

Difficulties and Some Solutions in Teaching English to Grade One Students in Hadong District, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

With the aim of finding out the difficulties in teaching English for grade one at primary schools in Hadong district; this study adopts quantitative and qualitative methods. To achieve the above aim, the study has been carried out with the data collected from questionnaires and classroom observations for teachers of grade one in Hadong to investigate their current difficulties that they meet in everyday teaching classes for 1st grade students.

Keywords

Difficulties, teaching, solutions, grade one,

I. Introduction

Nowadays, English is an international language and it has been widely used in many countries in the world. It is also an international language in diplomacy, business, science, technology, banking, computing, medicine, aviation, armed forces, engineering, tourism, and so on. The widespread need for English as an international language puts a considerable pressure on educational resources in many countries. In the time of international integration, the role of English is confirmed more and more vital to our social life. Thus, most countries in the world teach English as compulsory subject in their schools. In Vietnam, English is also considered the most important foreign language and taught as a compulsory subject in many schools throughout the country. Especially, Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training has issued the Decision No 1400- QD- TTg dated on September 30 2008, which targets to totally changing English teaching and learning in the national education system, carrying out teaching and learning English in all levels from elementary schools to colleges. By the year of 2020, the majority of Vietnamese youths will have achieved English proficiency, good English communication skills, and been able to work in an international integration environment, multi-nations and multi- languages, turned English into the Vietnamese's strengths, which contributes to our country's industrialization and modernization tasks. To aim these objectives, it is very necessary for our educational system to teach English from elementary school, especially right from 1st grade. In Hadong where I live, English is chosen as an optional subject to teach for 1st grade students in the whole district. As a result, this emerges a big challenge because most of the teachers in our country in general and in Hadong in particular are not trained to teach English for young learners as such. As a teacher, I myself confront many difficulties in teaching English for children, especially for grade one. No matter how hard I try, I received a little success in teaching them.

For all these reasons, it is necessary to find out difficulties in teaching English for grade one children in Hadong district and suggest some possible solutions to these problems. This urges the author to carry on a study named "Difficulties in teaching English for 1st grade primary school students in Hadong district, Hanoi city." Once difficulties are identified, some solutions to cope with them will be suggested.

II. Methodology

1. Instruments for Collecting Data

In this study, questionnaires and classroom observation are

chosen as main tools for collecting information because of some advantages. Firstly, these methods give the needed data in quantitative form. Secondly, all informants have chance of expressing their attitudes. As a result, the study will be more objective with accurate data.

2. Data Collecting Procedure

First, the teachers in Hadong are given a set of questionnaires with clear purposes provided by the researcher in break - time. Then they are all explained the benefits of this research for their teaching; this helps to encourage the teachers to complete the questionnaires. Finally, the researcher collects all the questionnaires right after the teachers has finished.

In order to make the result of the questionnaire more reliable, during 10 weeks, the author conducts the observations in ten primary schools with ten teachers of English. To have fair comparisons, the author observes teaching vocabulary lesson in all ten schools.

III. Results and Discussion

1. Results and Discussion

Firstly, teaching method is clearly seen as teacher's most difficulties in teaching English for children for all of the teachers in Hadong graduated from colleges, which train teachers to become secondary or high school teachers. As the matter of fact, at that time in Vietnam there were not any colleges or universities training primary school teachers. Thus, when they come to primary schools to teach children, they usually apply the methods as if they were teaching for secondary or high schools students into teaching for children. Because teaching English for children is not teachers' major, they have no understanding on the nature of children, characteristics, stages of developments, learning style, for instant, which are clearly mentioned in the literature review. As a result, teachers do not meet the aims of the lesson and the course as well as the standard requirements of teaching English for children. Furthermore, majority of the teachers in Hadong still employs translation method in their teaching. While there are very few teachers using communicative method in their teaching. Moreover, the variety of activities is still limited. In fact, a large number of teachers use maximum two activities in the class period.

Secondly, they do not get enough teachers' training program. Because they have no experiences in teaching English for children, obviously they really need to be trained but the training program is provided inadequately just about twice a year sometimes once

a year. Moreover, the training program, to some extent, does not meet the teachers' needs. Take for example; storytelling and phonics are the two teaching skills that teachers need to be trained most. They are just given some training on skills that they feel quite confident to teach. On the other hand, according to a workshop held by British council in April the fifth in Hanoi about teacher training course, they point out that teachers should be received training course at least three times a year. Besides, if there are any changes in the teaching curriculum or text books, teachers must be provided extra training courses to adapt those changes.

