

Teaching English as a Foreign Language Major to Gifted Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to outline the introduction of a special program for teaching the English language as a major (TEAM) to high school gifted students in Vietnam and how the students recognized its effectiveness. The data were collected via a survey and analyzed through descriptive statistics in order to categorize patterns of agreement and disagreement between two cohorts of gifted students. The results showed that the students' initial expectations were met as the majority of them expressed satisfaction with the quality of the TEAM program at the school and appreciated its usefulness for their further study and career. The findings were interpreted in view of their implications for further development of this program as well as how to improve the quality of ELT from that experience.

Keywords: English language teaching; gifted education; Teaching English as a foreign language major; ESL

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching has been subdivided into various broad categories, such as Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and others. While these categorizations have been widely accepted by English language teachers and researchers, the concept of teaching English language as a major to high school gifted students is still foreign to not only Vietnamese scholars but also international counterparts though its existence started more than 40 years ago in Vietnam. The question of whether it is part of TEFL or ESP or an independent sphere and how effective it is remains unclear.

There is no record of when and where programs of teaching English language as a major (TEAM) to gifted students first started in the world. By using key words such as gifted, ESL, linguistics and English language, in popular academic search engines such as ERIC, Google Scholar and EBSCO, I hardly found any study or report about foreign language programs for gifted learners. Neither of the two latest handbooks of gifted education (1996 and 2003) had any chapter about foreign languages or English language programs for the gifted.

According to Wright (1983), the goals of English language arts for gifted students were to give them the competence of interpreting the author's mood, style, and purpose; drawing conclusions about relationships among plot, character, setting, and theme; and evaluating the effectiveness of the author's techniques. This point of view, nonetheless, mainly focused on the literature aspect rather than on the skills of language.

A broader view on teaching English to gifted students was introduced by William and Bruce (1989). Accordingly, teaching English to the academically talented secondary school

students involved not only the four common language competencies of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and all of their complex areas, but also an appreciation and understanding of literature, a knowledge of semantics and grammar and an awareness of the power of language. Though this position specified students' level and covered all language skills, it limited its scope to English as a first language rather than English as a second or foreign language.

One of the earliest programs recognized worldwide is from the Soviet Union during the sixties. During that time, the Soviet Union established specialty schools for foreign languages where teaching was both in Russian and in a foreign language (Kitano, 1986). Foreign language instruction began in the first or second grade and continued through eleventh grade. Certain subjects such as history, biology or world geography were initially taught in the foreign language with more subjects being delivered in the foreign language with each level. The texts were written in the foreign language and all conversations were also conducted in the foreign tongue. The goal of the curriculum was to reach near-native like fluency in the foreign language in order to allow students to use it for specialized careers such as international relations, interpreting, technical or scientific research and foreign trade. Basically, most of these schools served the district rather than the neighborhood, and therefore they were not as highly competitive as some other types of specialty schools. Students were recruited through screening including interviews, recitations and poetry reading. In general, this program was set in a foreign language context with specific levels of proficiency identified.

The earliest TEAM program was introduced not so long after specialized schools were officially established in Vietnam in the sixties. Foreign Languages Specialized High School, a part of the College of Foreign Languages at Vietnam National University in Hanoi, was founded in 1969 and was regarded as the first of this program. Its general goal was to educate and train those students who were good at foreign languages to become government officers in cultural and foreign business fields. Students' recruitment was based on test results of three subject areas: Vietnamese literature, Mathematics and a foreign language. There were four foreign languages English, French, Russian and Chinese, which students could take. Students at that time were considered government officers. With the setting up of this first foreign language specialized high school in 1969, together with the boom of local specialized high schools in the 1980s, TEAM program was introduced at specialized high schools. So far, there has been no report on the number of TEAM programs, but it is estimated that the program is available in almost all specialized schools in Vietnam.

Every year, TEAM at specialized schools has two important testing events which are, to some extent, also used to evaluate the quality of TEAM at these schools. The first one is the provincial or municipal level contest for talented students. Schools in the whole province or city select their top six talented students to take the exam. This exam is organized and managed by the provincial or municipal service of education and training to ensure fairness among schools. From the results of this exam, other top six students are chosen for the national level contest for talented students which is organized and managed by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. Basically, the results of these exams are criteria to measure the effectiveness of TEAM at specialized schools and to promote or reward teachers. Since the results from these exams are used as assessment measures for teaching efficacy, TEAM teachers experience pressure that other teachers at normal schools do not.

