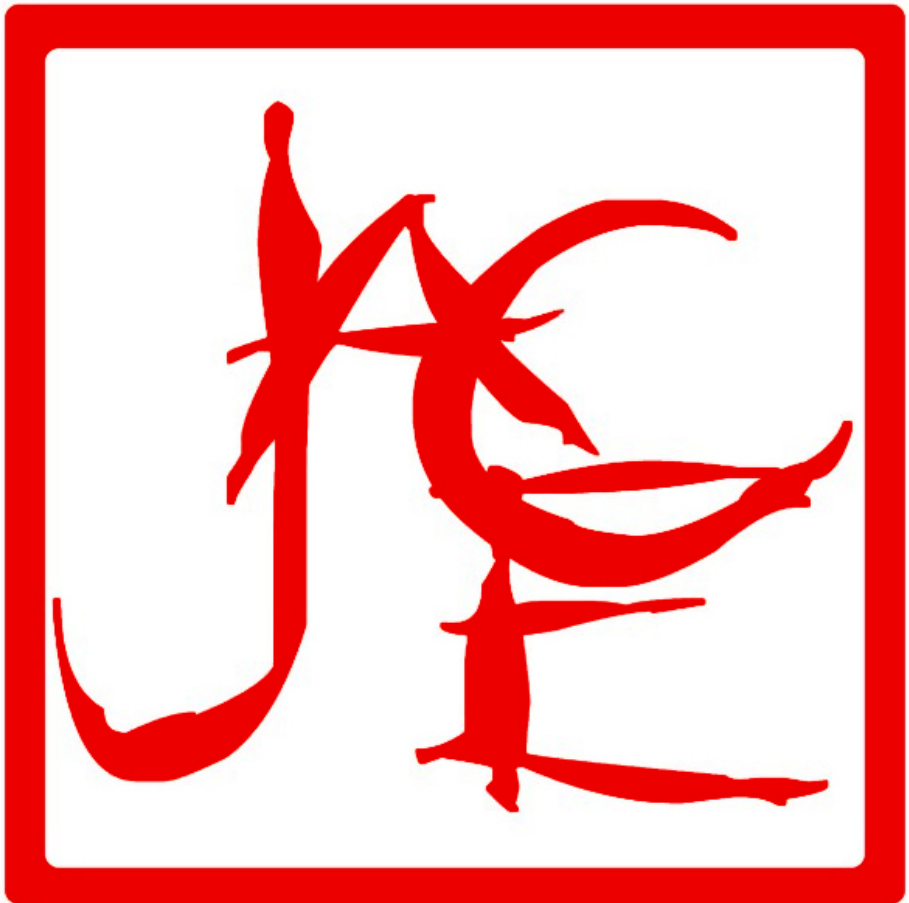


# JACE

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# COUNTING THE UNCOUNTED

Rumors, Corruption and Luck in Job Seeking by  
Vietnamese University Graduates

THI TUYET (JUNE) TRAN

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY/ VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, HANOI

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## ABSTRACT

*Transition is normally hard (Van Geert, 1994) and the transition from university to work is not an exception. In the case of Vietnamese university students, this transition seems to be harder since there are many factors involved in the process of graduates seeking jobs. Graduates often appear to have low esteem and a lack of confidence in how to confront problems encountered in this significant transition. It has been suggested that this results from a profound sense of unpreparedness with many graduates reporting that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills required by the labour market and the demanding requirements of employers (Pham Thi Huyen, 2008). However, in this article I forward the argument that impractical knowledge and irrelevant skills are only part of the problem. There is also an urgent need to address the hidden social and cultural features, to count the uncounted factors, which importantly contribute to the confusion and low esteem of university graduates. This article outlines some of these elements and influences by reporting on a recent qualitative study where the voice of university students and graduates were privileged, particularly in relation to their perspectives on the highly problematic issue of graduate employability in Vietnam. Preliminary results suggest that apart from the need to strengthen professional knowledge and skills, surprisingly, rumours, corruption and the belief in luck appear to be particularly highly valued and were commonly cited as significant features that affect students' confidence in pursuing a career after graduation.*

**Key words:** Rumours, corruption, luck, employment process, Vietnam, graduate employability

## INTRODUCTION

*Nhất hậu duệ*

*Nhì quan hệ*

*Ba tiền tệ*

*Bốn trí tuệ*

*Còn lại là mặc kệ!*

*First, offspring*

*Second, relationship*

*Third, money*

*Fourth, intellectual*

*The rest, who cares!*

This saying regarding the priorities in job offer and promotion at work in Vietnam seems to be popular among Vietnamese young people. It is quoted in many Facebook pages and thousands of facebook users ‘like’ it\*. However, when many university graduates cannot find work and end up unemployed or underemployed, when the government calls for serious research investigating the reasons for the situation, lists of skills have been imported from outside, mostly from Western developed countries, and have been reshaped and redesigned to draw different surveys, measuring the skill deficit of Vietnamese university graduates (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012a). A common reason for the underemployment and unemployment of university graduates has been suggested as the impractical professional knowledge and the deficit skills these graduates possess. And the university, it seems, is consistently blamed, like a convenient scapegoat, for the ill-prepared graduates.

This article does not aim to devalue these research projects. Nor does it aim to deny the responsibility of universities in training its students for the labour market. However, by using a survey with the pre-decided list of skills developed in a very different context and culture in the West, these research projects neglect the hidden factors such as in the above saying, and thus, somehow ‘distort’ the real situation. Thus, they cannot paint a full picture taking into account all of the subtle and entrenched Vietnamese culture and context at work (Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012b). This study, thus, aims to indicate the ‘blank spots’ and the ‘blind spots’ in the existing research (Gough, 2002). Such spots come from the hidden features of the context and circumstances of the employment market in Vietnam and also from Vietnamese culture.

This article will firstly discuss what is considered good research direction in this area in Vietnam and also what happened when I decided to choose a different route for my research direction. This will be followed by a brief summary of my research and the research findings regarding the blank and blind spots in the previous research. It is suggested that such hidden factors as rumours, corruption and luck in Vietnam do interfere badly in the transition of university

\* See, for example: [https://www.facebook.com/undefendable/posts/327976150619049?comment\\_id=1997197&offset=0&total\\_comments=2](https://www.facebook.com/undefendable/posts/327976150619049?comment_id=1997197&offset=0&total_comments=2)  
[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=134847039898337&story\\_fbid=348268365222869](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=134847039898337&story_fbid=348268365222869)  
<https://www.facebook.com/cauoihaihuoc/posts/395073153861988>

students to the labour market. In order to enhance graduate employability in Vietnam, there is not only a need to develop students' skills and knowledge, but it is also necessary to recognise and settle all the related obstacles, to bring these young people a practical understanding of what is expected from them in the labour market.

## COMMON RESEARCH DIRECTION IN THE AREA IN VIETNAM

Vietnam is a developing country with its economy developing impressively for the last two decades. The development of the economy has led to the expansion of the higher education sector. The number of students enrolling in and graduates from the system has increased from 130,000 students in 1987 to more than 2.1 million students in 2010 (General Statistics Office, 2012). 1987 was also the first year the Vietnamese government decided to adopt a market based economy to replace the central command economy that had been adopted in Vietnam since the country claimed independence in 1945. With a new direction in driving the economy, Vietnam has had impressive growth recently. The economy has developed quickly with very high demand for skilled workforce. The higher education system (HES) has expanded exponentially to meet this urgent demand.

However, new problems have arisen. Previously, with a university degree, graduates had rarely been worried about finding employment, because they would be allocated to work in some organisations of the government. Even in the early stages of the market economy, though the government stopped allocating jobs for graduates, finding a job and earning a substantial income was not a big problem for these young people. Their families remained proud of them and could expect they would earn enough money to help the whole family to 'overcome the poorness' (or 'thoát nghèo' to use the common Vietnamese saying). However, now, with a university degree, many graduates cannot find a job, with many ending up unemployed or underemployed.

For the majority of Vietnamese, who live in the poor countryside, a child getting into university is the hope of the whole family—the great hope for change. Though an investment needs to be made, though the rest of the family has to work harder to earn enough money to pay the tuition fees for the child, they still feel happy. They long for the time the child graduates and can start earning money to help the whole family 'thoát nghèo' or 'đổi đời' (to change their life). They still keep the strong belief that universities will bring good jobs and a better future for their children (George, 2010). Thus, when their children are struggling after graduation and still wait for their sponsor, many of them cannot figure out the reasons for their children's unemployment. The

common tendency is to blame the university. It is suggested that universities do not teach students the things that students need for jobs.

This belief also comes from some kinds of both unofficial and official research in Vietnam. Many ‘soft skills training’ centres have appeared in the market and claim to train students and graduates with the skills that universities neglect to develop. They also make explicit the warning that many young people nowadays lack skills required in the labour market (e.g. communication skills, team work or interpersonal skills), thus these people are very likely to end up unemployed. In addition to this ‘commercial’ claim, there are more and more complaints coming from academic researchers about the weak capability of universities in training high skilled workers for the modernization and industrialisation of the country. Some researchers even ‘look in the West’ and find many skills lists there, try to combine them, then draw a survey and send it to different stakeholders for marking the importance of these skills. At the end, again, they produce another list of skills and claim that these are the skills needed for graduates to be employable in Vietnam (See, for example Tran Quang Trung and Swierczek, 2009, Truong Quang Duoc, 2006).

These research projects are normally clear, and make easy generalisations—as they have hundreds of people answering their questionnaires, and are therefore argued to be highly representative. However, their findings seem to ‘put more oil into the fire’ as they effectively reinforce the commercial claims, thereby justifying the services of soft skills centres and helping them recruit more customers and in the process, make recent graduates more nervous. University has its responsibility in training its students; however, it cannot assure the employability for any of them (Yorke, 2006). Similarly, skills can be an issue in the contemporary market economy, but it is not the only issue, not to say the decisive matter in the transition of graduates entering the labour force. Especially in the context of a transitional economy like in Vietnam, where everything has not been professionally and clearly settled (Le Chien Thang and Truong Quang, 2005), there is a need to draw an overall picture of the transition to clearly indicate different obstacles for university graduates entering employment.

#### *Another way to approach the problem*

After carefully researching the literature in the area, and noting that the skills-focused agenda remains a contentious debate issue in the West (Harvey, 2005, Yorke, 2006), I concur with Holland (2006) that skills are also contextually and culturally dependent, I decided to get away from a familiar research approach of developing a questionnaire. I wanted to employ a qualitative based research which would allow me to make explicit the circumstances where university graduates entering the workforce (Beckett and Mulcahy, 2006).



My research direction has gained support from my supervisors as well as many academics attending different conferences where I presented my research methodology. I held a strong belief that my research direction was appropriate. However, I was quite shocked on the day I presented my proposal in the Faculty. When all members of the research panel which included a few Western doctors and professors supported my research direction, some even suggested that I was on my way and I could do it; several Vietnamese colleagues who attended my presentation were strongly against my way of approaching the problem. Some perceived that the way I did not support a skills questionnaire was not reasonable. When I explained that a skills list cannot cover all the complexity involved in the transition to employment of graduates, one even said ‘if the list imported from the West doesn’t cover all the skills and attributes required in Vietnam, you can survey participants and add some more in the list, that is why you do research, you ask your participants and you add new knowledge, ... you can make a list of 100 skills’.

My argument is: what for? Is it to add to the nervousness of the recent graduates by telling them that they do not have what the market requires? or to reinforce the claim of the weakness of universities? Will a list of skills lead to any positive change or any practical pedagogical application? With a centralised HES, where the majority of the policy makers in the central government and in each university are at approximately 50 to 60 years of age, who have grown up and have been trained in the central command economy, who have been working in the government sector for the whole of their lives and never experienced what the real ‘market economy’ is, can we realistically expect a radical change from these people? In addition, universities also have many internal problems needed to be settled (The World Bank, 2007). On top of that, though the quality of training at university is complained to be low, each year millions of school leavers still compete to gain a place in the system (Nguyen Thao, 2012). Thus, though this type of ‘skill’ claim has existed in Vietnam for nearly a decade, there is not much evidence showing that it has been taken into account in the HES.

I do not deny the fact that the HES in Vietnam is weak and it does have many problems to deal with. Skills deficit of students is one of those problems. However, I do not want to dwell on the area that has very limited potential pedagogical application. I also believe that skills are not the only factor interfering badly in the transition to employment of university graduates. Thus I decided to design a study which takes into account different socio-cultural features surrounding the issue.

I adopted the employability framework of Hillage and Pollard (1998). According to their framework, the ability to gain and to maintain jobs of university graduates depends on what they possess (in terms of knowledge,

skills and attitude), how they deploy and present their assets to employers, and most importantly, the context where they seek employment. This research was also designed to privilege the voice of students and graduates, the ‘actors’ in the transition but also often the neglected perspectives in relation to the issue of graduate employability in Vietnam. The findings suggest that a part from the need to strengthen professional knowledge and skills, other factors, such as rumours, corruption and the belief in luck, were surprisingly cited as significant features interfering into university graduates decision making, affecting their confidence and self esteem, and in many cases, leading them end up unemployed or underemployed.

### *Rumour*

One obvious theme emerging from the discussion with students and the interviews with recent graduates is rumours. Much of their understanding about the labour market has been built up from rumours around them. Thus, they often started by saying that ‘I’ve heard that...’, or ‘my friends told me that...’ or even ‘one of my friends told us about the story of her boyfriend’s sister’s boyfriend that...’. Thus, the picture they drew about the labour market is a mixed picture. Some suggested that ‘it’s impossible to find a good job without money or relationship’, whereas some others can report a more positive case: ‘my friend’s cousin is a provincial boy who himself has been able to find a dream job in the city’. Some still believe that they can change their lives with a university degree, but more students seemed to keep a negative attitude toward the co-relation between ‘good knowledge and skills’ and ‘good job and high income’. They suggested that knowledge and skills are just the beginnings, they are just the necessities, but not ‘enough’. Other interfering factors which they repeatedly mentioned were such factors as corruption, money, luck and relationship. They also suggested that they often heard numerous stories where these factors play a key role in job finding of university graduates. Rumours like these often made students worry the most.

However, one graduate who considered himself as a victim of rumours suggested:

When I finished university, I was very nervous because I received too many different types of advice. I also heard and read so many different contrasted stories about job finding. However, after working few years I realised that different companies, different employers, different jobs require different things from us. The thing is we need to know what we are good at, what we want to do, where we want to work (in public sector or private or FDI companies), then find information in that narrow area.

Some other graduates, on the other hand, confirmed that corruption, luck or money and the promotion at work does have some kind of relationship somewhere somehow, but this seemed to happen more in the public sector. In private and FDI corporations, real capability and appropriate attributes are usually the first priority.

However, for participating students, most of whom had no real experience in the workplace, they tended to focus more on negative stories that they had heard. Students often talked about money, relationship and corruption, about the tough requirements and the picky attitude of employers, about the ignorance of universities in providing related labour market information to help them prepare themselves for the labour market.