Besides, classroom management is one of the most difficult for most of the teachers in Hadong because of the following reasons. First, they have a very big class in terms of number of children. In average, they have about 30 - 50 children in class; this leads to difficulties in controlling class, especially when having students play games. In addition, teachers cannot take care of them one by one and as a result, students have no chance to practice speaking or just a little. Thus, choral repetition is used most of the time. While pair works, group work and individual work are not employed. Also, the interaction is mostly from teachers to students instead of students to students. Moreover, the arrangement of chairs and desks is also a barrier for teachers to convey the lesson. With in - rows shape, it is not convenient to for pupils to take part in activities. As we see in the picture of the classroom observation part, students are standing, singing and acting it out in space of the desks and chairs, which is very inconvenient for them to move their arms and legs. While the ideal arrangement for an English class is "U" shape but there is not such an arrangement in any English class in Hadong. On the other hand, none of primary schools in Hadong has such type of classroom arrangement. This result in lack of activities in the class for it is very difficult for teachers to carry activities in such a class, which chairs and desks are in -rows shape. Compared to children's learning styles and stages of development in literature review, children learn well through games, images, and activities, which involve them in reflections. Especially, activities concerns with the physical movements that help them feel more confident and more social in learning process. However, the classroom arrangement feature in Hadong cannot help meet the standard. In addition, many the teachers lack techniques to correct student's mistakes. They usually ignore the students' mistakes or they correct the mistakes in improper ways. Besides, a large number of teachers do not encourage or praise students when they have done their tasks well. As we know, "it is important to praise them if they are to keep their enthusiasm and feel successful from the beginning." [4]. Moreover, the ways teachers deal with students' misbehaviours in the class is also taken into account. A great deal of teachers still use punishments to control the class such as having students stand on the board, facing to the wall, or sitting in the desk which is deserted from his/her friends. According to the teachers, the number of students in each class is big, so they employ the strict methods to deal with students' making noise and disobeying.

In addition, the curriculum distribution is still heavy for teachers as well as students. There is only one period for each lesson with more than two skills to be taught in thirty-five minutes. As a result, it is also heavy for grade one - students to acquire three parts of one lesson within thirty-five minutes. For instant, in a vocabulary lesson, there are three parts; part one is presentation of six new words, part two is a task, and part three is a practice activity (a speaking activity, or a game). In my opinion, two periods for each lesson seems more suitable for grade one - students. This helps

to put less pressure on teachers in teaching as well as students in learning.

Furthermore, the textbook somehow does not match the content of the teaching curriculum properly. We can see this clearly through the focused skills in the curriculum and that in the textbook. This makes teachers difficult to achieve the aims of the teaching curriculum. Therefore, I think teachers should make a careful choice on the textbook to make it suitable with the curriculum.

In addition, the aids required in the materials and those available for use at schools are not synchronous. Take for example, some materials require flashcards and VCD but the aids available for use are tapes or CD without flashcards and so on. There are no agreements between the required aids and the available ones while teaching aids play a very important part in teaching in general and teaching English in particular.

Besides, teachers' English proficiency is one of the difficulties for the teachers in Hadong. According to Mr Trinh Quoc Hach, specialist of English in Hanoi Department of Education, for the time being, Hanoi has 30% of primary school teachers get common European frame B2. And most of them are in the central part of Hanoi. This means that in Hadong the number of teachers who reach the standard is still limited.

Finally yet importantly, teaching condition is also a difficulty for teachers because most of them have to teach many different classes with a large number of teaching periods because beside grade one; they have to teach other grades. Also, there are not many teachers of English at school, that is why they feel teaching is a big burden, it is not a passion any more, according to some teachers.

2. Suggested Solutions

a. Improving Teachers' English Proficiency

As mentioned above, the number of teachers reach the common European framework at B2 level in Hadong is quite limited; as a result, this emerges a need to improve teachers' English proficiency. This includes:

- Improving pronunciation practice: It is very clear that pronunciation is extremely important to English learners in general and to children in particular. In reality, teachers are not master in pronunciation. When observing the class, I can see that most of them (90 %) get pronunciation mistakes. Thus, it is very urgent for the teachers to improve their pronunciation. This can be done by looking it up in the dictionary all the transcriptions, listening to the CD before going to school to get the correct pronunciation.