Overall, the development of TEAM in Vietnam had its origins similar to the Soviet Union models of specialty schools for foreign languages. However, later along with the increasing appearance of local specialized high schools nationwide, TEAM was included in each specialized school and has acquired a Vietnamese identity. That is, specialty schools for

foreign languages in the former Soviet Union used foreign languages to teach other subjects, similar to the Language Immersion Method, a method of teaching a second language in which the regular school curriculum is taught in the second language. In another words, the second language is the vehicle for content instruction not the subject of instruction. TEAM in Vietnam is completely different. It is viewed as a subject like any other subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, Vietnamese literature and other. The methods of teaching English vary from the grammar translation method, direct method to the communicative approach.

GIFTED STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE GIFTED PROGRAM

Research on gifted students' attitudes towards the gifted program is rather scattered and out of date. According to Ford (1978), since it was generally assumed that talented students held favorable attitudes to special programs; it may be why the question about their perceptions of the effectiveness of the programs had received little or no attention in research. In a survey with approximately 500 middle grade students in 13 school districts in the state of Connecticut, Ford (1978) reported that more than 90% of the gifted students expressed satisfaction about being in a special program. Similarly, Colangelo and Kelly (1983) found that gifted students showed significantly more favorable attitudes to the gifted program than regular students and that they had more desire to take part in gifted programs. Gentry, Rizza and Gable (2001) conducted a survey with 2,221 elementary students from grades 3 – 6 and 1,523 middle school students. The findings were that gifted students both in rural and urban areas had positive attitudes towards the gifted program although the levels of interest, choice and enjoyment were different between samples.

Also interested in examining gifted elementary students' attitudes towards their gifted program, Swiatek (2001) conducted a survey with approximately 2,000 gifted students in the third through sixth grades. The findings revealed that the girls were more positive about verbal areas and about school in general than the boys and that older students were more negative about school and about such academic areas as computers, Mathematics, writing, and reading than younger students were. Another study investigating gifted learners at elementary and middle school was conducted by Martin (2002). However, different from previous studies with an emphasis on gifted programs in general, this study focused specifically on a math program for the gifted. Two hundred and sixty seven gifted learners answered questions on a survey. The results indicated that in each grade students had different attitudes toward math. The third and sixth grade students shared similar positive attitudes while the fourth grade responses were less positive. The least positive Mathematics attitudes occurred in fifth grade. The study also showed that there were some differences between the boys and girls and among grade levels in their attitudes towards the subject. That is, girls had less positive attitudes towards Mathematics than boys did. The finding indicated that girls overall had the best Mathematics attitudes in fourth grade, followed by the third, then the fifth, and finally the sixth grade.

In conclusion, related literature and research provided evidence that gifted students held a generally positive view about their programs of study. However, most of these studies mainly involved participants from the U.S. under the general term giftedness without any specific identification of what kind of giftedness the students had except the study by Martin. To that end, this study is to provide an overview of a gifted program of English language as a foreign language and to investigate students' attitudes towards it, to identify its effectiveness and possible implementation to other ELT programs. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do students perceive the effectiveness of TEAM program?

2. How do students recognise the role of TEAM program in their future jobs (for current students) and their study at tertiary level and current careers (for former students)?
3. According to students, what are the most common methodology and assessment practices in TEAM program?

RESEARCH DESIGN

PARTICIPANTS

Two groups of subjects were involved in the study, 60 current English major and 30 alumni at a specialized high school in the central region of Vietnam. Based on the school’s student list, the current students were recruited from Grades 10, 11 and 12. The alumni were selected through the school’s alumni network and contacted by the researchers. The first step in contacting the potential participants was done through an email of invitation for participation. After receiving consents for participation from two groups of samples, a link to get access to the online survey was sent to the participants. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the demographic information of participants.

TABLE 1. Age and gender demographics about the current student sample

Gender	Male	20 (33.3%)
	Female	40 (66.7%)
Age	16	31 (51.7%)
	17	26 (43.3%)
	18	3 (5.0%)

TABLE 2. Age and gender demographics about the former student sample

Gender	Male	9 (30%)
	Female	21 (70%)
Age	18	2 (6.7%)
	23	2 (6.7%)
	25	2 (6.7%)
	26	4 (13.3%)
	27	3 (10.0%)
	28	4 (13.3%)
	34	2 (6.7%)
	35	4 (13.3%)
	36	3 (10.0%)
	38	2 (6.7%)
Education	40	2 (6.7%)
	MA	9 (30%)
	BA	21 (70%)

INSTRUMENT

The instrument included two versions of an online survey, one for the current students and the other for the former ones. The survey consisted of two parts, the first part was about demographic information of participants and the second part had 19 items asking about students’ attitudes towards the program and teaching methods. The questionnaires were reviewed critically by three specialists in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

(TESOL) and Applied Linguistics and tested with five high school students to ensure validity and reliability of the instrument. All the items in the survey were carefully arranged so that it was convenient for the participants to reply. The survey employed three point scale items, *Not satisfied at all*, *Somewhat satisfied* and *Completely satisfied*. For the convenience of data analysis, *Not satisfied at all* was coded as 1, *Somewhat satisfied* as 2 and *Completely satisfied* as 3. Data were processed using SPSS Version 16.0.