It is not really hard to explain why Vietnamese students love rumours. First, Vietnam is a collectivist country (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) where information is often transferred quickly via chattering, one of the favourite channels of communication in Vietnam. Secondly, it is suggested that Vietnamese people are addicted to rumours, and they tended to believe in rumours more than the so called ‘official information’ on newspaper, radio or TV, because information from the later official channels has to go through censoring before being delivered to viewers (Nghiem Mỹ, 2012). Thus the information from these formal channels is often both out-of-date and distorted. Thus, ‘oral culture’ has virtually become one of the characteristics of daily life in Vietnam. Nonetheless in the case of Vietnamese university students, when they have virtually no idea about the labour market, when there is virtually no link between university and the workforce (Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006), the mixing-up picture that rumours have painted about the labour market had actually made these students more frustrated, confused and had lowered their self-esteem when facing challenges of the transition.

### *Corruption and luck*

Rumours about corruption is the one that worried most participating students, especially when corruption is really a serious problem in Vietnam (Gainsborough, 2003, Rama and Võ Van Kiet, 2008). The saying quoted at the beginning of this article illustrates this clearly. It suggests that getting a good job or gaining promotion at work is no problem if one’s parents are bureaucrats (*first, offspring*), otherwise, if one has a good relationship with bureaucrats or has lots of money, getting the job he/she wants is also easy (*second, relationship, third, money*). Knowledge and skills (*intellectual*) cannot beat relationship and money, this is especially applied in the public sector in Vietnam. The discussion and interviews with students and graduates also supported this saying. Most students and graduates who wanted to work in the public sector or to work for the bank perceived that they had to face some types of corruption.

Some shared the same thought that ‘each job in the public sector has its price, but sometimes even if you want to pay that price, it’s not easy, you need to have a good relationship as well’. Another student also suggested:

We all know that if we want to have this position at this bank, you need to have this amount of money. The higher ranking bank, the better position, the higher money you need to prepare. Your real ability comes after that.

A student told a real story of her sister:

My sister is a school teacher, her knowledge is very good, when she had to take part in the ‘*công chức*’ test\*, she did it really well and should have 8 points, but then she did not give them the money, she got only 5 points and failed.

A student expressed her lack of confidence since the first day she came to the university:

In my class people ask one another who their parents are. Many of them say that their parents are bosses in this or that province, and that later they will be placed at this or that position. This makes me lose lots of confidence, especially when I come from a poor family in the country side with no relative working in my occupation.

Another student referred to a similar story:

In my uncle’s company, they need to employ one more staff member, but they hold it until their acquaintance graduates to fill the position.

This unclear recruitment policy made students and graduates confused. Many of them ended up believing in luck. The majority of university students in Vietnam come from poor families in the countryside, they know that they do not have the first three priorities (offspring, relationship or money), and that many other students have similar levels of knowledge and skills as they do. So only luck can help them obtain a good job in these unclear, corrupted and competitive employment processes. Some students said that they could only focus on study for now, and hoped that luck would come to help them find a good job later. A student quoted a saying of a CEO of ACB bank ‘in order to success in life, you need lots of M letters, Money and ‘*May mắn*’ (means “luck” in Vietnamese) are important M letters in life’. Some other students avoided using the word ‘luck’, but instead expected that good ‘opportunities’ would come to

\* When someone passes the ‘*công chức*’ test, he/she will become a long-termer with a contract of no time limitation. In another words, the employment after passing ‘*công chức*’ test was similar as an assigned lifetime position.

knock their door. Some even joked that if anyone wanted to have a good job and better future, they should go to the pagoda to pray regularly.

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, socio-cultural factors such as rumors, corruption and luck do affect students' thinking, thereby lowering their confidence as they pursue their careers after graduation. There is a need to make explicit these factors and to address the complexity of the factors involved in the transition to employment of Vietnamese university students. Clearly, not only the HES, but the labour market also has many problems, one of which is corruption in recruitment. Thus, the changes need to come not only from higher education itself, but also from the labour market. There is also a call for better collaboration between higher education and employers, in order to not only prepare students with enterprise skills and work experience, but also bring them better understanding about the labour market. Thus they could draw a suitable and practical route to enter the workforce and they will not be overloaded with rumours.

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# MINIMIZING TRANSLATION MISTAKES IN THE WRITING PROCESS BY USING THE QUESTION-MAKING TECHNIQUE

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VUS, HO CHI MINH CITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Using a Socratic method of asking questions, teachers can lessen the chance that students will make UWMs during writing exercises.*

**Keywords:** writing, translation mistakes, English, question-making technique

**M**y students have many problems while learning English. For one group of students it can be the right way to speak English in a natural rhythm. For another group it can be how to learn and use vocabulary or simply how to read a passage actively. With more than 15 years of teaching experience, together with techniques shared from other teachers in my school, I have not had to struggle with teaching and counseling my students about their common problems learning grammar, vocabulary, or the three skills of listening, speaking and reading. Writing is absent from this list--for it is almost impossible to get the student writers out of the jungle of their *unidentified writing mistakes* or so-called UWMs.

These mistakes are unidentified due to their not belonging to any of the four types of mistakes which are usually found in a students' writing: spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage. UWMs may have some relation to the last one, which is understood to be a kind of error that "does not break a grammar

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‘rule’, but is a string of words that a native speaker would never use to express the particular meaning the ESL student is trying to convey.” (*Understanding Writing Mistakes*, n.d.).

Some ways of dealing with these kinds of mistakes are to ask for proof-reading by a native speaker or to spend more time reading good writing to get used to native writing styles. It is obviously not easy for a Vietnamese learner (among thousands) to meet and to seek help from a native speaker. The latter can work sometimes, but does not give consistent results. UWMs are frequently found in my students’ writing even though they have been provided with relevant vocabulary and sentence structure prior to the writing lesson. What is the reason for these mistakes? What category do the mistakes belong to? How can teachers help students stop repeatedly making these writing errors?

## MAIN CONCEPTS

These questions made me carry out some basic research that helped me discover that my students do not show enough interest in the product they are creating during the writing process. This is because they have almost no idea of what the process of writing is, or how important it is. Students write simply because teachers ask them to write, or just because it is time for the writing lesson. This mindset, incidentally, puts the students into a situation where they do not actually **write**, but translate their thoughts about the topic from Vietnamese into English. Obviously, the source language and the target language are at different levels. If they are unable to explain or analyze the grammatical structure of some of their thoughts, then how can they translate them into a grammatically acceptable piece of writing? Without any awareness, they have made an effort to translate—this effort has been misunderstood, by the writers themselves, to be the writing process. The consequence is that students make a number of mistakes that cannot easily be categorized or identified. In fact, with careful analysis, the mistakes can still be identified as types of translation errors that are often made by the student translators, who “...seem to let individual words and phrases take prominence, so that they are unable to see the larger conceptual meaning in re-reading.” (Seguinot, 1989, p.79).

### *Research Questions*

The first two problems are that students ignore or do not know the definition and the importance of writing, and that they show little or no interest in practicing the skills that can be improved by the teachers’ explanation. How much can this solution affect students’ attitudes?

Assuming that it can positively and the students make more effort to write, they cannot avoid translating their thinking into English. This incidentally re-



sults in a lot of UWMs. Further research should be done to find out the solution.

What should we do, and how? As mentioned above, the UWMs mostly comprise one of the four kinds of mistakes that student writers often make – usage, but it is not really of that type. A close look at the tips to deal with “translating mistakes” shows that the UWMs can be of one of three types: meaning, form, or compliance. (Schiaffino & Zearo, 2005). Should teachers manage their class time to provide students with an extra lesson in correcting translating mistakes, *before* any writing classes? Is this an effective way to deal with these UWMs, or will this make the students more stressed, with the new demands of completing two lessons: the writing lesson itself, followed by teaching the students how to correct the translation mistakes in their writing.

It is predictable that unexpected complexity will emerge when an extra mistake-correcting lesson is added as mentioned above. What is the other way out? As teachers, we have been trained to help improve students’ learning abilities and to deal with all problems the students may have. Our job is to find the best method to teach basic principles and instruct the learners to apply them to real-life cases in the safest, most independent and most effective ways.

As a challenge lover, I started to do any research that I could, officially or unofficially, with the hope to enlighten the L1-L2 translation darkness during the writing process. I finally found what I needed when observing how the students reacted during speaking tests. Such general questions as “talk about your family”, or “describe your hometown” really confuse the interviewees, taking them more time before their utterance of some topic-related but syntactically wrong sentences; for the sentences were merely the products of word-by-word translation. By contrast, whenever I replaced the general question with specific ones such as, “How many people are there in your family? Who are they? What are their jobs? How old are they? Who do you like best? etc., students became more confident to create grammatically acceptable responses with the grammar prompts from the questions.

At this level of Pre-intermediate English, students know how to create good questions. Can we help them to improve their writing skills with question-making techniques? Should teachers add something new to the process of teaching students how to write? Certainly we should, so as to enhance the students’ writing skills. The principal question now is, “How effectively can this new application of the question-making technique help ESL learners avoid or minimize UWMs during the writing process?”

### *Literature Review*

As a part of the process of finding the answer to this question, I researched documents to see what other researchers have found out or carried out in terms

of my statements. Some include useful information for my *Innovation* project. Many others report the common mistakes student writers make and solutions that teachers can apply while teaching writing to Pre-intermediate learners. This part of review is categorized based on the key points in my research questions.

### 5Ws1H

This technique of *5W1H* has been used widely and considered to be an effective approach to collecting and presenting information. This method is used in a wide range of professions and situations, not only to understand and explain virtually any problem or issue but also to organize the writing of reports, articles or even entire books. (Dave Baldwin Consulting, 2012). It has been understood to be the six basic question words: *Who, What, When, Where, Why* and *How*. The order of the W-words varies from documents to documents.

As per most of the situations in which the technique is mentioned, *5Ws1H* is understood to be a ‘Kipling method’ due to its appearance in his *Just So Stories* (1902). Rudyard Kipling memorialized it in a poem opening with:

I keep six honest serving-men  
 (They taught me all I knew)  
 Their names are What and Why and When  
 And How and Where and Who  
 (Wikipedia, 2012)

### A Definition of Writing

Searching ‘Writing skill, definition’, on Google, shows 7,990,000 results within 0.27 seconds. There are different definitions of writing given by different linguists. While a simple one can be “the act of a person or thing that writes” (*Writing*, 2012), a somewhat more detailed one is “specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message.” (“What are Writing Skills”, 1999). In this jungle of definitions, which is the right one for my ESL students; the ones who have almost no idea of what writing is and who have limited linguistic knowledge? Which one can help fill the gap and inspire them to learn the skill of writing?

After careful consideration and synthesis of several definitions from different sources, writing skill can be generally understood to be the way of putting sentences together for the best communicative purposes. This leads to an assumption that the students have been able to write sentences, which is related to the writers’ understanding of what grammar is and how to use it effectively. Another search for the right definition of grammar has been made. The one found should be “good” enough to be an inspiring bridge to connect

and encourage students to study and improve their writing skills. One that meets the requirements defines grammar as “the **art** of putting the **right words** into the **right places**” (Le, 1990, p.4). The word “Art” gives a good picture of creativity; and the phrases, “right words” and “right places”, help students understand that grammar should not be considered to be merely ‘rules’. It involves experiences that language users have accumulated thanks to their interaction with the language.

I have upgraded this definition of grammar to one of writing to interest my teenage students. My presentation of the idea that “writing is the art of putting the right sentences into the right places” has drawn the students’ attention and given them a feeling of accomplishment when they learn that writing skill involves in not only ideas (what to write) but also arrangement (how to write). This interesting discovery has given me an opportunity to engage their curiosity about the skill of writing.

### *The Importance of Writing Skills*

Being one of the four basic skills that all English learners recognize, writing is frequently used in our daily life: internet chatting, mobile phone texting, academic assignments, newspaper articles, e-mails, business letters or contracts. The list seems endless, which proves how wide and useful the application of writing skills in our life can be. Written documents last for a long time, even almost forever, in comparison with spoken utterances, as long as they are kept in good condition.

In fact, a survey goes on to say that almost 30% of our work is accomplished through written communication! Therefore, the skills of tactful writing are essential for achieving career and business goals. Apart from the workplace, writing is essential in many other areas as well. (Phillai, 2012, p.1)

Five remarkable reasons why writing skills are important are discussed in the article *Why are Writing Skills Important?* First, writing is a way of expression. Every day we share our points of view mainly through sounds (speaking) or written words (writing). Those who find it uncomfortable to speak their minds choose the safer way to communicate – writing. This is a right choice for ‘emotional’ people who tend not to communicate verbally. Besides daily written messages, longer forms of writing are also understood to be good methods of expression. These can be short stories, novels, biographies, etc. The excerpt from my diary can be seen as a good example of the significance of writing skills in expressing oneself.

The second factor that makes writing important is that writing can be a means of judging a person. A person is thought of as a thorough and respectable person if his written works are of good quality, proving his diligence and,

and vice versa. “Be it a school, college, workplace or society, writing has become a vital yardstick to assess one’s knowledge, and intellectuality.” (Phillai, 2012, p.1)

Helping learners to develop their flexibility and maturity is the next reason why writing is important. Phillai states that writing trains learners how to get closer to the readers’ needs so as to understand other people more. Besides, they are also trained how to adapt to different circumstances, and become more flexible and mature in both writing and thinking.

With the purpose of transferring information to others effectively and efficiently, writers have learned to be more cautious and careful when choosing the best language to convey their ideas. It is obvious that this thesis could never be done without written documents either in hard or soft copies. As an effective record, writing is remarkably important.

The final factor that makes writing important is that it is a means of communication. The author explains in detail and gives clear examples of each of the four areas in which writing is the key tool: business, education, career planning, and job application.

The author also concludes his article by sharing some tips to create good pieces of writing. Nevertheless, none of them can be right solutions to my students’ case: UWMs during the writing process.

### *Mistakes and Solutions in Written Works*

Another online article, *Understanding Writing Mistakes* (Shoebottom), remarks on the essentials to help learners realize and minimize mistakes when they write. Writing mistakes, according to him, can be of spelling, punctuation, grammar, or usage. Most writers, no matter they are native or non-native, make spelling mistakes. This is because there are irregular rules in the English spelling system. Students are advised to use the spell-check function or their own review before submitting the papers to teachers. Another suggestion is to regularly read authentic passages. These two ways can also be applied to minimize punctuation mistakes frequently made by students who lack a clear understanding of sentence structures.

Now that the most common mistakes ESL students make are of grammar or usage (the latter most resembles my students’ UWMs), the author recommends either to seek help from a native speaker or to read more. Nevertheless, it is not easy for an ESL student to frequently meet a native speaker within Vietnam. Not many of them are available to provide support. In spite of my agreement with the author that this solution is only for short-term goals, and the other- getting students immersed in authentic English - long term, neither are applicable to my students’ case. Being well prepared with relevant vocabu-

lary and grammatical structures, students cannot avoid UWMs, which can be considered to be unexpected consequences of the translation process.

To deal with these kinds of translation mistakes, ESL teachers can expand the post-writing lesson by adding another lesson to teach students how to correct them. This can take time and be stressful for both students and instructors, who have to learn and teach another new lesson with new concepts and rules. Can these UWMs be avoided or minimized? This is the right time to quote “prevention is better than cure”, isn’t it?

