

# Teaching and Learning English in Tanzania: Blessing or Curse? A Practical Review of Phan le Ha's Teaching English as an International Language

Godson Robert Mtallo  
College of Business Education (CBE) – Dodoma Campus  
Department of Business Administration, P.o.Box 2077 Dodoma, Tanzania  
E-mail: mtallogodson@yahoo.com

## Abstract

This paper is inspired by the work of Phan Le Ha (2008) in her book titled *Teaching English as an International Language: Identity, Resistance, and Negotiation* in which she presented the way English language is taught in Vietnam and the emergence of conflicting classes of western - trained Vietnamese teachers of English versus non western trained teachers, also the class of native versus non native teachers. Based on different schools of thought, this paper attempts to compare and contrast learning English in Vietnam and Tanzania. The paper discusses some classroom practices in Tanzania secondary schools focusing on the use of English language as a medium of instruction and came up with the conclusion that it is still an uphill task for the Tanzania learners to achieve learning objectives through the use of English language. The title of this paper is influenced by Rubagumya's work in (2010). as he concluded by asking whether English as it is taught and learnt at present is a blessing or a curse for African learners. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer this puzzle based on Tanzanian context.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language, Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs), Lingua Franca.

## 1. Introduction: Phan Le Ha's Background Information

Dr. Phan Le Ha is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia and she holds honorary positions at universities in Vietnam, Visiting Professorship appointment at the institute of Education at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom. She is the co-convenor of the Disruptive Notions Seminar Series with the Monash office of the Deputy Vice - Chancellor (Global Engagement) that engages in notions impacting the changing landscape of higher education globally. Her teaching and research interests include Vietnam, knowledge mobilization, 'Southern' theories, cultural sociology of education, English as an international language, culture and identity, writing, and international education.

Phan Le Ha is the author of '*Teaching English as an International Language: Identity, Resistance and Negotiation*' (Multilingual Matters, UK, 2008). This book examines how Western-trained Vietnamese teachers of English see themselves as professionals and individuals in relation to their work practices. It reveals the tensions, compromises, negotiations and resistance in their enactment of different roles and selves, especially when they are exposed to values often associated with the English- speaking west. The ways they perceive their identity formation challenge the seemingly dominant views of identity as having no 'core', always changing and fragmented. Their experiences highlight the importance of the sense of belonging and being, connectedness, continuity and a coherent growth in identity formation. Their attachment to a particular locality and their commitment to perform the moral guide role as English language teachers serve as the most powerful platform for all their other identities to be constructed, negotiated and reconstituted.

## 2. The Notion of English as an International Language

English as an International Language (EIL) can also be referred as English as a lingua franca, English as a global language, English as a world language, and English as a medium of Intercultural communication. Among other factors that make English language enjoys the status of International language, its spread forms the base. Other factors to be considered fall under some categories as political, economic, social as well as military power of the native speakers particularly Western countries, Britain and USA being the main ones.

## 3. School of thoughts on teaching English in Africa in general and Tanzania in particular

Phillipson (1992) propounds that English spread and dominance is seen in terms of Center countries mainly UK and USA imposing their language on the periphery countries mainly the former British colonies and other third world countries. This school of thoughts is opposed by Brutt-Griffler (2002), arguing in defense of what she calls World Language, in that people learn English because it is in their interests, and therefore in learning English they change it and make it their own.

The second school of thought sees English in Africa not as an opposed language but as a language that can rightly be claimed by Africans as their own as propounded by different scholars including the Nigerian

novelist Chinua Achebe.

The third school of thought propounds that teaching English should not be taken as an imperial instrument of oppression and therefore whoever uses it can claim the right to own it. Higgins (2009) has attempted to demonstrate that in Kenya and Tanzania for instance, English is a local resource that is not necessarily tied to English as an international or world language. In East Africa, English is often used as a hybrid code that has been re-appropriated for use in its local context. For example, data drawn from hip – hop song shows how a Dholuo word ‘**bwogo**’ (to shake) has taken a new meaning appropriated by artists and politicians to advance their own agenda, as the following hip – hop lyric demonstrates: (just a chorus)

Who can bwogo me (x3)  
I am unbwogable.  
Listen nobody can bwogo me  
Neither nobody can bwogo this  
Gidigidi big name I am saleable  
Kama pilipili yes am terrible  
Do you know gidigidi is unbwogabo  
(Gidigidi majimaji, 2002, quoted in Higgins, 2009)

Also during the campaigns for Kenyan presidency in 2002, the leader of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) Mwai Kibaki appropriated the phrase “We are unbwogabo” and made it the battle cry against KANU, the then ruling party.