FINDINGS

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAM

Research Question 1 aimed to examine how students perceived the effectiveness of the program in helping them acquire confidence in the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as proficiency in English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Overall, seven questions were included, each offering the following three answers: *Not satisfied at all*, *Somewhat satisfied* and *Completely satisfied*.

TABLE 3. Summary of survey questions for current students

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of learning English at Le Quy Don Specialized High School?	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
The opportunity to develop good listening skills in English	60	1	3	2.3	0.8
The opportunity to develop good speaking skills in English	60	1	3	2.1	0.8
The opportunity to develop good reading skills in English	60	1	3	2.3	1.0
The opportunity to develop good writing skills in English	60	1	3	1.9	1.0
The opportunity to acquire solid knowledge in English grammar	60	1	3	1.6	0.8
The opportunity to acquire extensive knowledge of English vocabulary	60	1	3	2.5	0.7
The opportunity to acquire clear and native-like pronunciation	60	1	3	1.3	0.7

TABLE 4. Summary of survey questions for former students

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of learning English at Le Quy Don Specialized High School?	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
The opportunity to develop good listening skills in English	30	1	3	2.8	0.8
The opportunity to develop good speaking skills in English	30	1	3	2.2	0.8
The opportunity to develop good reading skills in English	30	1	3	2.0	1.0
The opportunity to develop good writing skills in English	30	1	3	1.5	1.0
The opportunity to acquire solid knowledge in English grammar	30	1	3	2.3	0.8
The opportunity to acquire extensive knowledge of English vocabulary	30	1	3	2.4	0.7
The opportunity to acquire clear and native-like pronunciation	30	1	3	1.2	0.7

The finding reveals that except for very few differences, both current and former students had quite similar perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Specifically, the majority of both current and former students were satisfied with the opportunity to develop good listening skills in English. For reading skills, current students had a slightly higher rate of satisfaction than former ones, but, in general, both groups were pleased with the opportunities to develop their reading skills in English. Regarding writing, current students also showed a higher rate of satisfaction than former students did. Concerning the opportunity to acquire extensive knowledge of English vocabulary, both group samples shared almost the same rate of agreement. Both former and current students expressed dissatisfaction with the opportunity to acquire clear and native-like pronunciation. Interestingly, the main dissimilarity in satisfaction was found in relation to grammatical competence, where a considerable number of former students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the mean of 2.3 as compared to the number of current students who indicated relatively low satisfaction with the mean of 1.6.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

The second research question focused on how students perceived the role of their English education in their future jobs (for current students) and their post high school education and current careers (for former students). To find the answers to this question, two sub-questions were asked in the survey for both samples. The first sub-question was about what students would study (for current students) or had studied (former ones) after completing the program to see whether there was any relationship between their English education and future career selection. The second one asked participants if they thought the English skills and proficiency acquired in the program would be or were useful for their further study and career.

In reply to the first-sub question, 3% out of 100% current students indicated that they would like to become teachers of English. Another 3% wanted to pursue a degree in international relations. However, the majority of students (94%) were interested in pursuing a career in business or economics. Among the former students, 60% out of 100% students indicated that they had continued their English education at tertiary level and 40% students chose to study business or economics. Figure 1 below summarises the information about students' selected fields of study after high school.

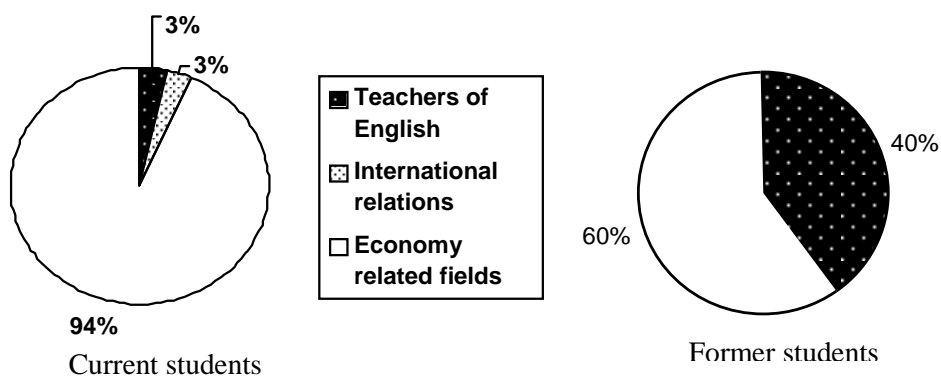


FIGURE 1. Fields of study students pursued after high school graduation

As for the second sub-question, 100% of both current and former students agreed that the English skills and proficiency acquired in the program would be useful for their future