## AN INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

### *Students’ Obstacle – Teachers’ Challenge*

Although the relevant documents reviewed above discuss the problem of writing mistakes and ways to deal with them, the suggested solutions are not specific enough to implement at the very stage when UWMs are formed – the stage of exploring ideas for writing. How to stop the ESL learners’ brain from immediately thinking in Vietnamese is a principle concern; for this can help students get rid of UWMs. What about some hints that can serve as the basic foundation for students to create grammatically acceptable sentences? From my observation of students’ reactions to different types of questions in an oral test, I propose using a question-making technique or *5Ws1H*. This application can help prevent the risk of unconscious translation from SL to TL. This leads to a new question: *When or at what step should 5Ws1H be applied during writing?*

### *The Right Time for the Application*

A writing lesson can be taught using different techniques which vary from a few basic steps to several detailed ones. Generally, they are pre-writing, composing, revising, editing, and publishing (Shoebottom, n.d.). In order to prevent the translating process, the application should be made at the first step of writing, the pre-writing step. It is when “...you spend time making notes and thinking how to organize your work” (Shoebottom, n.d.).

Now that making ‘notes’ is vital, how ‘notes’ are formed becomes the root of all UWMs. In most cases, students report that the ‘notes’ first appear in their mind in Vietnamese before being translated into English, which they found impossible without risky word-by-word translation. Although translation can be regarded a way of writing, as discussed in an online article titled *Some Tips for Writing in a Foreign Language*, (n.d.), writing directly in the TL can be more effective. This article also reinforces the idea of making efforts to write in the TL whenever a writing task is being carried out.

### *The Steps of Writing*

The 6-step writing process is applied in my ESL classes. Not being very simple, it helps make students aware of the significance and the academic factors of the skill in which they are training. It is not *too* complicated either, which encourages learners to confidently climb the steps of the writing process, one by one.

Preceded by the introduction of the grammar definition and the importance of writing skills in daily life, the 6 writing steps, in order, are presented to the learners, who are now free from the worry of not having any ideas to write about, and who are excited to learn the new technique.

Step 1: Understanding the topic. Students read the topic and get the key words for *what to write* and *how to write*.

Step 2: Exploring ideas. Students learn how to develop ideas for their writing.

Step 3: Organizing ideas. Students arrange their selected ideas in an ideal way.

Step 4: Writing the draft. Sentences are put together. Cohesive devices are encouraged.

Step 5: Editing. Mistakes are checked (Spelling, punctuation, and grammar).

Step 6: Writing. The final version is completed.

### *Application of the Innovative Teaching Technique.*

Step 2 is the right time to apply the innovation of using *5Ws1H*. This helps prevent the process of translating the ideas from Vietnamese into English.

Proposed teaching tips to apply the technique:

- As readers, students create a list of questions about the topic. The method is pre-taught or introduced to learners in advance.
- Questions are written on the board in correct full structures.
- Learners interview each other using the list of questions before writing down all of the answers in full sentences. Dictionaries or teachers' support as needed for individual words is acceptable.

- Guide students how to model the syntactical structures of the full questions for their *correct* sentences.
- Explain why and how this method is useful to avoid or minimize the “translation” process, which is too difficult for learners at this level when their TL is not corresponding to the SL.

## INNOVATION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *General*

*5Ws and 1H* or the Kipling method is not a new technique; it has been used in various professional fields. Applying it in teaching writing skills to ESL students of Pre-intermediate levels can open a new phase of teaching writing in a Vietnamese context, when teachers and students do not need to spend time dealing with the ‘translation mistakes’ made during the writing process. Theoretical analysis has made me confident enough to implement this innovative pedagogical application into my classroom.

In the chain of courses: *Action Research*, *Innovation*, and *Evaluation*, *Evaluation* plays an important role since its function is evaluate and give researchers a good answer if the innovative solution to the research question is effective. Simultaneously, *Evaluation* also opens a new cycle of *Action Research – Innovation – Evaluation* in case the innovative solutions, after being applied and evaluated, lead to new statements. In this part of *Innovation Methodology*, the action plan is described in details with clear pictures of the participants, stages of research, data collection, data analysis, and ethical issues. Each of them plays an important role in the process for evaluation purposes; just as in *Research Methods in Language Learning*, (Nunan, 1994, p.184) writes, “Evaluation may be defined as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils.”

### *Participants*

The participants are the instructor and the students at VUS, an English center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I am the instructor in this research, responsible for applying the proposed technique of using *5Ws1H* into a writing lesson with the purpose of avoiding or minimizing the risk of making ‘translation mistakes’. It is a school regulation that all students take a placement test so as to be placed in the at-the-same-English –level group to enhance the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the English level of the target group of about 25 Pre-intermediate students is relatively similar. That some students may be

dominant in one skill can somehow distort the result, but the margin of error is within an acceptable range.

### *The Stages of Research and Data Collection*

The two groups of students take the three-hour writing class after they have finished the four lessons of the unit. (Textbook: *New English File (Pre-intermediate)*, Oxford University Press, 2012).

While group A studies with regular teaching techniques as suggested by the teachers' book, group B spends some time becoming familiar with the definition of writing and its importance (class discussion) before the teacher presents the writing lesson with the 6-step method, in which step number 2 is when the innovative method is applied. This is when students are asked to write full questions about the writing topic with the purpose of exploring ideas and avoiding UWMs.

At the end of the class, writing papers are collected for later analysis and comparison in terms of mistake types, which is a part of the data collection including questionnaires, interviews, observation, and mistake reviews.

By employing the survey questionnaire (all 25 students) and interview methods (5 students selected randomly), I can get to understand the students more in terms of how they feel, how much the innovative technique has inspired them, and how much they can avoid the translation process during the writing class. All of the questions in both methods are composed with the consideration of the target goal of evaluating the innovative teaching method. The only difference is that while the questionnaire embeds statements so that students can respond based on an *agree-disagree* scale, the interview questions are more open, so as to encourage a wider range of student feedback. (See appendix A)

Neither of the methods addresses the concern that limitations in the informants' responses may occur. The interviewees tend to evaluate things in a way that makes them sound "positive," rather than speak their minds. Meanwhile, the questionnaire may limit the extent of the information that informants wish to state. One more technique of advising students how valuable their responses are to the process of teaching and learning the skill is extremely important and is done in advance. This can reinforce the accuracy and reliability of the data collected.

Besides the survey questionnaire and the interview, observation is another effective mean of qualitative research. The argument can be whether it is reliable for me – the innovator – the instructor – and now the observer. It *is* reliable; for the innovation is mainly for my teaching improvement and my students' writing skills improvement. The mechanism is academically meaningful, and is not bound by any hierarchical supervision. The innovative con-



cept comes initially from the desire to help students study more effectively; the observation is for that purpose too. I am confident enough to make an objective observation for my professional development.

The last and most important way to collect data is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative. Mistakes collected on the students' papers are categorized, counted (as quantitative research), and then analyzed to see what type of error they belong to. The result will then focus on how effective the innovation application is in terms of helping students avoid incidental translation mistakes.

### *Data Analysis*

All data collected are interpreted as a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. This result is first for my own teaching improvement, before it can be shared with other teachers. The feedback from those directly involved can be wide-ranging, and their attitude during the innovation lends a special meaning to this research. Hence, the data collected are designated to be put into two categories: students' learning behavior and their academic performance in terms of the fluctuation of the UWMs during the writing process.

### *Ethical Issues*

VUS is an English center where teachers are scheduled weekly and provided with the modern facilities. We have agreed to follow the course outline made by the academic team. Within this context, we are given the right to choose the best techniques and the best lesson plans, as long as they meet the objectives of each lesson, which can include vocabulary, grammar usage, or language skill improvement. However, as in a mutually supportive educational environment, the innovation plan is shared with the academic manager before being applied in the classroom.

I also inform the administration team about interviewing 5 students, chosen randomly, right after class. (We meet one group of students only once a week; while students have two classes a week with two different teachers). Students' genders do not matter; for this is not a compulsory course at a high school, but an English center where students pay a lot of money for each course in a well-developed curriculum. The VUS students choose to participate in the course; their attitude towards the subject is, without any doubt, positive.

### *Research Timeline*

#### **Preparation:** Three weeks

Right after the completion of the *evaluation* course, I started to work on reading relevant documents before making an action plan and composing the questionnaire and the interview questions. This was to be done (after checking

for advice from other teachers who share an interest in teaching the skill of writing) within three weeks, from January 18 to February 1, and then from February 18 to February 22. The missing period is two weeks when Tet takes place in Vietnam.

**Application:** One week

School resumed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February. The right time for the innovation application was from March 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>, within which, Friday afternoon (March 8<sup>th</sup>) was chosen; for it is the happiest evening of the week, when students may be physically tired from work or mainstream schools, but psychologically full of energy for the upcoming weekend. Fortunately, the course outline scheduled a writing class on that day.

**Data collection**

**A) Writing Papers:** All students' writings are collected right after the completion of the last step of the writing process.

**B) Survey Questionnaire:** Ten minutes after the lesson

Students stay after the class for the survey questions. The instructor gives a short explanation on the purpose of the survey, provides the students with clear instructions, and makes sure that students understand all of statements in the form.

**C) Interview:** Fifteen to twenty-five minutes

Each of the five randomly-selected students is interviewed with the list of the 5 prepared questions. Some warm-up or communicative questions can be added during the interview, as the instructor's wish. Each interview should be from 3-5 minutes. The instructor takes notes on the students' responses for later analysis.

*Data Analysis: One week*

All the survey questionnaires, interview responses, and writing papers are collected, analyzed, synthesized, and categorized, together with the observation, to be evaluated to see how effective the innovation is and if further research should be undertaken.

**Report:** Five days

Other parts of the assignments have been written, so five days (March 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>) were enough for researcher to write the report before the deadline.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### *Observation*

My in-class observation has led me to a positive conclusion that the application of my innovation is effective in some ways. Students seemed to enjoy the minutes when I first presented the Definition of Writing as a kind of art. They showed their interest in their eyes and the way they discussed the key words used in the definition before starting to discuss the variety and significance of Writing Skills in their life. Ninety percent of the students got starting the writing lesson right away, and they got more and more involved when the writing lesson was presented step by step, during some of which, they could practice speaking together about the topic.

The students asked each other a lot of questions when *5Ws 1H* was written on the board for their discussion; the method seemed to have been known by some students. They shared their knowing with others as I showed them the way to apply the question-making technique into the step of exploring ideas, when students pretended to be the readers and made questions about the topic. They filled up the board with questions within five minutes.

Besides, the data from other sources are also important for the final findings about the innovation application. “A wide variety of sources can provide information for an interpretive study. As noted above, researchers often combine multiple sources (triangulation) to increase credibility, or trustworthiness, of their work.” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 77).

### *Survey Questionnaire*

With the simple design, the questions in the list are easily understandable. Students felt free of pressure as they checked if they agreed or disagreed with 13 statements which can semantically be categorized into three groups, relevant to the research purposes. Besides checking if the students understand what and how important the skill is, and if the application of the Kipling method to avoid or minimize the risk of UWMs is effective, some questions inquire if the students feel interested in the technique and would like to apply it to skills. The response by percentage basis and the details of the raw data can be found in the appendix A and appendix B

Twenty-five copies were handed out to the students who attended the writing period. A general overview draws a positive picture about the innovation; for the majority of the responses are strongly agree and agree. It means that most of the students felt that the innovation was positive. It is obvious that the selected definition of question has given students a new perception of what writing is (92%). They were really motivated to know about the importance

of the skill (100%). The first two steps opened a promising way for the main innovation application.

Most of the students showed their interest in knowing the Kipling method of using *5WsIH* during the process of learning skills. (Statements 3,5,6,7,8,9,10,12,13). Although minorities of the students (varying from 4% to 28%) were still unsure about the advantages of the innovation, or they were not able to keep up with the lesson, it was interesting to know that the method of *5Ws IH* was not completely new to nearly half of students (44% - Statement 4). It was noticeable that 36% of them still doubted if they could get away from the “thinking translation” or not. Notwithstanding the positive effects they got from the innovative teaching method, most of the students were still unsure if they wrote right sentences, in terms of grammar (76 % neutral; 8% disagree for statement # 11). This can lead to another research project on how to teach students the skill of editing a draft, especially regarding grammatical aspects.

### *Interview*

Five of the innovation attendees were selected randomly for the post-class interview. Again the questions were composed in an easily understandable way so that no obstacles could stop students from giving feedback. The six questions aimed at (1) the feelings students got upon knowing the definition and the importance of the skill, (2) the extent of effectiveness of the innovation of using *5Ws IH*, and (3) students’ expectations for using this method in other skills.

The responses reinforced the findings from the other research; for almost 100% of the students showed their interest, excitement, and joyfulness during class. They also shared the surprise they felt when they were happy to have been the ones who could study with this innovative method. Being interviewed separately in a separate room, all students gave similar responses. Only one student (20%) differed on one question, when he said that he liked step 1 best, when he could make a decision on What and How to write; while others (80%) – cited step 2, when the question-making technique was applied.

### *Writing Papers*

It has prompted clear improvement, as seen when scoring the Group B students’ writing papers. Still, there were mistakes in their papers. Nevertheless, the mistakes considered UWMs or the ‘products’ of the translation process students made while trying to translate their thinking from SL (Vietnamese) into TL (English) remarkably decreased and almost disappeared in some papers (5 students – makes 20%). In comparison with the papers from the other group, mistakes such as: “ In my city has...” or “It’s sunny is wonderful...”, or “ In the summer is horrible...”, were minimized and appeared only here and there

when students forgot the technique. They were about 10 % of all the mistakes they made (one out of ten). What is more is that they could write longer writing, with more ideas that were relevant to the topic and absolutely met the readers' needs. (It is still early to say, but 'coherence' and 'cohesion' maybe gained by these writers in the near future).

## DISCUSSION

Data from the observation, questionnaires, interviews, and collecting and analyzing mistakes from the students' writing papers have demonstrated that the innovative pedagogical has been a success. Students have been interested in studying or ESL writing skills, which they used to be afraid of and showed little or no aptitude to learn it. Without clear knowledge of what writing REALLY is and of how important it is in daily life, students did not feel motivated to learn the subject.

Even though some of them tried to, the fact that they made so many UWMs during the writing process formed an invisible obstacle, gradually taking away their energy. The *5Ws 1H* or Kipling method was applied at just the right time, when the student got something new and useful for their writing improvement. Students could see the advantages of this technique right after it was suggested on the board. They created a board full of questions before they used them to talk together about the writing topic, and before the relevant ones were chosen for the next step, 'organizing ideas' of the six-step writing lesson presented that day. UWMs were also minimized in their final writing papers. The data from all sources of the research, for either qualitative or quantitative analysis, proved the positive application, showing significant improvement in students' learning behavior and results.

It cannot be denied that some students did not benefit completely from the innovation. They still showed their uncertainty about whether they could get away from the translation *virus* or not (36 % from the questionnaire), or about whether the sentences they wrote were grammatically correct (76% - questionnaire). Two of them even doubt the usefulness of the technique in terms of helping confidently write good sentences as long as they could make good complete questions. The reasons could have been emotional, psychological or motivational. More research should be done to find out the correct reasons, before solutions can be innovated and suggested.

## CONCLUSION

Three hours of studying writing with a 15-minute break could be a little bit boring for the students. Although the time and place had been carefully se-

lected so as to avoid distraction, students might still have felt nervous and shy to get to know and apply a relatively new technique into the writing lesson, one that most ESL learners do not appreciate.

In addition, within the first 15 minutes, three new things were introduced to the students: the definition, the importance, and the method. Despite the instructor's effort to make the presentation inductively with a lot of involvement from the students, the transitions between the parts did not take place smoothly, which could have been a shock to the students, affecting the whole process of learning and practicing the steps of writing.