- Improving teachers' language skills: Teachers themselves have to improve their language to achieve common European framework at B2 level. According to the Ministry of Education, all of the teachers teaching in primary must get this standard. Eventually they must get this standard or they cannot be teachers. Teachers can take some English courses that train for this level and then take examination to get B2 certificate.

- Strengthening lexicon – grammar knowledge: It is apparent that English teachers should be the masters of English. In terms of language skills and language elements, if listening, speaking, reading, writing and pronunciation are stems and branches of a tree, grammar is the root. Thus, teachers must study hard to master it. They can widen their knowledge by reading grammar books, learning from internet, or taking some grammar courses to consolidate grammar rules and update the latest ones.

b. Strengthening Teachers' Teaching Methodology for Young Learners

Teachers of English in primary schools in Hadong need to be trained in methods of teaching English for children due to the role of teachers in teaching and learning process has already altered. They are no longer expected to dominate all work in the classroom explaining new words by translating into Vietnamese, etc., which can create a passive habit of children's learning. However, the teachers' tasks are to create learning environment in the classroom in which children can learn by engaging in activities or working on tasks. Nowadays, students are the centre of teaching and learning process. Not only do the teachers achieve common European framework B2 level that is regulated by the Ministry of education but they also must be artists, singers, dancers, good storytellers and so on.

These are very useful for teachers at any primary schools for children learn through imagination not explanation. For instance, when teacher presents a word "banana", instead of describing how a banana looks like and tastes, she does an action of peeling a banana and then children will know what word the teacher is presenting right away. Teachers have to use gestures most of the time in the class, especially when presenting vocabulary.

While teachers are observing the teaching demo, they have to take notes all teaching steps. After finishing the teaching, all teachers will give feedbacks and comments to the teaching demo. This activity should be held monthly due to it is very useful for teachers.

Also, teachers should consider the ways to exploit, use and develop materials in harmony with students' levels and learning styles. Indeed, most of the materials need to be adapted when used because they are designed for mass of the students in a large scale, not only for particular ones. Thus, sometimes they may not be suitable with the students' levels. Teachers must know about this and adapt materials accordingly. This will help to create an effective teaching and learning.

Besides, teachers also need to be trained technology for primary English classroom. It is very common nowadays that many schools apply technology in teaching such as using projectors, screens, liquid crystal projectors (LCP), active boards, and so on. These technologies are still not familiar with the teachers in Vietnam in general and teachers in Hadong in particular. As a result, they need to be trained to use and apply these things in their teaching.

In addition, teachers need to be equipped with classroom observation skills. Most of the teachers can go to class to make classroom observation, but not many of them grasp the process of this. They need to be provided classroom observation sheets to record teaching procedure and give comments for the teaching period. Also some principles when observing the class should be given to the teachers in order to help them focus on the needed issues. Richard & Lockhart suggested principles for classroom observation as follow:

Pre-observation stage: the goal of the pre-observation discussion is to identify the instructor's learning goals for the students, the materials used in the lesson, her or his strategies for meeting these goals.

During the class observation: during the class visit, the observer takes notes both on what he or she observes (describing what the instructor and students are doing at each moment) and his/ her responses to the behaviours (e.g., comments on the observer's level of understanding or reactions to the material and what aspects of class help or hinder that understanding, questions that come up

in observer's mind, the observer's emotional reactions drawn from students' behaviours, etc.). An effective way to take notes is to use a split – page format: A line is drawn down the middle of the paper. On the left, the observer makes notes on the content and instructor's actions. On the right, the observer makes notes his or her response to the material or situation, questions that come up for him or her, or other commentary.

Post-observation stage: the instructor and observer should discuss the class as soon after the class as possible. Ideally, the discussion occurs immediately after the observed class session when it is still fresh in both their minds. An early meeting also helps to relieve any anxiety related to the visit that is felt by the instructor.

Finally, it is ideal if the teachers keep teaching journals, portfolio and lesson plans: "Keeping a teaching journal gives teachers a space to generate teaching ideas, work out pedagogical problems, reflect on your successes and struggles in the classroom, and put your past insights to work in planning future courses" [5] Teaching journal as a place to record all of the course marginalia that does not make its way into formal teaching documents (such as assignment sheets). Teachers can typically write in journal as soon as possible after each class session, keeping what happened during that class fresh in mind. Teachers compose a short summary of the class, and then reflect on and evaluate how lesson went. Of course, this isn't the only time—or the only material—that teachers write in teaching journal. They can keep it with them all the time so that at the spur of the moment they can jot down ideas. They also use journal during class sessions—for example, to write down smart things their students say.

c. Equipping Classroom Management Methods to Teachers

ESL and TEFL teachers often do not have class management training that their primary school colleagues benefit from. Without preparation, it can be somewhat of a shock to take on a classroom of energetic children. Here are some tips and ideas to help teachers contain the pupils' enthusiasm to a manageable level, which is shared by Shelly Ann Vernon, a game writer for ESL English teachers.