Rubagumya (2010) asserts that teaching English in Africa is not in the best interest of the learners based on the following views:

Teaching English in Africa generally and Tanzania in particular does not account for the needs and interests of the learners. Learners go through difficult time, sometimes suffering from both physical and psychological torture in the process of learning English

Policy makers hardly think of learners when formulating neither language policies nor do curriculum developers. Language policy in most cases is guided by political expediency rather than the interest of the learners.

Classroom practices, text books, assessments, as well as the school environment make learning English in Africa an uphill task. Textbooks are in most cases difficulty for an average learner to understand.

Teaching English in the name of globalization may be beneficial to the minority elites but for the majority learners, the globalization euphoria and the teaching practices that go with it are counter-productive.

Teaching English in Tanzania is more theoretical than practical and it does not consider the needs and interests of the learners but it is premised on political expedencies. Assessments focus on remembering than the ability of learners to use the language for communicative purposes.

#### **4. Teaching English in Vietnam as argued by Phan Le Ha**

Le Ha, P (2008) presents a thoroughly observation on how the situation is in teaching and learning English in Vietnam. This section therefore attempts to present her major observations.

Teaching English in Vietnam is surrounded with lot of politics. In Vietnam, the center has intentionally shifted the role of English and ELT from coercion in the old days to consent in recent times.

In Vietnam, English is learned as a foreign language (FL). It was then learnt after Russian which became less and less attractive after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The sudden replacement of Russian by English in Vietnam has caused part of the society to have negative attitudes towards Russian and consequently made teachers of Russian struggle for their living.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been reported in Vietnam in that the kind of teaching practiced in Vietnam focused on helping learners to communicate through English language. The use of English has been blooming since the government introduced the reform policy in 1986.

Teaching and learning English in Vietnam varies according to education levels. At school level, more and more students learn English but at tertiary levels it has become saturated. Learning English at universities now is more like learning a means to serve other purposes than taking English as a major.

People in Vietnam want to learn English because of socio-cultural changes in Vietnam. During the Vietnam – America war, people in the South of Vietnam had to learn English to communicate or work for Americans, because then the US poured a lot of money in American – Vietnamese association or the like.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, people in Vietnam turned to English because capitalist countries invested a lot in Vietnam and people considerer knowing English as an economic advantage, therefore, English was closely attached to opportunities. What these teachers had said showed their belief that English and ELT had brought more positives than negatives. The rise of English meant the fall of Russian.

They affirmed that English and ELT not only helped change their performance such as teaching

methodologies but these also converted English language teachers, values and personalities. These suggested that the influence was deeper and more serious than it appeared on the surface. Also, there are certain bad habits that are formed by the learning and teaching of English, such as code-mixing and telling dirty jokes.

The quality of former teachers of Russian teaching English in Vietnam is with no doubt low. They are therefore not allowed to teach students majoring in English, thus, they only teach English to students from other majors, but this is a serious problem because those students will never learn good English. The subject really made them uncomfortable and 'hurt' because it is boasted of the power and global status of English.

It was again reported that in Vietnam unethical representation of 'other' existed in teaching examples. For instance, former teachers of Russian commented on Australian lecturer on how she addressed the subject. The way she lectures is very untactful as she always gives negative examples of the developing countries so they could not feel easy at all in such lectures. She always gives very negative examples of how English is taught in Vietnam. She always uses the word 'barbaric' or the like in her lectures.

Teaching English in Vietnam has been criticized by the native speaker teachers as all memorization with nothing good. It is often assumed in the literature that there is a clear cut distinction between non native and native teachers of English (Brutt - Griffler and Samimy 1999, Philipson 1992).

Vietnamese teachers are bilingual in both English and Vietnamese something which helps them communicate with students and thus helps them understand better underlying messages, requirements, explanations, and so on. This is certainly better when English fails to prove its efficient role.

The aspect of first language acquisition (L1) and second language acquisition (L2) has also been in a deep discussion. L1 is especially important at beginners' level and when advanced students come across complicated notions, L2 often fails to satisfy them. The use of L1 serves more time and makes things clear. Knowing students' L1 facilitates student-teacher contact to a certain extent, because students can be sure that they can let teachers know their problems by explaining to teachers in L1. Also it helps teachers understand better difficulties faced by students when learning L2 since teachers themselves have experienced the same.

Teachers have therefore empathy and understanding for students. Pronunciation is one of the limitations in learning L2. Some other limitations may also be observed in teaching writing as teachers know when students write by thinking in English and when they write translating from Vietnamese. Moreover, as non native speakers, teachers also share the same culture with students, the general culture, and thus they can adjust materials or activities to make them more culturally appropriate.