Besides, background knowledge or interest in the topic area could also interfere with the innovation application. The topic was not difficult – about a student's town or country, but it is true that many of the students do not pay attention to the place they live carefully, in terms of geography, history, climatology, and economy. Hence, they would have struggled to discuss or write about these topics.

The main purpose of this research was to evaluate if the innovative pedagogical method is advantageous. And we did find the results. Different sources of data converge into one main point: that the students' writing has improved. In fact, their attitude towards the skill has been changed positively with some extra provision of the definition and the importance of the skill. Importantly, they got more confident in the writing process when they learned how to apply the technique of question-making of *5Ws 1S* or the Kipling method into the step of Exploring ideas. This helps them avoid or minimize unidentified writing mistakes (UWMs), which are the unexpected product of the translation process, due to the fact that most ESL learners start to think in Vietnamese before translating their thoughts into English. And this is almost impossible for students of Pre-intermediate levels. The application of this technique really helps.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE (RAW)

Feedback Form						
<p>Your opinion on the recent writing period with the new teaching technique is important to improve the quality of teaching and learning the writing skill. Please take a few minutes to respond to the following statements regarding our writing class. The results of this evaluation will be used to improve our next coming lessons.</p>						
No.	<i>Do you agree with the following statements? Tick ONE for each.</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	<i>The definition of Writing makes me <b>confident</b> to study the skill.</i>	7	16	2		
2	<i>The importance of writing in daily life gives me <b>power</b> to learn the skill.</i>	9	16			
3	<i>The six steps of writing <b>positively helps</b> me during the writing process.</i>	10	13	2		
4	<i>5Ws1H method is <b>new</b> to me.</i>	6	8	4	7	
5	<i>5Ws1H method helps me <b>get the ideas</b> for my writing.</i>	9	16			
6	<i>At the step of exploring ideas, 5Ws1H helps me <b>NOT to think in Vietnamese.</b></i>	3	17	5		
7	<i>The full questions make me <b>confident to write.</b></i>	10	15			



8	<i>It is <b>easy</b> for me to <b>make questions</b> with <b>5Ws1H</b> technique.</i>	3	15	7		
9	<i>My writing is <b>improved</b> with this technique.</i>	5	19	1		
10	<i>I do <b>not translate</b> from Vietnamese into English during the writing process.</i>		16	9		
11	<i>The sentences I write are <b>grammatically correct</b>.</i>		4	19	2	
12	<i>I feel <b>interested</b> in learning how to write with <b>5Ws 1H method</b>.</i>	8	15	2		
13	<i>I want to <b>practice more</b> with <b>5Ws1H</b> method.</i>	16	7	2		
Thank you very much for your cooperation.						

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE (PERCENTAGE)

Feedback Form						
Your opinion on the recent writing period with the new teaching technique is important to improve the quality of teaching and learning the writing skill. Please take a few minutes the respond to the following statements regarding our writing class. The results of this evaluation will be used to improve our next coming lessons.						
No.	<i>Do you agree with the following statements? Tick ONE for each.</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	<i>The definition of Writing makes me <b>confident</b> to study the skill.</i>	28.00%	64.00%	8.00%		
2	<i>The importance of writing in daily life gives me <b>power</b> to learn the skill.</i>	36.00%	64.00%			
3	<i>The six steps of writing <b>positively helps</b> me during the writing process.</i>	40.00%	52.00%	8.00%		
4	<i>5Ws1H method is <b>new</b> to me.</i>	24.00%	32.00%	16.00%	28.00%	
5	<i>5Ws1H method helps me <b>get the ideas</b> for my writing.</i>	36.00%	64.00%			
6	<i>At the step of exploring ideas, 5Ws1H helps me <b>NOT to think in Vietnamese.</b></i>	12.00%	68.00%	20.00%		
7	<i>The full questions make me <b>confident to write.</b></i>	40.00%	60.00%			

8	<i>It is <b>easy</b> for me to <b>make questions</b> with 5Ws1H technique.</i>	12.00%	<b>60.00%</b>	<b>28.00%</b>		
9	<i>My writing is <b>improved</b> with this technique.</i>	<b>20.00%</b>	<b>76.00%</b>	4.00%		
10	<i>I do <b>not translate</b> from Vietnamese into English during the writing process.</i>		<b>64.00%</b>	<b>36.00%</b>		
11	<i>The sentences I write are <b>grammatically correct</b>.</i>		<b>16.00%</b>	<b>76.00%</b>	8.00%	
12	<i>I feel <b>interested</b> in learning how to write with <b>5Ws 1H method</b>.</i>	<b>32.00%</b>	<b>60.00%</b>	8.00%		
13	<i>I want to <b>practice more</b> with 5Ws1H method.</i>	<b>64.00%</b>	28.00%	<b>8.00%</b>		
Thank you very much for your cooperation.						

## APPENDIX C : INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Interview Responses					
	<b>Student #1</b> Nguyễn, Văn Lợi May, 07, 1990 College Student	<b>Student #2</b> Dương, Thăng Sept. 30, 1986 Interpreter	<b>Student #3</b> Lê, Bình Giang Dec. 27, 1989 Film Director	<b>Student #4</b> Trần, Hữu Minh Dec. 25, 1891 IT Programmer	<b>Student #5</b> Lê, Thị Thu Thảo Aug. 15, 1990, Receptionist
<i>1. How do you feel about the definition of the writing skill?</i>	It is great to me. It helps me understand clearly about Writing. I can be confident to write for my sisters and friends abroad in English.	It is very simple, logical, and easy to understand.	That is interesting. First time in my life. Cool	Interesting. I feel that I am a little bit more mature. (Smile and then laugh)	I feel that I have more knowledge about the Skill. I never think of these stuff before.
<i>2. How do you feel after you understand about the importance of writing?</i>	I feel that life is hard without it, and I have more plans to learn and to train this skill.	I feel that I need to try to study more and more to improve my writing skill.	I know this, because I am a film director who works with the scripts (writing products), but they are in Vietnamese language. It is good to know that the English writing skill is important to me. I will try to study more.	Interesting too. Something true but I never think (should be thought) about. Good for me, I will try to study this subject (skill) more.	More knowledge about Writing. Some thing true and simple but I did not pay attention to. Now I feel that I need to train this skill.
<i>3. What step of the six writing steps is the most interesting to you?</i>	Exploring the Ideas. It is important for other steps of Writing.	The step of pretending to be the readers and make questions about the topic. The step number 2.	The first step. The step of Understanding the Topic. It helps me to have a right direction what to write and how to write.	Looking for ideas. Yes, it is.	The step of exploring ideas.

<p>4. <i>What do you remember about 5Ws1H?</i></p>	<p>Yes, for sure. It is What, How, When, etc.</p>	<p>What, Who, When, etc.</p>	<p>Who, where, when, etc.</p>	<p>What, Why, ...and How. Including How....I remember (Smile and Laugh)</p>	<p>What, Who, Why, etc.</p>
<p>5. <i>How much can the 5Ws1H method help you with your writing skill?</i></p>	<p>Without it, the writing cannot be perfect. I do not know what is the key points to mention, so the ideas are usually here and there and some are not related to the topic and the reader's need.</p>	<p>It makes me feel flexible and enjoy the writing process when I know that my writing can interest the readers.</p>	<p>Helps me write faster and in a right way.</p>	<p>It helps me to be more confident when I write a sentence. I can base on the structures of the questions to write sentences with good grammar, I think... because I do not translate a lot. (Laugh)</p>	<p>A lot with my Grammar.</p>
<p>6. <i>What other skills can this technique of using 5Ws 1H help you with?</i></p>	<p>Yes, a lot. In making questions during a conversation. It helps with my communication: speaking and reading, I think.</p>	<p>For my real life as an interpreter. It help me to guess other people's ideas before they speak, so it can be more active in my job. Besides, it may help me to be successful in communication.</p>	<p>Can help me more active in daily life communication.</p>	<p>In my academic life at university when I need to prepare for the presentation. I can ask questions myself and prepare them. ... Yeah...I will be more confident....(Laugh again)</p>	<p>Yes, in my real life. I can guess what the customers want to ask, and then can please them better. I am a receptionist. (Smile)</p>

# HOW USEFUL ARE MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN MOTIVATING VIETNAMESE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY?

LOC TAN LE  
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## ABSTRACT

*Motivating young learners in learning vocabulary is not easy; especially in the context that children learning English at weekends in language schools in Vietnam feel stressful and tired after weekdays learning at their primary schools. But if that fails, it is unable to help children improve language skills. As a result, this action research examined the roles of multimodal texts in motivating Vietnamese primary school children in learning English vocabulary. It was conducted in two classes at a language school where the researcher has been teaching English for five years and a conclusion was withdrawn that in spite of challenges facing the teachers multimodality engaged the primary school children, both boys and girls, at different ages in learning vocabulary.*

In Vietnam, the traditional teaching approach focusing on grammar, accuracy, reading, and tests has been ‘rooted’ in schools for years. The new approach - Communicative Language Teaching - focuses on communication and fluency. It has been introduced recently but the former system still plays a dominant role, particularly in public schools. Another approach, as described in Lewis and McCook (2002), also formed in Vietnam in the past few years is the combination of the two approaches above. It covers fluency, accuracy, oral language, written language, and tests. My language school has utilized this approach with the aim of helping learners, including children, who are fac-

ing different English tests in their school to communicate well in English and improve their exam scores.

In this context, my colleagues and I have faced increasing challenges. First, all teachers are assessed by two following main factors. The first one is to meet the requirements of teaching quality, which is evaluation by a Training Quality Manager's observation. The second one challenging us more is how highly we are evaluated by learners via the surveys conducted in the end of each course. Sometimes, we try our best to meet the former but fail to achieve the later. Another challenge is that most classes for children are held during the weekend. By then, most of them are overloaded with studying five or six days a week at their primary school. Hence, motivating them to study appropriately is a perpetual challenge.

My primary concern is how to motivate primary school children to learn vocabulary. Before teaching them grammar, reading, listening, or speaking, we are requested to clarify the meaning and pronunciation of words. However, they usually ignore what we try to do for them. When we ask them to listen and repeat words, some of them whisper, some do not open their mouth, some enthusiastically speak out the words but just for one time. As a result, I realise that innovation needs to be done in my classrooms with the hope that my students get excited in learning vocabulary because Mei-fang (2008) confirms that 'If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh.'

Also, Chappelle (2003, p. 67); Marsh and Singleton (2009); Robins (2011) comment that learning under the context of technology development not only relies on written texts, but is also supported by a variety of texts including sounds, gestures, pictures, and games, etc. These are multimodal texts. I would like to investigate how the modes of texts including written texts, visual texts (flashcards and images searched from the internet) and games designed with the software of PowerPoint can motivate Vietnamese primary school children at different ages to learning new vocabulary. In my research I am trying to answer these questions:

How can multimodal texts change children's attitudes towards learning vocabulary?

Do girls and boys have the same level of motivation?

What text motivates children most?

How should multimodal texts be used in vocabulary teaching and learning?

How do the children acquire vocabulary under the application of multimodality?

## MOTIVATION

Motivation can be said to play a decisive role in literacy learning in general and second language in particular. Motivation, as defined by Vincent (1984) quoted in Al-Haj (2011), is what catches someone's interests, draws their attention, and makes them act. Ornstein (1995) describes in detail that students who are not motivated act in different ways such as being distracted, quickly withdrawing from activities, daydreaming, doodling, looking out the window, getting disruptive, etc. He also states that those students rarely volunteer to answer questions and usually keep quiet unless called upon by the teacher. Consequently, Gomleksiz (2001) states that teachers find it difficult to teach those students. According to Li (2009) and Al-Haj (2011) motivation in learning has a significant influence on second language acquisition because learners who are interested in learning language devote their time to it and have suitable strategies to achieve their learning goals.

In terms of motivation classifications, Landen and Willems (2001) claim intrinsic motivation is better for learning than extrinsic motivation because the later mainly depends on extrinsic rewards; therefore, there is no motivation if there is no reward. Exploring the factors affecting motivation, Yeung, Lau and Nie (2011) make a remarkable comment that gender, age and motivation have a close relationship: boys are more motivated than girls and the older are less motivated than the younger.

### *Vocabulary teaching and learning*

As discussed above, motivation is really necessary for second language acquisition. This results in a judgment that it can play an important role in teaching and learning vocabulary. Allen (1983, pp. 8-15) informs that teachers find it hard to teach their students vocabulary because of the fact that the students feel they do not need to learn it. Therefore, the teachers' duty is to create a sense of need for learning vocabulary by different techniques for 'showing the meanings of words' and 'drawing attention to meanings before drilling words'. Allen also suggests some useful techniques that help students learn words effectively, including real objects, pictures, and actions and especially games, which make students enthusiastic about learning and make them feel that they need to learn words to play the games (pp. 33-52). More interestingly, Sharma and Barrett (2007, pp. 22-38) provide technology-related techniques in teaching and learning vocabulary. Those are images searched from the web pages and electronic games that can be alternative to books and print-based activities.

Discussing how to teach and learn vocabulary, McCarten (2007, p.21) claims that repeating a word aloud is one of the effective ways to help students



remember it. Teachers are also suggested to create more opportunities for their students to recall a word, not just to see it over and over. Moreover, Mei-fang (2008) recommends that teachers get students to interact with words more than just repeat them. She especially refers to creating ‘a mental image of a word’s meaning’ so that students can use their mental processing in a deeper and richer way, leading to a result that they can remember the word.

Furthermore, Jalongo and Sobolak (2011) notice that children who learn English as their second language are at risk of failing to reach vocabulary proficiency because they hardly find any chances of gaining new words at home. Accordingly, they propose the solutions that the teachers, firstly, find ways to engage the students to learn vocabulary in classroom. Secondly, the procedures such as repetition and reading words aloud as argued in the papers reviewed above should be combined with enactive, iconic, and symbolic modes in teaching vocabulary.

#### *Multimodal texts and their roles in vocabulary teaching and learning*

The techniques suggested by Allen (1983); Sharma and Barrett (2007), as mentioned in the previous subsection, are the forms of multimodality used in teaching and learning vocabulary. Besides, Marsh and Singleton (2009); Wyatt-smith and Kimber (2009) inform that multimodal texts and new technologies harmonise with each other under the context of technology development. According to Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007); Robins (2011); Lancaster and Rowe (2011), multimodality is so rich in modes including gesture, visual images, sound, games, written language, objects, and other semiotics.

However, a number of authors contend that the application of multimodal texts pose considerable challenges for both teachers and students. As Shenton and Pagett (2007) put it, teachers have to spend much of their time on preparing materials. In addition to the requirement of excellent software, Hai-peng and Li-jing (2007) state that teachers need some knowledge of technology. Moreover, Honan (2008) reports that the adoption of digital texts in classroom can cause a problem that the teachers cannot cover syllabus documents because they do not have enough time in classroom. Sharing the same point of view of Hai-peng and Li-jing (2007), Graham (2009) argues that computer games enhance students’ literacy, but the challenge both teachers and students face is that they need to learn ‘new skills’. Agreeing with Honan (2008) and Graham (2009), Harrett and Benjamin (2009) point out in their paper that games, videos, and DVD materials motivate students in learning on the one hand; on the other hand, teachers are reluctant to adopt them because of their lack of knowledge of technology. Impressively, Ryan, Scott and Walsh (2010) reveal that some teachers worry that their role will be pushed to the margins of classroom.