study and career (for current students) and previous study and current jobs (for former students). Specifically, all current students pointed out that they would use English in their future jobs, in applying for scholarship programs to study abroad, and for their further study. The former students also indicated that their English education at high school was useful for their study at tertiary level and current careers. However, there was a slight difference in how current and former students recognized the application of their English skills as the current students emphasized the employment of English in job-related communication, whereas for the alumni, English was particularly valuable for reading and writing purposes. They also appreciated their solid background knowledge in English grammar.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF TYPES OF METHODOLOGY

Research Question 3 intended to elicit participants' feedback about the types of methodology that they experienced during their English classes. There were eight sub-questions with three end points: 1) Never 2) Sometimes 3) Often.

The result showed that there was a difference in common teaching practices in this program between former and current students' opinions. According to current students, the teaching methods were oriented towards the communicative approach while according to former students they tended to be more traditional. Specifically, the majority of current students indicated that *interactive speaking* was often used in their classrooms, whereas the majority of former students pointed out that *interactive speaking* was sometimes used in their classrooms. The data also revealed *grammar translation* practices were employed in this program more often in the former students' classrooms (70%) than in the current students' classrooms (40%). The divergence between the opinions of the two generations of students is also reflected in other teaching methods. For instance, *pronunciation*, *use of games and role-plays* and *listening to authentic recordings* are more common in current students' classroom than in former students' ones. The only similarity between the two groups is the high frequency of usage of *reading texts* and *emphasis on vocabulary learning*, and a lack of *computer based teaching* in the program.

TABLE 5. Common teaching methodologies in teaching English as a major

	Current students			Former students			
Grammar & translation	Never	1	1.7%	Grammar & translation	Never	1	3%
	Sometimes	42	70%		Sometimes	21	70%
	Often	17	28%		Often	8	27%
Pronunciation practice	Never	3	5%	Pronunciation practice	Never	3	10%
	Sometimes	50	83%		Sometimes	20	67%
	Often	7	12%		Often	7	23%
Reading texts	Never	2	3%	Reading texts	Never	1	3%
	Sometimes	7	12%		Sometimes	9	30%
	Often	51	85%		Often	20	67%
Interactive speaking	Never	2	3%	Interactive speaking	Never	4	13%
	Sometimes	28	47%		Sometimes	26	87%
	Often	30	50%		Often	0	0%
Games and role-plays	Never	2	3%	Games and role-plays	Never	7	23%
	Sometimes	51	85%		Sometimes	20	67%
	Often	7	12%		Often	3	10%
Computer based teaching	Never	41	68%	Computer based teaching	Never	23	77%
	Sometimes	17	29%		Sometimes	7	23%
	Often	2	3%		Often	0	0%

Continued

Continued

Listening to authentic recordings	Never	8	13%	Listening to authentic recordings	Never	8	27%
	Sometimes	45	75%		Sometimes	19	63%
	Often	7	12%		Often	3	10%
Emphasis on vocabulary learning	Never	1	2%	Emphasis on vocabulary learning	Never	3	10%
	Sometimes	14	23%		Sometimes	7	23%
	Often	45	75%		Often	20	67%

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Except for the Decision No 82 /2008/QĐ-BGDĐT passed by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training in 2008 to provide a framework and guidelines for educators and educational administrators in identifying the functions and responsibilities of specialised high schools and two national level conferences on specialised education in 2008 and 2009, no official record of governmental documents about TEAM was found. This led to difficulties in identifying the government's policy about the program. The only generally stated goal that could be deduced focused on educating students who were good at foreign languages to become government officers in cultural and foreign relations fields. Interestingly, the trend of career selection of participants in this study reflected the government's goal in which 94% of current students and 60% of former students selected economy-related fields for their further study as well as their career.

However, it is puzzling that subject matter related to business, economics and culture has not been included in the TEAM program. That is, if the goal was to create specialists for government and foreign business fields, and the majority of students would select those fields for their study and careers, why were these disciplines not included in the TEAM curricula? This fact may be interpreted to mean that the government intention in launching the TEAM program was to equip the students with a language skill that would be employed in their future careers for communication purposes, rather than to encourage them to pursue careers in language teaching or related fields. However, since this issue is not explicitly addressed in government documents, it remains a speculation, which requires further investigation in order to be confirmed.