It has been observed that Vietnamese teachers of English are not able to speak English as fluently as native speakers and of course they cannot master the language as native speakers. This therefore, causes difficulties in teaching, for examples intonation, rhythm, listening and even pronunciation. This does not apply to all teachers because in Vietnam many teachers are extremely good at English and teaching methodologies.

Materials used for teaching English in Vietnam are mainly written by native speakers. These materials require teachers to have understanding of English language cultures and societies. For example, non native speakers cannot explain about how to validate tickets as they do not know about the train and the train system in Australia. These things seem to be taken for granted with native teachers of English because these are part of their life. To Vietnamese teachers especially those who do not have many contacts with real - life and authentic materials, media and culture of L2 it is difficult for them.

The non native teachers lack confidence on issues related to language. One of the Vietnamese teachers quoted in Phan Le Ha's book said, "*I lack confidence not because I am a teacher but because I am a non native speaker of English. For example, I can't be sure of intonation or stress in English. I am not confident about my intonation and my fluency, but my writing at all worth than theirs*".

Work quality was the most significant criterion of teachers. Teachers were just based on their personalities and performance. More attention was paid to how they perform and how they teach than considering where they come from, and who they are.

Generally, teaching English in Vietnam is surrounded by conflicting classes: Native versus Non native teachers, Western-trained versus non western trained teachers. These western trained teachers seemed to think that after being trained in the west, unlike teachers at home, they become more broad-minded and tended not to take things personally. This suggests a positive change in the performance, and simultaneously implies that other teachers are narrow-minded, close-minded, and easily affected.

The Vietnamese teachers feel un easy asking students to give feedback on their teaching because of a powerful notion of 'face' given to and taken from teachers according to how well they perform. Loosing face to students is a humiliating experience, so they are afraid of doing so. This is not the same to western-trained teachers who feel it much easier since they are labeled as being trained in the west. That means they are assumed to be more open and democratic to students.

## 5. Teaching English in Tanzania as compared to Vietnam

The same applies to Vietnam, in Tanzania English language is learnt as a foreign language. English enjoys the

status of a foreign language as most of the Tanzanians use their Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs) as the first language and Kiswahili being the second language (L2). If that being the case, then English is learnt as a third language which is vividly a foreign language (FL)

As it can be seen in Vietnam that the learning of English has been blooming since the government introduced the reform policy in 1986, the same can be observed in Tanzania whereby the learning of English has been enforced by the government decision in education policy that English language should be used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools as well as in higher learning institutions. Again, it is obvious that this decision is influenced by the presence of globalization, thus it is obvious that globalization has made English more valuable to many Tanzanians.

The learning of English in Tanzania, the same as in Vietnam, varied according to education level as English language is taught just as a single subject in primary schools, but in secondary schools, apart from Kiswahili which is taught as a single subject, all other subjects are taught in English language. Also, the learning of English language at tertiary level in Tanzania as in Vietnam has become saturated as learning English at Universities now is more like learning a means to serve other purposes.

Teaching and learning English in Tanzania is surrounded with code-switching and code-mixing something which has been referred by Phan Le Ha as bad habits as it is the case in Vietnam. For instance, a physics teacher teaching Physics in one of the classes in Tanzania “*Ukiwa na mwali mtuo unatoka kwenye chanzo chake ukigonga kitu chochote utakisiwa.*” (**Kiswahili**. In other words, an incident ray from its source when strikes any object will be reflected. (**English**). *Ukistrike tu unakuwa reflected*” (**Kiswahili + English = Kiswanglish**)

A tendency of going against classroom practices when teaching English is common in Tanzania secondary schools as the same has been reported by Phan Le Ha to be the case in Vietnam. In Tanzania, classroom practices sometimes go against the declared official language, something seems to be motivated by teachers need to help learners to have a clear understanding of a particular concept. That means whenever learners fail to understand a certain concept explained in English language, teachers decide to explain it in Kiswahili. A good example can be picked from the following educational advertisement broadcasted in the televisions in Tanzania:

**Teacher:** *Alright students.....student! Who can tell me what global warming means?*

**Student:** *It is.....i.....is..... (hesitation)*

*Ni kuonge.....(a teacher interrupts) English please!*

*A student fails to express it in English language then the teacher allows her to use Kiswahili*

**Teacher:** *Okay, in Kiswahili!*

**Student:** *Ni kuongezeka kwa joto duniani, nadhani hii inasababishwa na.....*

(Now this student seems to have a mastery of the concept of global warming when she was allowed to explain it in Kiswahili but she failed to explain it in English)

This situation evidences that Tanzanian students experience difficulties in explaining some concepts in English language hence they need to use Kiswahili to explain them.