Despite some challenges posed by the adoption of multimodality, it still plays a significant role in education. As a result, it has been investigated by a variety of studies; however, their findings are not convergent. Acha (2009) examines the roles of verbal annotations, visual annotations and both of them in teaching children new words and concludes that using verbal annotations is 'more effective' than using visual annotations or both. The reason, as she explained, is that it takes children less time to recognise what a word means. Using the same instruments as Acha's (2009), but Shahrokni (2009) records a conflicting finding that the combination of texts and images results in improving students' vocabulary acquisition. In spite of using different instruments, videos with subtitles, Harji, Woods, and Alavi (2010) support Shahrokni (2009) that those instruments enhance students' level of second language vocabulary. In the same way, Sabet and Shalmani (2010) assess the adoption of videos, spoken texts, and visual texts for teaching vocabulary and then comment in their research that videos combined with visual texts result in better learning: students improve their 'memorization and retrieval of vocabulary'. Rezaee and Shoar (2011) compare video clips combined with text, picture with text, and text without annotation with each other in their research on the roles of multimedia in teaching vocabulary. Their study indicates that the combination of text and video clips is the most effective and the text without annotation is the least effective. In general, the studies above, except for the one by Acha (2009), proclaim that multimodality works well with vocabulary teaching and learning.

Another study by Zarei and Khazaie (2011) report some findings that differ from what is reviewed above can be called 'neutral'. They evaluate how students with different abilities (high-visual, high-verbal, low-visual, and low-verbal) acquire second language vocabulary with different modes of texts (no annotation, pictorial and written annotations). A conclusion drawn is that students with high-visual ability learn vocabulary better with pictorial annotation, whereas students with high-verbal ability learn words better with written annotation. Meanwhile, no annotation is suitable for the ones with both low-visual and low-verbal abilities.

The research articles reviewed did not offer the answers in the same direction; hence, the question about whether multimodal texts are useful for teaching and learning vocabulary has not been answered satisfactorily. More importantly, how multimodality can motivate learners in learning vocabulary has not been examined carefully either.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Methods*

This action research project adopted three different methods to form a triangulation, as Cotton, Stokes, and Cotton (2010) suggest in their article, with the aim to get as much reliable data as possible. Observing, according to Tomal (2010, p. 37), including direct observations and journals was used to record children's performance in the context of using multimodality. Wilmot (1979) suggests that observing participants gives researchers an overall and realistic look. In addition, the teacher's assistant journals were also examined to get information, which may be missed, in the teacher journals.

Semi-structured interviewing is another method combined with observation to form that triangulation. Kortessluoma, Hentinen, and Nikkonen (2003) find that interviews with children help researchers explore what children think. Also, talking to adults who are close to the children in another way we can learn children's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I found this to be the case with my students since they usually shared their feelings with my assistants. Hence, face-to-face interviews with my assistants were also held with the purpose of getting their opinion on how multimodality works in classroom and children's thoughts.

Finally, we need to reflect on how the children acquired the words they had learned with multimodal texts. At the planning stage, doing students' test paper assessment was not considered because standard tests in Vietnam usually put children under too much pressure. However, the time budgeted for conducting the research was close to a midterm test designed and required by the school. As a result, their test papers were also examined with the aim to evaluate their ability in recalling words they had learned. Moreover, how they did exercises designed in their students' book after learning new words was recorded in the teacher journals to evaluate the children's vocabulary acquisition. Then their cards for writing words were also collected for the same purpose.

There were some limits that probably influenced the findings. The first one was the time for holding children interviews was unreasonable. The reason for this was that the interviews were conducted during break time, so the children focused less on answering questions but more on the games their friends were playing outside and the food and drinks they looked forward to buying. It is noticed that appointments could not be made with them after or before school time. The second reason was that some important events might be missed in the teacher and teacher's assistant journals because the teacher wrote them during break time of each section and the teacher's assistants observed how children were involved in three main activities conducted to teach vocabulary

but not the activities of speaking, listening or reading after that due to the fact that they were busy with their paper work.

#### *Participants and research context:*

The participants in this research were 34 primary school children at the age of 7 to 11 studying English at Vietnam USA Society, a language school, and two teacher's assistants. All children took the classes held on Sunday mornings. One class (*class A*) with 17 children (6 boys and 11 girls) at the age of 7 to 8 learning with the textbook *Everybody Up 1* (Jackson and Sileci, 2012) was from 7:45 a.m. to 9:45 a.m. Another one (*class B*) with another 17 children (5 girls and 12 boys) at the age of 9 to 11 learning with the text book *Everybody Up 3* (Jackson and Sileci, 2012) was from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. At the time this study was conducted, the students in both classes had finished one of four units. From the whole number of participants, one boy and one girl in each class were selected randomly for interviews. Two lists of students' names were shown to one of my colleagues who did not know my students and she was asked to choose one boy and one girl from each list (the boy and the girl in class A were known as boy A and girl A; similarly, the boy and the girl in class B were known as boy B and girl B).

#### *Instruments*

As described, multimodal texts include different modes of texts, but this study focused on some of them, which were considered suitable for the lessons from the textbooks. They were written texts, flashcards, images including still and moving images searched from the internet to clarify the meanings and pronunciation of the words in the lessons. They were also used as sources to design learning activities-like games to encourage children to follow the procedures of teaching and learning vocabulary. In addition, PowerPoint was used for designing games ('*Pelmanism*' and '*The wheel of fortune*') and presenting images. Importantly, projectors and computers in each classroom that are usually reserved for teenager and adult classes were used in this research.

#### *Procedures*

Data were collected within three sections (around 110 minutes for each section in which the time for teaching and learning vocabulary is around 50 minutes). In the first and second section, the vocabulary in the same topic was taught by using flashcards and images to clarify the meaning of words and their pronunciation. After that, three games were introduced with the aim of encouraging the children to repeat, write and remember the words.

The first one was designed by sticking the flashcards on the board in rows. Then a story was made up to draw the children's attention to this activity.

For example, with the words for animals (class A), a story was that ‘Imagine that one day your parents take you to go to the zoo. When you get there, you see a zookeeper serving a meal for animals. He is working very hard and he is very tired. Please help him.’ Then the class were divided into two teams: team A with a small red ball and team B with a small blue ball (the balls were imagined as the food). One student from team A and another one from team B held their ball in their hands. They listened to a word said by their teacher and then threw their ball into the correct flashcard on the board. The student threw the ball into the correct flashcards quicker got one point for his/her team (that means he/she brought the food to the animal quicker). And then he/she is the person who said the word for two other students on the next turn. This activity lasted about 15 minutes in each class.

The second one, which is known as *Pelmanism* (figure 1), was designed with PowerPoint. One team selects any two windows by saying the numbers presented on them and the teacher then clicks the mouse to open these two windows. If they match (see an example in figure 1), a point is given to that team and they continue until two windows they select do not match. That means they lose their turn and another team repeats the procedure. Each class did this activity in about 10 minutes.

<b>monkey</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>

Figure 1: ‘Pelmanism’ for class A

The third one, which was also designed with PowerPoint, is called ‘*The wheel of fortune*’ (figure 2). The teacher shows the whole class the definition of a word (see an example in figure 2). Then one of the students in one team guesses one letter that he or she thinks it may be in the word. If he or she guess-

es correctly, the teacher clicks the mouse to open the window(s) to show the letter(s) to the class. After that, that student clicks the mouse on ‘spin’ button to spin the wheel and he or she then clicks the mouse again to stop the wheel. How many points his or her team get depends on where the hand is. About 10 minutes were spent for this activity in each class.

The same procedure with different topic (the chores) was also used for another class (class B). How the students participated in the activities in the section of vocabulary teaching and how they used the words they had learned with multimodality to do listening, speaking, or reading activities designed in the text books were observed and recorded in the teacher journals. In the teacher’s assistant journals, only the former was covered because teacher’s assistants did not have enough time to do some paper work required by the school.

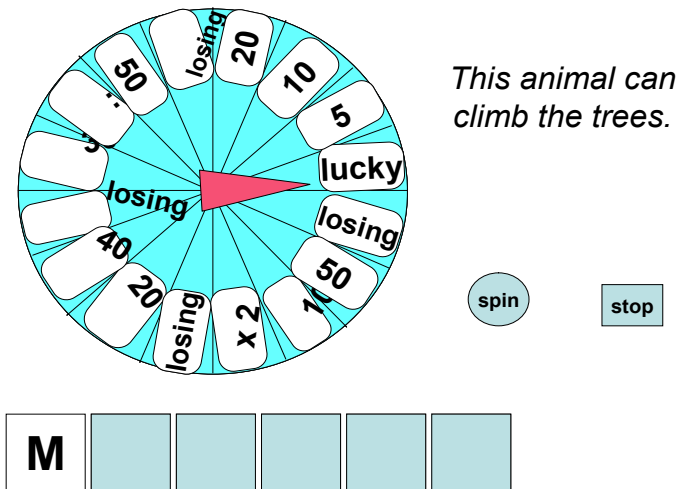


Figure 2: ‘The wheel of fortune’ for class A

In the third section, the moving images which were used to clarify the meanings and pronunciation of the words taught in the first and second section were put in the PowerPoint slide(s) to help the children review them firstly (*see an example in figure 3*). After that, they saw those moving images presented on PowerPoint slide(s) again and wrote the words (or phrases) describing the images down on their card. Three students finishing their work first without spelling mistakes won the prize. Finally, all of their cards were collected for assessment (*see an example in figure 4*).



Figure 3: A slide with moving images presented in class A

Name: Boy A

Monkey /	_____
elephant /	_____
bear /	_____
giraffe /	_____
Kangaroo /	_____
zebra /	_____

6

Figure 4: Boy A's writing cards (class A)

In the middle of the third section (during break time), student interviews were conducted. At the end of the third section the teacher's assistants were interviewed. A week after that, the students in both classes had a midterm examination. How they recalled the words they had learned with multimodal texts reflected in their test paper was examined.

## FINDINGS

Compared to what happened previously, the classroom atmosphere changed fundamentally. Most students in the two classes were motivated a lot. They were curious when I pulled the screen down and opened a projector. Some boys asked me 'what are you doing, teacher? Watching movies?' I said 'playing games'. Most of them were very surprised and excited. For example, the children in class B laughed a lot when they saw a cow milking another cow for its bowl of cereal. Nevertheless, they were attracted most by the games. While playing the games '*The wheel of fortune*' and '*Pelmanism*' most students in both classes raised their hands and yelled 'teacher, me, me'. Particularly, most boys and girls in class A and most boys in class B stood up to draw my attention to them. Noticeably, some boys in class B loved the game '*The wheel of fortune*' so much that they drew '*The wheel of fortune*' on the floor, used a marker as the hand and played in groups in their break time (figure 5).



Figure 5: '*The wheel of fortune*' drawn on the floor by some boys in class B



Importantly, activities designed using multimodal texts changed ‘quiet’ children in both classes. A few children who had never raised their hands before enthusiastically join with their classmates. In class A, there was a boy who always refused to join with their classmates in activities; in class B, four out of five girls usually sat in silence. However, they raised their hands to be called to play the game ‘*Pelmanism*’ and they really liked images presented with PowerPoint; and as a result, they took part in activities actively.

My assistants also noticed how the multimodality highly engaged the children during activities. In one of my assistant’s journals it reported that children participated in activities instead of talking, making noise, or looking at the clock. Some of them did not sit silently as they had ever done before. My two assistants stated in interview sections that adopting multimodality made the classes livelier and more interesting. The assistant in class B responded that ‘some girls told me that previously they didn’t like to raise their hand although they knew how to answer the questions, but they changed a lot. They were more active.’

In regard to the text which was the most attractive to children, the data collected from the teacher observations, the teacher’s assistants journals and the interview sections showed that the games designed from flashcards and the combination of images and written texts motivated children most in both class A and B, but it is difficult to identify which of three games motivated children most. Boy A said that he liked ‘*ball throwing*’ and ‘*Pelmanism*’; meanwhile, girl A and boy B stated that they loved playing ‘*The wheel of fortune*’. Partly agreeing with boy A, girl B informed that she preferred ‘*Pelmanism*’. Sharing my students’ point of views, my assistants agreed that the games ‘*The wheel of fortune*’ and ‘*Pelmanism*’ were more interesting, but they also agreed that ‘*ball-throwing*’ could also motivate children.

In addition, most children could recall the words they had learned with multimodality very well. After learning words with multimodal texts, most children could use them in speaking and they could also recognise the words they had learned in listening activities. More importantly, all of them could recognise the relation between the images and the words. As a result of this, most of them could write down the words on their cards after seeing the images in spite of the fact that a few students had mistakes in spelling. Moreover, examining their test papers led to a comment that most students in both classes could come to know the words they had acquired with multimodality in listening and reading sections. That made a significant contribution to their good result. Most of them had excellent or very good scores (only one student in class A and one student in class B got good scores). Remarkably, the girls in both classes achieved higher score than the boys although they were not as highly motivated as the boys in some activities.

## DISCUSSION

Multimodal texts adopted in this research could motivate Vietnamese primary school children at different ages. Children at the age of 7 to 11 highly engaged in activities designed by using written texts, flashcards, and images including both still and moving ones searched from the internet. The children showed more interests in learning vocabulary. The manifestations of being bored with learning such as talking, sitting in silence, or looking at the clock on the wall, etc. as Ornstein (1995) describes disappeared. However, the activities designed for this research could only produce extrinsic but not intrinsic motivation. Most children actively participated in the activities because they enjoy fun, play games, and are competitive. Although some boys in class B drew the wheel of fortune on the floor to play and learn vocabulary with each other without any enforcement, this is also extrinsic. Since the activities could motivate the children the project is a success because motivating children, as Mast (1937) claimed, is difficult. The children in this study have to learn English during weekends and the evenings after a long day in their primary school, motivating them in learning is an enormous challenge.

Multimodal texts motivated the children in this study, and so the way they were adopted is a crucial issue that needs to be explored. The fact that flashcards and images searched from the internet were used for presenting vocabulary could only draw the children's attention. But it is not sure that they can be used to motivate the children all the time. In my practical experience, only flashcards that are used to present the meanings and pronunciation of words are ignored by most children. Additionally, although Kayaoglu, Dagakbas and Ozturk (2011) found that animation motivated students in learning vocabulary, how long it gets trite to them is unknown. However, the insight gained from this research is that flashcards and images combined with written texts could be used as resources for designing different activities, like games, in order to motivate children to participate. Gul Keskil and Pasa Tefvik Cephe (2001) quoted in Harmer (2007, p. 82) confirms that the game is one technique children like most.

Harmer (2007, p. 83) also concludes that children easily get bored with the same activities, so it is necessary to change their activity about every ten minutes. This paper shares this suggestion. In a 50 minute period for teaching vocabulary, three different activities or games should be planned to maintain the children's interest. This poses a challenge because many new ideas are needed. The school should encourage its teaching staff to contribute their ideas and share them with one another.

Who was more motivated: the boy or the girls, the older or the younger? Yeung, Lau and Nie (2011) conclude in their papers that boys are more mo-

tivated than girls, but that did not happen in this study. The difference in the level of motivation between the boys and the girls crucially depended on activities. In ‘*ball-throwing*’ and ‘*The wheel of fortune*’ games, the boys more highly engaged, but in ‘*Pelmanism*’ there were not any differences. Nevertheless, the way some girls showed their interests was not the same as the boys. Some of them did not yell, dance, or stand up, but only raised their hands and laughed lightly.

