii) B2 (CEFR) proficiency or equivalent; and (iii) being able to attend professional activities [58]. However, in one province in the Northwest, only 28% of PETs had obtained B2 (CEFR) in English. After receiving ongoing training for four years, only 30% achieved B2 (CEFR) [65]. When being asked about their degree of confidence in working as a PET, all the interviewees admitted that they faced many challenges during their early years at primary schools,

especially when dealing with young learners of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Lan said:

I am the only English teacher in my school. I was supposed to work at a high school, but I could not find a place, then I was offered a permanent position at this rural school. During the first term, I was struggling with how to explain to my students, especially those from Dao, Hmong . . . , they did not understand many word meanings when translating from English to Vietnamese, it was too hard to ask them to do handwriting or spelling tasks. In addition to teaching, I have to be available at school to do busy work such as supporting students to do extra curriculum activities, painting walls, and looking after classes if teachers are busy. I wish there was a colleague here so we might sort it out together.

(Lan)

Research has indicated that a great number of PETs have not been trained as qualified primary teachers, and lack proficiency and effective teaching methodologies [5,7–29]. Therefore, PETs have limited knowledge and skills to carry out their teaching duties, and they lose confidence in using English. These problems become worse in rural and remote areas where teachers suffer from low commitment and limited capacity to handle the diverse needs of ethnic students.

The inadequate number of qualified PETs derives from the inconsistency between the recruitment policy implementation and the local context. In the Northwest's provinces, the issue of PETs satisfying the recruitment conditions is of concern. For example, among 50 PETs recruited between 2008 and 2015, no teacher could achieve the standard of proficiency required by the MoET for a PET. After attending training and retraining courses to meet the proficiency requirement, many PETs were still unsuccessful. However, these unqualified PETs are employed while many with sufficient qualifications struggle to be offered a teaching position (T. T. Pham, personal communication, 25 March 2017).

Despite recent government policies concerning unqualified teachers [64,66], and primary teachers in particular [67], these policies have not been implemented in the local contexts [5]. To realise the Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg's goals in Vietnam's disadvantaged areas, all these personnel issues should be considered and addressed by the relevant stakeholders, especially those who are working at the provincial level.

5. Summary

Our study has addressed the challenges of primary English teaching in Vietnam's rural and remote areas. The findings revealed that the Northwest region was behind other regions of the nation in implementing the English language policies. The slow implementation of the Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg has been due to a number of reasons regarding inadequate time provided for students, a critical lack of PETs, misalignment of curriculum requirements and current practice, significant variations and shortage of teaching resources, inappropriate pedagogy and assessment, and personnel issues, including inappropriate pre-service training and recruitment. The year 2008 marked the promulgation of critical decisions, directives, guidelines, requirements, and curricula regarding EFL and PET education; however, there remain numerous inconsistencies concerning implementing such policies at the local and classroom levels. The shortage of proficient PETs has been a burning issue. The recruitment of qualified PETs in this region has become complex due to mismatches at different levels of governance. The gap between policy requirements and actual allocations of teaching resources hinders the satisfactory outcomes of policy implementation. The study's findings were similar to the previous studies on language policy implementation [7,11], which confirm the gap between language policy and teaching practice.

Primary English teaching in Vietnam's remoteness is far from meeting expectations due to a significant gap between who PETs are and what they are expected to do. It has been acknowledged that the MoET's intention identified well-equipped teachers as being key to the realisation of Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg's goals [68], but contextual factors should

be taken into account. A remarkable gap exists between PETs' required knowledge as represented in the MoET's English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) in Vietnam and discrepancies exist between the curriculum policy and PETs' classroom practice.

The data analysis shows that the English Language policy planning and implementation in the primary sector have good intentions. However, there are a lot of concerns and challenges that make these policies unrealistic in various local contexts, especially in rural and remote areas. One overarching question regarding students' learning raised here is, if the teachers do not possess adequate knowledge, skills, and proficiency, how can the students learn English? and how can their students be expected to achieve level A1 (CEFR)? Policy makers should support PETs' professionalism in conjunction with other matters. These issues include but are not limited to teacher workload, salary, commitment, motivation, and policy implementation inconsistencies in the local context.

6. Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions

Numerous implications are relevant to a significant number of stakeholders. Policy makers might see the urgent need to address the inconsistencies when translating the requirements of language policies into real classroom contexts. More attention should be paid to the recruitment and professional development (PD) support of PETs working in disadvantaged areas, including directives or frameworks for proficiency requirements of PETs working in rural and remote areas. At boarding schools that teach all day and provide lunches for students (trường bán trú), teachers who work extra should be paid accordingly [8]. Salary and allowance for PETs should be adjusted, as teachers' financial security impacts their commitment to teaching. As committed teachers are willing to change [69], students can benefit. The findings suggest the necessity of reconsidering the requirements for a PET working in rural and remote areas, objectives, and time allocation in reaching the educational goals stated in Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg.

Policy makers should help reduce the heavy workload of PETs, especially teachers working in disadvantaged areas. The awareness of constraints faced by PETs enables institutions and schools to assist PETs in their PD activities in the future. Sufficient and supporting PD programs should promote PETs' proficiency and performance when handling young multilingual learners' diverse needs. PETs should be equipped with knowledge and skills to cope with learning challenges. EFL teacher education and training institutions should include unique streams for PETs, and knowledge about students from ethnic minority groups needs to be integrated into the training programs. These supports will ultimately contribute to the realisation of Vietnamese Government's Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg's goals by 2025.

Successful English education at the primary level involves some other aspects as well. Suitable textbooks and Supplementary Materials for this cohort of students should be carefully selected, developed, and adapted. Teaching facilities such as cassettes, computers, and internet access need to be sufficient. As English primary teaching and learning in disadvantaged areas face the learning inequity issue, more investment, support, and attention should be given. Without adequate intervention and support, PETs will be left behind.

This study design has its own limitations in terms of collection methods and data sources. In addition to desk review of existing literature, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews, further researchers could conduct surveys, which would enable them to understand more broadly about how English language policy goals have been implemented in the primary sector in Vietnam's disadvantaged areas. In terms of participants, further studies could collect more information from school leaders, teacher educators, officers at the Department of Education and Training, parents, and primary students. Longitudinal research with various data collection methods from different sources would provide a more complete picture of English language-in-policy implementation in rural and remote areas in Vietnam.

Primary English teaching and learning in the rural and remote areas have experienced more disadvantages than in other regions of Vietnam. Therefore, the study findings should be only used as a reference for similar socio-cultural contexts, and future studies should focus on various research sites. For primary English teaching to contribute to equal and inclusive education in rural areas, research is needed on how English education policies can be effectively interpreted and implemented in local contexts. More extensive discussion and research might be needed to gain insights into how to upskill PETs so that they can implement the English language policies and fulfill the policy mandates at the English classroom level. It is also necessary to investigate the impacts of PETs' perceptions of PETs' implementation of language policies. In the context of Vietnam, where a culture of compliance dominates, or more specifically, the subordinates follow and implement their leaders' mandates [14], English teachers are considered mere policy recipients. However, a few studies do not favour this argument. Instead of strictly following and implementing the policy mandates, PETs are actively and creatively involved in developing, implementing, and adapting the language policies. This study including a small number of teachers in the disadvantaged areas in Vietnam, should be seen as the first initial step to exploring such aspects.

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