As teaching English in Vietnam have been criticized by the native speaker teachers as all memorization with nothing good, in Tanzania it has been asserted by Rubagumya, (2010) that assessments focus mainly on remembering facts about English rather than abilities of learners to use the language for communicative purposes.

Materials used for teaching English in Vietnam are mainly written by native speakers. These materials require teachers to have understanding of English language culture. The same situation exists in Tanzania as most of teaching and learning materials come from western countries and they are in most cases too difficult for an average learner to understand. It has been evidenced that there are textbooks from oxford whereby teachers are forced to use them and even when they are given some money for buying text books, they are obliged to buy Oxford materials. These materials neither correspond to students’ and teachers’ culture nor consider their learning environment, thus, it becomes very difficult to use them accordingly.

It is also evident that teaching and learning English in Tanzania focuses on helping students to have linguistic skills than communicative skills. For example, it is likely to see some Tanzanian secondary students performing well in their examinations by scoring good divisions but failing to express themselves orally through English language. Currently, majority of English teachers in Tanzania are those who are born and educated in Tanzania.

## 6. Reflecting on the experience of using English language as a medium of instruction (MOI) in Tanzania

Some scholars have attempted to present their arguments on the way English language is used as a medium of instruction (MOI) in Tanzania. Ismail, (2007) for instance, wonders whether English is a gift or a curse to Zanzibar; a Tanzania island, in that the use of English has failed to fit reality since languages used in education

are not only initiated by elites but by ordinary citizens.

Ismail further narrates her experience in the use of English language when she started the university which seemed to be very painful to her. These experiences are likely to be true for the majority of Tanzanian students. Let me quote a bit from what she narrated:

*“When I started my first year at the University of Dar es Salaam, my ESL journey was not physically painful but emotionally so. Nobody spansks or smacks you, but I was expected to be highly proficient in English at the beginning of the academic year. In reality, this was not the case for everyone. We were supposed to do a University Screening Test (UST). The test did not categorize people overtly into poor and good, but those “at risk” were supposed to be enrolled in Intensive Grammar Program (IGP) and the other unit known as Communication Skills Unit (CSU). I already had University admission but the thought that I would be screened caused me terror. This was not because of examination fever but rather I viewed the screening test as scourge or an airport screening in the aftermath of the 9/11. The thought that I will be in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for a foreign language! in my own land! Are we the Dumb-bells? I consider myself a world-weary person. I was taken by surprise.”( Ismail 2007)*

From what Ismail narrated, it is obvious that Tanzanian students have negative feelings on the use of English as a medium of instruction. The use of English language seems to torture students’ mind and thus they don’t enjoy the language but they are just forced to use it in a slavery way. They are not comfortable with it at all! Rubagumya (2010) asserts that while creating some opportunities for using English in the school compound is a good idea, forcing pupils (and teachers) to speak English and punishing them for not doing so is counter – productive on three counts. First, the “speak English” rule is difficult to enforce unless schools become some kind of “police states”. In fact, teachers are the first to break this rule both inside and outside the classroom. Second, learning English in such a hostile environment becomes a painful experience for learners, and may end up creating negative attitudes towards the language. Third, the “speak English” rule demonizes African languages and creates in the young minds of learners the impression that English is the only legitimate language for producing and disseminating knowledge.

## 7. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has attempted to compare and contrast the situation in teaching and learning English in the two countries; Vietnam and Tanzania. It has presented Phan Le Ha’s major observations in the way English language is learnt and taught in Vietnam and compares this situation with the Tanzanian context. In reality, the whole process of formulating language policy in Tanzania does not consider the interests of the learners as it is surrounded by political expediency. Although the language policy dictates the use of English language as the medium of instruction, its practice is not yet successful. In classrooms for instance, teachers tend to code-switch between English and Kiswahili in order to help learners understand better and therefore this practice demonstrates vividly the mismatch between language policy and classroom practice in Tanzania. Despite the fact that the use of English language seems to have economic and social merits to the developing countries like Tanzania as motivated by the overwhelming globalization, the language has not yet managed to lift up these countries to the intended level of development. Therefore, there is a need for the country (Tanzania) to think on how it can revisit its language policy so that the policy can reflect the need and interests of the Tanzanians since the existing policy seems to be a blessing theoretically but practically it is a curse as evidenced by some classroom practices presented in this paper.

### List of abbreviations and Labels:

CLT.....	Communicative Language Teaching
ECLs.....	Ethnic Community Languages
EFL.....	English as a Foreign Language
EIL.....	English as an International Language
ELT.....	English Language Teaching
KANU.....	Kenya African National Union
L1.....	First Language Acquisition
L2.....	Second Language Acquisition
MOI.....	Medium of Instruction
NARC.....	National Rainbow Coalition



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