Yeung, Lau and Nie (2011) also note that younger students are more motivated. Once again, this is not in accordance with what was found in this study. The children at different ages (from 7 to 11) were motivated by the same forms of activity designed for teaching vocabulary; even the older children were more motivated because they found easier to follow their teacher’s instructions of how to do activities. However, the children at the age of 6 were not investigated in this study due to the fact that the classes the teacher was assigned at the time this study was conducted were not for the children at that age. Consequently, this issue needs to be examined more carefully by one further research on a larger scale with the participation of primary school children at the age of 6 to 11.

Above all, what was found in this research correctly reflected what Tella (2007); Putman and Walker (2010); Yeung, Lau and Nie (2011) argue in their papers that motivation has a direct influence on learning outcomes. Although there have been different point of views on the relation between multimodality and vocabulary learning outcomes as reviewed in the section of literature review, this research showed that children could recall the words they had learned well with the support of multimodality. They were motivated, resulting in their interests of learning new words. That greatly contributed to their impressive midterm examination results. Therefore, it is recommended that multimodal texts should be used in a larger scale in the context of Vietnam USA Society in which the objectives of improving children’s communicative ability in English and scores in exams are set.

Moreover, the application of multimodality made children follow the usual procedure of vocabulary teaching and learning without any enforcement. McCarten (2007, pp. 20-21); Jalongo and Sobolak (2011) suggest that when teaching vocabulary, teachers need to draw students’ attention to the words they are teaching, use suitable techniques to clarify their meanings and pronunciation, and then encourage students to repeat and read aloud the words. In this research context, flashcards and the images searched from the internet and presented with the help of PowerPoint slides awakened children’s curiosity about the words. After that the meaning and pronunciation of words were taught by the same tools. Children then unintentionally repeated the words by playing the multimodality-based games.

Besides the benefits, using multimodality for teaching English in general and teaching vocabulary in particular should be considered because of some challenges it posed. First, what Shenton and Pagett (2007) claim that it takes teachers more time to prepare materials was in line with what the teacher doing this research faced. Two weeks were spent on planning to teach vocabulary within 2 sections and do review and assessment in one section. That is really difficult for busy teachers. Second, knowledge of technology as Hai-peng and Li-jing (2007) informed in their paper can create a barrier that prevents good ideas from coming true. Before using PowerPoint to design the games for conducting this study, I had got some ideas from game shows on TV channels and tried to find educational computer programs and other software suitable for designing games. It took me several more weeks to design as many games with PowerPoint as possible and from which the best ones were selected. When the research was conducted, some of them were used with some appropriate adjustment. Third, adopting computer games for teaching, according to Graham (2009), requires both teachers and students to learn new skills. To teachers, the skills of using a computer and designing games as discussed above are important. To students in class A (in this research context), some of them were very confused with clicking the mouse to play games at first. After being instructed again and again, they were more proficient.

Despite some achievements, there were also some limitations that need to be examined. The first one was that some technical problems partly affected some children's level of motivation. For example, the projector did not work in class B while all children were looking for playing games. Therefore, some looked disappointed. Around ten minutes later it was fixed by a maintenance staff. The second one was that very little information was received from children interviews due to the fact that appointments were not made after or before classes. The reasons for this were that some children could not go to school before their classes on Sunday mornings or their parents were too busy to take them to go to school earlier and they could not wait until interviews ending to pick up their children. Consequently, interviews had to be conducted during break time when children only liked going out for playing with their friends. That led to the possibility of not fully exploring what they really thought about the multimodality-based activities. Kortessluoma, Hentinen, and Nikkonen (2003) advise that children interviews reflected faithfully their feelings. Lastly, Honan (2008) complains that it is the syllabus that can affect teachers' decision, the selection of activities in this research were limited by the time set for each class and the lesson structured in the text books. That led to the fact that there were fewer opportunities to get more reliable data.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Primary school children at different ages in this research context changed their attitudes towards learning vocabulary under the adoption of multimodality. They actively participated and did not ignore their teacher. By using different modes of texts to design activities with the support of technology, the teacher could engage the children in new ways of learning vocabulary. Noticeably, both boys and girls were motivated although there were differences in the ways they showed interest in the activities. More importantly, a few students who the teacher encountered difficulty engaging in lessons changed their behaviour towards learning new words. Via assessing how children recalled the words they had learned with multimodality by the ways of observing how they did speaking, listening and reading activities and examining their mid-term examination result, it is also concluded that they acquired vocabulary very well.

Also, the modes of text were adopted in an appropriate way in this research. They were not used individually but some of them were combined with each other. They were used as sources for designing activities (games) that the children enjoyed, leading them to maintain their interest in learning vocabulary.

However, using multimodal texts to conduct this action research also posed some challenges for both the teacher and children. The first one was that the teacher spent much more time than before to prepare the lessons. This requires English language teachers in Vietnam to make a choice: teaching more or teaching less and saving more time for planning. The second was that more knowledge of technology was needed. The third was that teacher and children had to learn new skills.

To utilise multimodal texts for teaching and learning English extensively this research project suggests several recommendations: First, further study should be conducted with the aim of investigating the roles of multimodality in motivating primary school children at the age of 6 to 11 in learning vocabulary. It is also suggested that it is necessary to further study the roles of multimodal texts in teaching vocabulary and English skills for adolescents and adults. Second, the school should encourage its teaching staff to adopt multimodal texts in a large scale in teaching children vocabulary. Finally, the school also needs to develop a policy on motivating teachers to contribute more new ideas for using multimodal texts in teaching.

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# A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF MAINLAND CHINESE PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR CHILDREN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS' EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Although parent involvement has received long-standing attention in the literature, there is limited research about Chinese parent involvement, especially, in mainland, China. With Chinese immigrant students' high academic success having been repeatedly reported, more attention has been given to Chinese parent involvement, however it was restricted to Chinese overseas, or in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is unclear whether findings obtained accurately described Chinese parent involvement, and can be generalized to Chinese in Mainland.*

*This research attempts to add an in-depth contextual understanding of mainland Chinese parent involvement. Based on face-to-face interviews, this study investigated Chinese parents' involvement in, expectations for and perceptions of their children's education. Participants were 30 parents, randomly selected from 5 primary schools in Changsha, China.*

*Results indicated that parents: 1) are highly involved in their children's education, with daily homework supervising; frequently communicating school issues to their children and generously investing time and money in children's extra-curricular training; 2) hold high expectations for their children with more than 70% parents expecting their children to complete "at least" university education; 3) mostly attribute their educational involvement to the realistic need of well preparing their children for the fierce workforce competition, and passing the university-entry exams.*

**Key words:** Chinese parent involvement, context, interview, Mainland China,



## INTRODUCTION

Stemmed from Sociological theories noting the impact of family background on children's school achievement, "parent involvement" has received numerous attentions from researchers in different areas during the recent decades. To date, it has been widely recognized as a strong predictor of students' academic achievement and other positive school behaviours (Anderson and Minke, 2007, Flouri and Buchanan, 2004), i.e., higher grade point averages and better scores in reading and mathematics (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002); reduced special education placements and grade retentions (Miedel and Reynolds, 1999); lower student dropout rates and higher levels of social skills (McWayne et al., 2004); and increased ability to self-regulate behaviours (Brody et al., 1999). If pupils are to maximize their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Despite extensive attention on parent involvement in western contexts, there is currently a deficit of research about Chinese parent involvement (Kim and Wong, 2002), except the limited literature focusing on Chinese overseas, or in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chao and Tseng, 2002, Shek, 2006, Li, 2001). It is inexplicit whether findings obtained accurately described Chinese parental involvement, and could be generalized to a broader population, especially, in Mainland, China.

However, with Chinese immigrant students' academic outperformance having been repeatedly reported by cross-cultural studies (Stevenson et al., 1994), and with the best results in mathematics, science and reading achieved by students from Shanghai in the 2009 test of the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* having been revealed (Dillon, 2010) more researchers have been interested in Chinese parent involvement. As Huntsinger and Joseb (2009) wondered "Do Chinese parents manifest their involvement in their child's schooling in the same ways as do parents from other ethnic groups or not?" (p. 400) It would be interesting and valuable for educators and researchers to know more about and to better understand how and why Chinese parents involve themselves in children's education.

### *Aim of the present study*

This study attempted to address the current gap and add an in-depth understanding of Chinese parent involvement to the literature. Using face-to-face interviews of 30 parents, the present study investigated the pattern, and the context of Chinese parent involvement. Then it further examined the contextual impact on parents' involvement in and perceptions of children's education. Research of this study was guided by questions as below:

- 1) How do Chinese parents involve themselves in their children's education?
- 2) Why are they involved in children's education in this way?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND MEASURE

### *Method*

This study employed a mixed method of using semi-structured face-to-face interview, with three sections included and both quantitative and qualitative items examined. The first section of the interview was designed to collect parent's demographic characteristics, i.e., education level, occupation, and yearly income, etc. In the second part, variable about the pattern of Chinese parent involvement was examined by investigating the question "How are you involved in your children's education"? Inspired by Epstein's (1986; 1995) six-level model of parent involvement, meanwhile, grounded in the educational and cultural Chinese context, this study particularly examined three quantitative items related to parent's involvement: homework supervising, talking with children about school issues, extra-curricular lessons their children currently had. At the end, the interview further examined two questions, "What do you expect for your children's education?" and "Why do you have such expectation/s"? Quantitative data and qualitative information was respectively analysed by descriptive statistical technique and content analysis method (Johnson and LaMontagne, 1993).

### Research site

Changsha is a capital city of Hunan Province, located in central South China, with a population of 6 million. It has been highly reputed for its successful basic education, with higher rate of graduations enrolled into universities. Parents in Changsha have been traditionally highly motivated to scaffold their children's education achievement. Findings obtained here, can be generalized and added into the literature for better understanding of Chinese parent involvement in mainland, China.

### *Participants*

Follow the criterion of having students from different family backgrounds, 4 public schools, plus one private school were purposively selected to serve as an unbiased sample for this study. From each school, 6 parents, 30 in total, with children in grade 3 were randomly recruited to complete the face-to-face interview. Of the group, 28 are mothers, 2 are fathers, all from different levels of family Socioeconomics (SES) background.

### *Procedure*

From 1024 primary schools in the urban area, 10 primary schools were purposively selected under the standard of having students from different family backgrounds. Then principals of these schools were contacted with by telephone and email for their consent to attend the research, and for information of classes in grade 3. 5 principals agreed to participate in the study. One class in grade3 from each school was randomly selected to be the sample and information sheet was then sent to the classroom teacher, to be handed over to parents. In each class, among those who consented to participate in the research, five parents were randomly selected to attend the interview, and further contacted with about the schedule of interview by email or telephone.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author, at suitable times and in places nominated by parents, such as at home, or in school office, etc. 90% of them were completed within 1 hour. Before interviews started, parents were promised that the information they provided would be confidential; no name of participants, their children, or schools would be reported.

## **MEASURES**

### *Instruments of Parent involvement*

Parent involvement is a multifaceted concept encompassing a broad range of parenting practices (Fan, 2001). It can take forms, such as parental aspiration for children's academic achievement (Bloom, 1980), parents' communication with children about school (Walberg, 1986), parents' participation in school's activities (Stevenson and Baker, 1987), parental rules of education imposed at home (Marjoribanks, 1988), parents' volunteering in children's school and helping with their homework (Carlisle et al., 2005).

Throughout most of the literature, Epstein's Model (1986, Epstein, 1995) has been widely recognized as a typology and fundamental framework for investigating parenting activities and educational practice (Cheng and Sally, 2009). According to this model, parents engage in children's education at six levels: parenting, addressing children's basic needs and support as students; communicating, talking with teachers/schools about school programs and children's progress; volunteering, assisting or participating in schools; learning at home, supervising children's home learning; decision making, being involved in school's decision-making; collaborating with community, working with community programs to access education-related services.

### *Parent involvement Instrument in this study*

Previous studies have suggested that Chinese parents practiced more home-based involvement and tended to conform to the school requirements and supervise their children's learning at home (Ho and Willms, 1996). Based on Epstein's model, meanwhile, grounded in China's educational and cultural context, this study particularly examined three types of parent involvement which are significant in Chinese context: homework supervising, communicating school issues to children, extra-curricular lessons currently registered for their children.

***Homework*** has been world-widely recognised as an effective way for students to practise academic skills, increase learning-task involvement, and to foster their self-discipline as well as responsibilities (Epstein, 1988). However, the significance of homework is particularly pronounced in Chinese communities where children spend substantial amount of time on take-home assignments everyday (Chen and Stevenson, 1989, Tam, 2009). Therefore it is fundamentally important for this study to investigate how Chinese parents' homework supervision.

***Communication with children about school issues*** Rather than general parenting, parental communication with children about their school progress was found to be more strongly related to student motivation (Marchant et al., 2001). Parental communicating the importance of education to children helps them learn strategies to enhance their perceptions of competence and control over achievement outcomes (Lareau, 2000); and structure learning experiences that result in skill development (Keith et al., 1993). When parents communicate with their school-aged children about school issues, children are more satisfied with the school and have higher academic achievement (Coleman, 1998).

***Extra-curricular lessons*** Extra-curricular lessons were valued by researchers as a vital and essential supplement to general school curriculum, with benefits to enhance and strengthen the content and quality of the curriculum (Fung and Wong, 1991, Dentemaro and Kranz, 1993); to greatly contribute to students' growth, school administration, and society (Miller et al., 1956). In this study, it refers to supervised training sessions for voluntary participation in order to facilitate children's learning and improve their achievement in some area(s). These lessons are student-centred, scheduled outside normal school hours, formally organised and planned in accordance with students' ability and interest (Chow and Wong, 2000).

Other studies found that extra-curricular lessons participants demonstrate positive effects on academic performance, personality, and peer acceptance (Fung, 1992, Shi, 1996). They are able to attain higher academic achievements (Holland and Andre, 1987, Camp, 1990); express much stronger career aspirations (Crittendon, 1998); develop their potential to a greater extent (Shi, 1996); enhance their leadership skills (Hollingsworth, 1996); develop their character, and improve behavior (Hollingsworth, 1996) as well as their social skills.

In China, it's very popular for students to attend extra-curricular lessons, for the potential positive effects, more frequently for their utilitarian benefits. In most areas of China, local policies entitle students the priority or extra scores as a reward added to the gross results of entrance-exam to gain admission into key schools or universities. However the admission into key schools or universities is fiercely competitive with every point being crucial to distinguish students the winner from the loser. For Chinese children, having extra-curricular lessons is somehow a divide for them to study in key schools or universities or not. Only if looking at children's extra-curricular lessons can we relatively accurately describe the scenario of Chinese parent involvement.

#### *Parent expectations for children's education*

Parent expectations are beliefs that parents hold about the future performance of their children and are often focused on achievement-related areas such as educational, professional (Barber and Rao, 2005). Of many family variables that contribute to children's school achievement, parent expectation was singled out by researchers to be the most salient and powerful force (Patrikakou, 1997, Seginer, 2006). Especially parental expectations for children's educational attainment (e.g., whether or not attend college) have been shown to be significantly related both to the child's current achievement and to later achievement (Fuligni, 1995, Marjoribanks, 1988).