Interestingly, although the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training had definitely made a strong commitment in launching and supporting TEAM, it had not carried out any program evaluation initiatives. For this reason, the results reported in this study could not be compared to any previous ones and constitute the only officially collected data about students' profiles and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the program.

If we consider this particular program of ELT as part of general gifted education, then, we can realize that these findings corroborate previous research by Colangelo and Kelly (1983), Feldhusen and Dai (1997), and Ford (1978). That is, gifted students had positive attitudes towards the program. Overall, the majority of participants were pleased with their study in the English major program and perceived the learning of English as an asset to their professional development and careers. Moreover, their initial choice to enroll in the program was well justified and almost none of them regretted this decision.

In all, those findings lead to some significant implications for the program of teaching English language as a major to high school gifted students in particular and the area of ELT in general. First of all, this program is confirmed to be effective since it meets the expectations of the learners and really contributes to the learners' professional and academic

success. Within the limited scope of this study, reasons for the participants' satisfactions were not identified. However, such factors as intrinsic motivations (students voluntarily took the exams to get admitted to the program), small classes with an average of 25 students, higher frequency of exposure to ELT than regular peers, high competent teachers are likely the causes of the success of the program. If these assumptions are correct, it is suggested that those aspects should be taken into account to establish successful programs in ELT. Nonetheless, further studies are necessary to validate those assumptions.

Another interesting facet of this study is that it leads to an important implication in methodology. Every method regardless of traditional or communicative can motivate students' interest in learning and be effective. This finding may not be favorable for those who call for the alleviation of traditional approaches in ELT contexts. Furthermore, it also reminds ELT practitioners about the implementation of a holistic approach in ELT such as above mentioned factors rather than the teaching methods themselves in order to improve the quality of ELT. It would be no wonder when a teacher said that she or he already changed her or his teaching method, but the quality of teaching and learning did not improve.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Like most research designs, this study has its own limitations which stem from the nature of survey research, the use of an online system of data collection, and the lack of related research. We could not control how much time each subject spent on the survey. It is possible that some subjects might not have wanted to spend sufficient time nor think about the questions carefully. Instead, they might have chosen any of the answer choices. Therefore, the results of the study may not convey the real perceptions and attitudes of the two groups of subjects.

In addition, the two participants were not well matched in terms of numbers as the current student sample outnumbered the former student sample two times. This fact may have skewed the results to a certain extent. Besides, in the former student sample, there were participants of a wide age range which fact may have further affected the observed overall group responses. All of these issues may warn against broad generalizations of the reported results.

Another problem stemmed from the lack of research and scarcity of document archives on issues related to TEAM. For this reason, the findings reported in this study could not really be connected to any previous ones and thus remain solely valid for the scope of the sample studied within the framework of the study.

The above outlined limitations should serve to inform future investigations which may want to consider them in designing their research instruments specifically in relation to selecting Likert scale questions as well as subject selection criteria, especially concerning the alumni sample. Finally, it is recommended that future studies should focus on specific areas of the specialized English major program and examine them in an in-depth way. For example, areas that need more profound understanding and analysis include methodology and assessment practices, their effectiveness and inter-relatedness. In this respect, future research may employ an ethnographic approach to examining the areas outlined above.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this research has contributed to the existing literature about TEAM by confirming some previously discussed results and highlighting

unexplored elements such as the conclusion that the two groups of samples did not show large divergence in how they perceived the effectiveness of TEAM program. Specifically, this study has made contributions to administrative, academic and teaching practice.

Firstly, the study has made pioneering contributions for educational policy makers in considering whether to continue the program or not since the cancellation of specialised education has been discussed recently. In addition, the findings have provided valuable insights to teachers involved in the TEAM program about how students perceived their teaching methodologies, which hopefully will inform them about existing practices that should be maintained and possible adjustments to accommodate new practices or rethink priorities. For example, one area that both sample groups indicated as needing more attention concerned the lack of opportunities for students to develop accurate pronunciation. Interestingly, the current students also indicated some dissatisfaction with the teaching of grammar. One possible interpretation of this finding is that the recent emphasis on communicative practices may have negatively influenced the effectiveness of teaching grammar. Since these issues were only suggested by the data, it is recommended that future research about the effectiveness and state of TEAM in Vietnam focuses specifically on the current methods of teaching English and their relevancy to developing students' competence in the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary.

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