Chinese parents are reputed to not only have higher expectations for their children's academic achievement (Li, 2001), view academic success as having multiple benefits for the family (Cheng and Sally, 2009), but also place a high premium on education and academic success, and actively engage in children's learning (White, 1993). Examining such expectations is not only essential for this study but also necessary for us to have in-depth understanding of Chinese parent involvement.

## RESULTS

Results presented in the following subsections focus on: (1) presenting the profiles of participants of this research; (2) describing the pattern of

Chinese parent involvement; (3) contextual understanding of Chinese parent involvement.

### *Demographic characteristics*

Parents' demographic information can be found in Table 1. As it showed, 93.3% of the sample was mothers, with the rest 6.7% falling to be fathers. All parents were -aged ranging from 30 to 43 years old, with 35.7 years as the median age. Except two parents, most of them have completed at least high school level education (equivalent to 12 years), with 36.7% holding bachelor degree, and another 20% respectively having 3 or 2 years diploma.

Slightly more than 30% parents had income less than ¥50,000/year, falling to the lower SES group (the National Bureau of Statistics, 2002). However, there was nearly one-third of the group earned annually more than ¥100,000, with 3.3% of them even had yearly income higher than ¥200,000 per year. Another one-third of parents belonged to middle class with income ranging from ¥50,000 to ¥100,000.

Data of parents' occupation also clearly showed that parents were from diverse family background. Except 5 parents declined to reveal their career, 33.3% parents defined themselves as professionals, e.g., engineers, doctors, teachers, accountants, etc. Another 6 parents were working as managerial staff, with 2 as senior managers, 4 as administrative staffs. Another 4 parents were from business background, with 1 parent claimed to be "businessman", another 3 as "self-employed". Except 3 housewives, there was 1 labor and 1 unemployed parent.

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristic of Parents (n=30)

	Variable	Number	Percentage %	Median
Gender	Father	2	6.7	
	Mother	28	93.3	
Age (30-43)				35.7
Education Level	4 years University	11	36.7	College
	3years College	6	20	
	2years College	6	20	
	High School	5	16.7	
	Middle School	1	3.3	
	Primary School	1	3.3	

Yearly Income (¥1.0=10,000)	< 5.0	11	36.7	6.81
	5.0 ~10.0	10	33.3	
	10.0 ~ 15.0	8	26.7	
	>20.0	1	3.3	
Occupation	Professional (doctor, teacher, engineer, accountant, etc.)	10	33.3	
	Professional manager	2	6.7	
	Administrative officers	4	13.3	
	Businessman	1	3.3	
	Self-employed	3	10	
	Housewife	3	10	
	Labor	1	3.3	
	Unemployed	1	3.3	
	Information missing	5	16.7	

*The pattern of Chinese parent involvement*

Information about how parents participate in children’s education; and what expectations do they have for children’s education are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2** Parents’ Involvement in & expectations for Children’s Education (N = 30)

Involvement Area		Scale	Number	Percentage %	Median
Home-work supervising	Frequency (Every day)	Yes	29	96.7	1-2hrs
		No	1	3.3	
	Time spent (Daily)	(0,30mins)	12	40	
		30-60mins	10	33.4	
		1-2hrs	6	20	
		2-3hrs	1	3.3	
Communication school issues to children	Frequency	≥3hrs	1	3.3	
		Daily	11	36.7	
		Often	16	53.3	
		Seldom	2	6.7	
		Rarely	1	3.3	

Extra-curricular lessons	Amount	(,2)	3	10	3 [1, 5]
		[2,4)	16	53.4	
	Tuition ¥ (half year)	[4,6)	10	33.3	2,200 [600, 100,000]
		[600, 2000)	5	16.6	
		[2,000, 6,000)	16	53.4	
		[6,000, 8,000)	3	10	
		[8,000, 100,000]	4	13.3	
	Weekly hours (children)	Missing	2	6.7	5 [0.5,12]
		[0.5, 4)	8	26.7	
		[4, 8)	12	40	
[8, 12]		9	30		
Missing		1	3.3		
Expectations for Children	Clearly-mentioned eventual education	At least bachelor	9	30	
		Key university	2	6.7	
		First-class/Overseas university	5	16.7	
	Other	Master	2	6.7	
		PhD	1	3.3	
		To be a professional	3	10	
		Good study habit	1	3.3	
Not clearly-mentioned	Be healthy & happy	4	16.7		
	To be financially self-supported	3	16.7		

**Homework supervision** As indicated in the table, 96.7% of parents, are actively involved in daily supervising their children's homework from less than 30 minutes to even more than 3 hours. 40% parents claimed the time spent on children's homework less than 30 minutes; while to another 10 parents, the time was doubled to about 1 hour. However, there were 6 parents needed 1~2 hours a day to help children with home learning, while to another 2 parents it was respectively 2-3 hours and more than 3 hours each day.

**Communication school issues to children** Information in the table revealed that Chinese parents highly concerned their children's school issues by com-



municating with them frequently. 90% of them talked with their children about school progress in a frequency above the level of “Often”. Among them, nearly 40% did it every day, while presumably another 50% did it “often”. Only 10% of these parents seldom or rarely mentioned these issues to their children.

***Extra-curricular lessons*** As Table 2 shows that registering extra-curricular lessons for their children is a must-do for Chinese parents. 100% of parents currently registered from one to five extra-curricular lessons for their children. Their children slightly more than 50% were engaging in 2-4 training lessons. Another 33.3% had 4-5 subjects. Only 10% of the sample registered lessons for their children less than 2 lessons.

The money parents spent on children’s extra-curricular could be found in Table 2. The median tuition is ¥2,200/half year, with ¥10,000 on the top and ¥600 at the bottom. More than 50% of the group invested ¥2,000~¥6,000 per six months for their children’s extra-curricular learning. Within them, only 5 parents spent less than ¥2,000, however, another 4 parents spend ¥8,000~¥10,000, with 3 spend ¥6,000 ~ ¥8,000 per half a year.

Meanwhile, parents spend plenty of time on their children’s extra-curricular learning. As demonstrated, the median weekly time is 5 hours. 40% of this group, 12 parents, spent 4~8 hours per week on children’s extra-learning. The weekly time for another 8 parents, 26.7% of the sample, is more than half hour but less than 4 hours. However, another 30% parents spend 8~12 hours a week engaging in their children’s out-school training.

***Parent expectations*** While asked about their expectations for their children, 63% parents clearly claimed that their children should complete university education. More than a quarter clarified it as “at least” a university level. Another 2 parents expected their children to study at a “key university”; while another 5 parents hope it should be a “first-class” or an overseas university. There were 2 parents who wanted their children to have master degree, while another 1 parent hopes it to be doctoral degree.

Among those not clearly expressed their expectations, 10% preferred their children to be a professional, such as lawyer, doctor or engineer. 1 parent hoped his child to form good learning habits. Another 4 parents emphasized more on children’s non-academic development, such as happiness and health. Different with others, there were 3 parents only wanted their children to be financially self-supported.

*Parents' perceptions*

Parents' views about the load of study, the significance of education, were described in Table 3. Numbers and percentages were calculated by content analysis according to the frequency of words/phase used by parents.

**Table 3** Parents' perceptions

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Parents' perceptions</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
<b>Load of study</b>	Heavy (too much many homework)	9	30
	Sound	18	60
	Not heavy at all	3	10
<b>significance of education</b>	Means of enhance social status	16	53.3
	The way to learn, know the world	4	13.3
	Crucial for children's whole life	10	33.3
<b>Reason of emphasis on education</b>	cultural tradition: respect education, parents' high expectation	9	30
	preparation for the competitive workforce	15	50
	Impact of university-entry system	6	20

As Table 3 revealed, 18 parents regarded the load of study as "sound"; although another 9 parents, considered it was "too heavy". To another 10% parents, it was "not heavy at all". However, almost all parents understood education is significant to their children. More than 50% parents took education as a means to enhance social status. For another 4 parents, education is a way to know more about the world. Although not clearly stated, to another 33% of this group, education is crucial for children's whole life.

Why parents emphasize their children's education? 30% of them attributed it to the influence of Chinese cultural tradition of respecting education, and highly expecting for children's future. However, another 15 parents understood it more practically as the need of well preparing their children for the fierce competitive workforce. 20% of this group thought it was led by the university-entry system where children have to pass complicated examinations to study continuingly in universities.

## DISCUSSION

Different with previous studies focusing on Chinese parent overseas, or in Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Chao and Tseng, 2002, Shek, 2006, Li, 2001), this exploratory study shed lights on mainland Chinese; aimed to explore an in-depth contextual understanding of their involvement in children's education. Based on Epstein's model, and information collected from face-to-face interviews, this study investigated the pattern, the context and the self-perceptions of Chinese parent involvement.

Consistent with previous findings about that Chinese parents overseas regarded education as their top priority (Li, 2001), seriously concerned with their children's learning and actively participate in their children's education (Pearce, 2006), this study shows that Chinese parents at home put their children's education in a critically important position. More than 50% parents interviewed regarded education as means to enhance social status, with another one-third closely supposed that education is "crucial" to their children's whole life.

Consequently, parents in this study were found to be highly committed to their children's learning and school success. Most of them, about 90%, not only supervise home-learning more than 30 minutes a day, but also communicate school issues to their children quite frequently. Besides highly being involved in children's home-supervision, parents in this study actively engage in their children's extra-curricular activities. 100% of this group registered 1~5 training lesson/s for their children, with averagely 5 hours/week spent and ¥2,200/half year invested in these training lessons.

While asked about why education is so significant to their children? 50% parents attributed it to the realistic context where the young generation is under the overwhelming pressure from the workforce. With the technology improving and university education more affordable, it becomes fiercely competitive for undergraduates to find a satisfactory job, then to live comfortably. For the sake of their children to stand out in the fierce competition, to lead a decent life, what parents wanted to do, in this study, is to push their children study hard and study well. "Not to lose at the start-point of your children" is somehow an alarm clock ringing to parents at all the time. Parenting cannot be understood unless it is placed within its economic, social, political, and historical context (Taylor et al., 2000). In Chinese context, education is somehow a business with the whole family as cooperators.

As parents noted, the current university-enrolment system is another powerful force pushing them actively engage in their children's education. Policies in China entitle no access for children to study in universities, especially "key universities" unless they pass the difficult university-entry exams and

get a score greatly higher than the requirement. However, as an interviewee said, “Nowadays, if you want to find a relatively good job, most basically you have to graduate from a good university”. That could partly explain why more than 50% parents in this study expected their children to complete “at least” university education. Slightly inconsistent with previous research, where Chinese parents’ high educational engagement was attributed to Chinese culture tradition; in this study, only 30% parents claimed to be culturally motivated to participate in their children’s education, following the cultural tradition of respecting education and people well-educated, and highly expecting for their children’s success.

In summary, Chinese parents in this study not only highly expect for their children’s education, but also actively engage in their children’s learning by extensive homework supervision; frequent communication school issues to their children and generous investment in their after-school training. The most powerful force driving them to practise all these parenting is to well prepare their children for the fiercely competitive labour market, and to pass the complicated university-entry exams, a high bar towards the entry of better life.

However, considering the cultural and economic diversity in mainland, China, and the limited sample of this study, it would be better to be cautious while generalising the findings to a broader population of Chinese.

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# EDUCATION REFORM IN VIETNAM

A Critical Analysis of Inclusion and Management  
Discourses

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the construction of educational discourses in the Vietnamese educational system in the context of the country's institutional reform. Through our analysis of the management and inclusive education discourses, we argue that the restructuring of Vietnamese educational policy manifests the shift in the political structure, which reflects the dimensions of inclusion and exclusion at both global and local levels. Further, through our analysis, we argue that the politics of educational reform legitimates, rather than challenges exclusion. In this hegemonic agenda, inclusion is constructed as a mainstream discourse that ideologically perpetuates exclusion by the new structure of educational reform.*

## INTRODUCTION

**T**oday, Vietnam represents a country with a distinctive socio-economic image that has acquired an interest within the international community. The socio-economic reform in the late 1980s, namely *Doi Moi*, triggered dramatic changes in the Vietnamese social, political, and cultural spheres. The shift has resulted in numerous patterns of change within the Vietnamese socio-economic and demographic structure. Critics observe that inequalities in the social and educational systems in Vietnam have increased as a result of the shift in the economic structure and the decentralization of the state control over so-

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cial sectors, which ultimately re-organize social relationships within the public and private domains (Dollar and Litvack 1998; McCargo 2004; Nguyen 2005; Taylor 2003). The emergence of poverty reduction and social inclusion raises critical questions regarding who is included and excluded in this political agenda of social reform.

Since the early 1990s, powerful global institutions have researched some of the ongoing developmental trends in the Vietnamese educational system. This literature raises some concerns over the impacts of Doi Moi on educational equity (World Bank 1996; Oxfam, Save the Children Alliance, and UNICEF 1998; Do 2005; Duggan 2001; Nguyen 2005). However, there remains a need for a critical understanding of the social, political, and institutional dimensions that have transformed the politics of education. The constructions of educational inclusion and exclusion in relation to this socio-economic agenda are critical issues which inform us of the relationship between education and social change. As a result, it is important to document the dynamic cultural, political, and ideological forces underlying the constructions of inclusion and exclusion in the education system within the changing patterns of Vietnamese society in the twenty-first century. This understanding needs to critically take into account the emergence of competing agendas of institutional management and inclusion in Vietnamese social and educational reform. The examination and analysis of these discourses is a primary focus in this essay.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper examines the meanings of educational reform, in relation to their implications for inclusion and exclusion in the Vietnamese context. We situate our inquiry within the broader context of social change to observe the process and effect of social change on school population. The term governmentality refers to an art of modern government in the emergence of modern societies. To govern, modern states have participated in shaping and handling the behaviour of populations. They applied management technologies through such activities as the control of contamination, the application of hygiene methods, the institutionalization of compulsory education, and the constructions of disciplines and technologies in schools. These managerial technologies work as a complex system of power to control the populations through the production of discourses and practices that construct inclusion and exclusion (Foucault, 1977, 1991).

Inclusion and exclusion are theoretical concepts that can be analyzed through a variety of dimensions, including who is in control of the educational system, why, and for what purposes. Critical theory in education has shown that educational curriculum, policies, and practices are the institutional



arrangements which privilege particular social groups in educational settings while simultaneously marginalizing those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2006). By constructing educational codes which enable some segments of the school population to thrive disproportionately, the school system plays a critical role in reproducing social inequalities (Apple 1995; Bernstein 1971; Giroux 1981; Kincheloe 2004). From a Foucauldian perspective, inclusion and exclusion are meanings constructed through the normative discourses and practices of institutions. For example, the ways modern institutions govern their populations have been exercised through the formulation of the codes of conduct that every individual is expected to respect and follow. The system of power operating in these institutional rules works to control the individual, while at the same time governs the conduct of entire population through rationalities and disciplines (Foucault, 1977). As Popkewitz and Linbrad (2000) argue, in conjunction with the process of social change is the restructuring of the welfare state, the educational system, and the systems of rules that restructure social inclusion and exclusion. Discourse is the social meaning articulated through institutionally governed practices such as policymaking (Ball 1990a). Discourse constructs knowledge and thought, while at the same time constructs inclusion and exclusion.

In examining the institutional power that constructs inclusion and exclusion, we analyze two seemingly opposing discourses - management and inclusion - in order to address the political agenda of educational reform and its implications regarding inclusion and exclusion. We pose three interrelated questions relating to the politics of inclusion and exclusion: (1) How is the discourse of management constructed within the historical juncture of local and global forces restructuring Vietnamese educational policy?; (2) How is inclusion/exclusion constructed within the management discourse in this context of social change?; and, (3) What are the implications of the management discourse on the participation of disadvantaged students in the education system? We begin by providing a historical perspective on the relationship between the state, the education system, and social power in Vietnam. This is followed by our discussion of the discursive shift in educational policy in the reform context, which analyzes the discourses of management and inclusion that emerged within this context of educational reform. Finally, we address some current trends of educational inclusion and exclusion in schooling to consider the effects of educational reform on school populations.

### *The state, power, and education: A historical perspective*

In Vietnam, the Western-style mass education system was established in Vietnam shortly after the French invaded the country in 1858. While the Vietnamese educational system has had a long history (Pham, 1998), the politics of

education which the French set forth aimed at training a cheap labour force to work for the administration under the control of the colonizer. This system of education privileged a small number of high-ranking officials, while at the same time rendered the indigenous population powerless (Osborne 1969). Regarding the legacy of colonial education, Pham (2000) argues that schooling was a means of sustaining the hegemonic ideology of the feudal and colonial authorities over the populace. The system of education was designed to be a meritocracy, which led to only a small number of children maximally benefiting from public schools. Conversely, Kelly (1982) observes that rather than being a unified system of education mirroring the French educational system, colonial education was complicated by the application of differing educational systems to different geographic regions, including Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. The existence of differing systems of education, argues Kelly (1982), reflects the tensions and conflicts between the different interest groups within the social strata, the mandarin/monarchy, and the French colonizer. The findings of his study show that schooling can actually increase social differentiation. Specifically, schools allowed individuals with more relative social power to advance more rapidly within the social hierarchy. The intensification of social differentiation under colonial rule will be an important point for us to return when we address educational reform in Vietnam.

The shift in educational ideologies in the current context has been driven by the Dakar Framework, set forth by UNESCO's World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO 1990). This framework is a global impetus that has had a widespread impact on the politics of education in Vietnam. Education for All, as its name demonstrates, has been an ambitious agenda in reforming public education by redefining the notion of learning and the role of local knowledge in developing effective and relevant forms of schooling for all disadvantaged children through the discourse of human rights. However, the discursive formation of EFA is also enmeshed with dilemmas such as those embedded within stakeholders' values, beliefs, positions, and resources. That is, although Education for All has been important for including disadvantaged groups into mainstream institutions, the politics of Education for All has been contentious both in terms of its ideological implications and within the policy implementation process (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011; Bermingham 2011; Nguyen 2010; Tikly 2004; Tamatea 2005). For instance, Nguyen (2010) argues that this policy agenda is a global initiative that reconstructs social power within the global, national, and local contexts. While such a framework offers out-of-school children and adults an access to basic education and further sets forth to develop quality education for all, inequality has been increasing in the global agenda. For instance, among 72 million children who do not have access to schools, most of them are located in Sub-Saharan Africa and

South Asia (e.g., UNESCO 2010). As UNESCO (2010) stated, “failure to address inequalities, stigmatization and discrimination linked to wealth, gender, ethnicity, language, location and disability is holding back progress towards Education for All (UNESCO, 2010, p.2).

Critics argue that this global agenda on universalizing basic education has been driven by complex and incommensurable ideological implications. The implication of the EFA on educational restructuring is contentious. This historical framework is ideologically driven by the belief that global community could be transformed towards a status of social progress through modernizing education. However, its ideologies in restructuring educational standards raised the question as to who will be included and excluded within these standards (Nguyen, 2010). Bermingham (2011) argues that there are tensions and conflicts of interest within the Fast Track Initiative, one of many important strategies of EFA set forth by international donors to support education in fragile and conflict-affected countries (UNESCO 2000). This approach, however, has failed to address the goals of EFA in financing education. This failure reflects the dilemmas of power and choice within a policymaking process, where the power to decision-making is controlled by multilateral stakeholders. In what follows, we will examine the problematics of Vietnamese educational reform through our analysis of educational ideologies and its implications for school populations.

## **REFRAMING THE PUBLIC SPHERES: RATIONALIZING EDUCATION FOR THE MARKET**

The marketization of education is a new mechanism of educational management since the 1986 reform in Vietnam. To restructure the relationship between the state and the market, numerous policy strategies were set forth, including reforming agricultural sector, freeing up the market, renovating administrative and legal institutions, and creating an educational system that responds to the market demand (Gaiha and Thapa 2007). The shift in the market agenda of education is manifested in these socio-economic and educational frameworks through the emergence of the educational investment strategy largely restructuring the politics of education (Henaff and Martin 2003).

The influence of global forces on the ideological shift within the Vietnamese education system could be observed through the development of educational policies that shape new mechanisms for management within the educational system. These mechanisms have critical impacts on education by transforming educational paradigms through the influence of the global, national, and local levels of policymaking. For instance, in the context of globalization, new educational strategies such as the *Educational Develop-*

*ment Strategies* (EDS) in 2001 have altered the political agenda of education through the shift in the educational ideology, which was underpinned by the state's drive to create a labour force for economic growth. This strategic plan aims to diversify its educational system based on the norms of standardization, modernization, and participation to make the educational system keep up with developed countries in the context of globalization (SRV 2002; MOET 2001). The goal of educational reform is to restructure the educational system through "appropriate management systems" (SRV 2003, 9) in educational investment, quality of learning, classroom instruction, access, and school completion. For example, built on the EDS strategic plan, the *National Education for All Action Plan 2003-2015* (SRV 2003) emphasized the management discourse alongside an emphasis on the inclusion of out-of-school population as the premise of Education for All:

While reform processes will in the long-term provide conditions for more effective administration and delivery of education, the transition period may be characterized by difficulties in timely policy implementation and having appropriate management systems and capacities in place...It will require substantial investment to improve the quality of schools and facilities, to improve the quality of learning, to progress towards more classroom contact time and to extend access and completion of out-of-school children (SRV 2003, 9).

The focus on "out-of-school children" through a strong managerial system, interestingly, restructures the politics of education (Nguyen, 2010, 2012). The inclusion of disadvantaged children into schooling rationalizes the politics of educational reform, which brings into line the rationalities of equal opportunity, inclusion, and management in the political realm of education. "Out of school children" are defined as groups of population that "experience different types of disadvantage" (SRV 2003a, 9-10). These include groups who stay outside of mainstream education, such as children disadvantaged by socio-economic status, ethnicity, and health conditions, including children "who are hardest to reach in physical and learning terms" (SRV 2003, 9-10). As the EFA stated:

Reaching the last 20% of out-of-school children will require a special set of targeted and probably more costly measures to give these children equal opportunities to complete the full cycle of basic education (SRV 2003, 9-10).

Implied within this educational strategy, as we argued, is the construction of a managerial system that creates manpower for the labour market through standardization. As the *Socio-economic development strategies 2001-2010* stated, a fundamental change in the educational system is the need to train

workers who “possess basic knowledge,” “professional skills” and “conscious of the need to rise up in science and technology” (SRV 2002, 22). This educational strategy sought to tailor school population to the market, where professional knowledge becomes a new yardstick for measuring the quality of school population. While this yardstick may be argued as creating an imperative for including “out-of-school children” who may serve as a surplus for the labour market, the standards of educational reform such as knowledge, skills, science, and technology are technologies of management that re-divide school populations along the market’s standards. Given that inequality in Vietnam has been rising over the last decades, where, for instance, the wealthiest spend 3.8 times more in health care and 6 times more in education than their poorer counterpart (Essential HELP, 2012), disadvantaged populations are at risk of being deprived of equal opportunities to select their work, as well as to be fully included into the education and socio-political systems.

Second, while inclusion discourse is institutionalized within the local EFA framework, the objectives and indicators in this framework restrict schooling access to higher levels of education. In particular, to aim at the global EFA goals, the local EFA framework sets a target of recruiting only 45% of school-aged students attending high school by 2005 (SRV 2003a). This quota is important to take into account because it assumes that 55% of school age children will drop out before obtaining a high school diploma. This is an evidence of social exclusion because it fits the school population into pre-determined goals of socio-economic reform in which human capital plays a central role for shaping and accelerating the market force (SRV 2002). Thus, to meet the demand of social development, the goal of education in generating a more competitive labour force for the knowledge-based economy constructs the inclusion and exclusion parameters. The relationship between inclusion and the management of school populations politicizes education within the context of social change.

Third, within neo-liberal institutions, education is redefined and reformulated within the current framework of EFA at the global and local levels, to be filtered through the school population. While primary education being seen globally as an avenue to achieving development, this inclusionary approach reduced education to a means to create a labor force which values the neo-liberal ideology on human capital. For instance, the goal of education within the local EFA framework focuses on creating manpower for the market as a priority of socio-economic reform. It assumes that a strong educational system must be constructed by rules and standards to provide quality education for school population. Underlying this assumption is that, although this framework provides a rationale for including disadvantaged children into schooling, this human capital theory is intrinsically driven by neo-liberal ideologies that fail to recognize that the educational system works to perpetuate exclusion and

injustice at the global, national, and local scales (Slee, 2011). Human capital theory holds that education provides individuals with the essential means to advance in socio-economic status (Apple 1995). By focusing on improving the competitiveness of the labor force, and streamlining the school population through educational programs and preparing individuals for socio-economic development, the modernist agenda of institutional reform is effectively constructed through education, human capital, and social control. Such a view is largely locked within the instrumental assumption of knowledge construction, where education is used as a tool for capital accumulation. Further, education constructs social difference through technologies of management and classification (Foucault, 1977). These technologies discursively construct the “normal” and “abnormal” school populations through educational standards (Ball, 1990b). What needs to be emphasized, further, is that educational standards, performativity, and selection are tools of exclusion that have become deepened in a neo-liberal agenda (Barton & Slee 1999). The convergence between global and local forces shifts the politics of inclusion into a discourse of management that views education as instrumental for the achievement of socio-economic objectives. This discourse rationalizes the political agenda of development through the modernist belief of truth and social progress. The co-existence of these seemingly opposing political discourses on inclusion and management serves to hegemonically restructure modern institutions.

### *Inclusion or exclusion? Consider some current trends*

In this final section, we consider some current trends in educational inclusion and exclusion as a critical interrogation of the politics of educational reform. Gaiha and Thapa (2007) argue that inequality in Vietnamese education has increased considerably, particularly with regard to the disparities between rural and urban arenas, as well as between ethnic minorities and the rest of the country’s population. They estimate that the share of ethnic minorities among the poor has risen from 20 percent in 1993 to 30 percent in 2002, and likely to rise to 42 percent in 2010. In fact, the process of educational reform is contested, which is demonstrated by increasing problems of socio-economic inequality within the student-aged population. In the early period of reform in the 1990s, school attendance reached a new low as a result of the socio-economic downturn in many regions of the country. Statistics show that only 80% of school-aged children attended primary education in the early 1990s. Additionally, more than 2,000,000 individuals aged 15-36 were deemed “illiterate” and 2,300,000 individuals aged 6-14 were not attending schools (Pham 2000). Recent data has shown that enrolment is highly skewed by socio-economic status: the participation of the richest population quintile being four times that of the poorest quintile (Do 2005; World Bank 2006). Education is more stratified

at higher level of education. For example, between 1993 and 1998, whereas the participation into primary and secondary education of the poor tends to be more equal, the poor is much less likely to participate into high school, compared to the rich (an increase of 2.98% compared to 38.66% of the rich) (Do 2005). According to research conducted by UNICEF, the privatization of social services has detrimentally affected the participation of children in education and children's access to health care (UNICEF, 2000). This increasing trend in privatizing social services reflects, in some ways, the detrimental impacts of neo-liberal policies on the participation of poor and disadvantaged children in developing countries. More than three million Vietnamese individuals could not afford the user-fee expenses of basic social services, such as health care and higher levels of education. According to a MOLISA-UNICEF survey, 52% of all Vietnamese children surveyed did not have access to schools (MOLISA and UNICEF 2003). The latest statistics regarding disabled children demonstrates that only 22.24 percent of all children with disabilities have access to schooling (MOET 2006). The data, while not fully capturing the diverse forms of exclusion, point to the failure of the government to ensure equity for its disadvantaged school population, even within relatively low quotas being targeted by the government's policy objectives\*.

Tikly (2004) states that many of these global policies seek to make target populations "economically useful and politically docile" (p.174) for, what is increasingly referred to as, the New (Economic) World Order. The New (Economic) World Order, which Hart and Negri (2000) refer to as *Empire*, is characterized by a lack of basis in any one specific nation state. Imperialism, then, becomes a global process that goes beyond the boundaries on any one particular nation state. EFA aims to develop basic education for disadvantaged individuals, primarily targeting the so-called "developing countries" (Nguyen 2010). By necessity, the global governance policies aim to change, redirect, and even destroy local cultural and professional practices through the imposition of standardized, market-oriented institutions. The translation of Western power, knowledge, and hegemony through educational systems fosters the perpetuation of Western power and knowledge. Tamatea (2005) argues that this power matrix reduces the social relations of schooling into mathematical symbols that objectify social relations in education while subordinating schooling to neo-liberal control and surveillance. This global matrix is enacted in ways that make management an institutional discourse in the surveillance of the school population. Such discourses/practices render government rationale, manageable, and thinkable in certain times and places (Miller and Rose 2008).

\* According to the Educational Development Strategies 2001-2010, the objective of education for children with disabilities is "ensuring that 50% and 70% of children with disabilities will attend one kind of education in inclusive education, semi-integrated, and special education in 2005 and 2010 respectively" (SRV 2001).

As Arguerrondo (2008) argued, inclusion and exclusion have always existed at the emergence of schooling system. There are multiple forms of exclusion such as marginalization by total exclusion, marginalization by early exclusion, and marginalization by inclusion. Given that the traditional culture of Vietnamese schools has been structured by normative and meritocratic standards, the integration of a small proportion of disabled students legitimates the normative structure of political institutions, such as education, within the state's development regime. The attempt to include some individuals who remain outside of educational boundary by itself falls short of the theoretical complexity of how and why the education system includes some and excludes others.

## CONCLUSION

While the intentions of educational reform could be positive for educational development, the long-term negative implications of these actions deserve ample considerations by policymakers. The fundamental assumptions of EFA, inclusion, and exclusion in Vietnam have been implemented based on Western notions of progress and efficiency, circumscribed by the goals of socio-economic development. Reflecting on the initial introduction of mass, mandatory education by French colonizers in the nineteenth century and the gaining of independence thereafter, we believe that it is disheartening to see that the education system remains imperialist in its outcomes. The intensification of the management discourse within the context of social and educational reform excludes more than includes disadvantaged children in education. The collusion of global and local forces has led to some more progressive policies with regard to the improvement of access to education for the out-of-school population, but the ideological implications of these policies should be critically examined within the broader politics of modernity. The local politics of inclusion and exclusion should be understood within the broader understanding of the relationship between education systems and the new imperialism. Therefore, the imperatives for modernizing and policing social institutions in which education is a part, should be considered critically. If we are to seek equity for all, can the imposition of imperialistic educational policies and institutions, which admittedly seek to create hierarchical divisions, provide the type of social arrangement that is more inclusive for all? In what ways can we seek to include local cultural values in the discourse of inclusion and exclusion in Vietnam? How might we ensure that disadvantaged people are able to equally and fully participate in Vietnamese society?



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