+ The Basics

- Have pupils define the rules in the first lesson, and post them on the wall for reference. Knowing why a rule is in place makes it easier to keep. You must establish the rules on day one and stick to them!
- Be consistent in applying your rules. If teachers are arbitrary about how to dish out rewards or 'consequences', or punishments teachers will undermine the rules themselves.
- Praise good behaviour to generate love and self-esteem. Whatever the teachers do, avoid being like so many parents who spend their whole time telling their children, "don't do this", and "don't do that".

+ Handy Tips

- There is nothing as sweet as the sound of one's own name. So use an individual's name for praise and avoid using it when ticking someone off.
- Prevention is better than cure, so try giving boisterous students an important task before they start to play up. They may respond well to the responsibility.
- Do not break teachers' rules by raising your voice to be heard. Instead, talk quietly or stop and wait. Your pupils should know that for every minute you are kept waiting they will receive extra homework, or whatever consequence you have

designated.

- Hand things out quickly or use a system to have things handed out, such as giving the well-behaved students the task as a reward. Sing a song together or do some counting to occupy the class while materials are handed out.

+ Instant Attention Getters

- Play a mystery game and say that during the activity you will be watching out for 3 well-behaved students who will be rewarded.
- Create teams and use peer pressure to encourage good behaviour. Deduct or reward behaviour points to a team's score during a game.
- Start a song the children know and love – they will all join in with teacher and at the end teacher will have their attention.
- Clap out a pattern that they must clap back, or start a rhyme they know with actions.
- Use quiet cues such as heads down or lights off.
- For children aged 6 to 12 you could think up a fun 1 to 5 with actions such as clap your hands, turn around, and sit down, eyes front, finger on lips". Teachers would adapt this idea depending on the space they have in their class.
- Not comply start counting 1, 2 etc. The child knows that if teacher gets to 3 there will be some sort of consequence, such as missing out on the next game. If teacher uses this and she/he reaches three, she/he must follow through with an appropriate consequence consistently.

Moreover, teachers should balance the use of L1 and L2 in the class because the plenty of teachers are abusing L1 in classroom instead of L2. In an English class, teachers should use English in an appropriate amount to form an English classroom environment for students.

Last but not least, teachers need to create communicative English environment for children. Not many teachers can do this because most of them teach English in a traditional way. They need to employ games, songs, dramas into the class period because by this way, not only can they create an exciting and relaxing atmosphere but they also can bring chance for children to take part in conversations naturally, that is, communication.

To summarize, establishing the rules and consequences for good and bad behaviour, apply them consistently, set a good example, use peer pressure and points, and use attention grabbing cues such as favourite songs, rhymes with actions and countdowns Teachers can be firm and fun at the same time, and if they cannot manage their class, teachers should realize that, although it sounds harsh to say it, they are wasting their time

IV. Conclusions

This study aims at finding the difficulties of teachers of English teaching for grade one in Hadong district and then offers some suggestions to overcome those difficulties. This study was carried out in terms of both theory and practice. The study started with reviews children background such as, characteristics, stages of developments, learning styles, teaching methodologies in teaching English for children on four skills, and classroom management in an ESL class for children. The next chapter described an over view on current situation of teaching and learning English in primary schools in Hadong district. This led the readers to the teachers and students' backgrounds, teaching materials and teaching facilities in Hadong.

In order to find out the problems, a survey questionnaire is

employed to collect data from the twenty primary schools in Hadong with forty teachers of English for grade one. The goal of this instrument is to find out difficulties at teachers in grade one are confronting. The findings have shown that some difficulties that the teachers face to are lack of teaching methods for children, lack of training program, lack of teaching facilities, lack of classroom management skills, big number of children in the class, overloaded teaching hours, also the teachers' master of English needed to be improved.

Based on the study's findings, some solutions are suggested to overcome those difficulties including training for the teachers in teaching methodology, master of English as well as classroom management, equipping enough teaching facilities, making a good choice of materials, adjusting number of children in the class and teachers' teaching hours, increasing time allocation for teacher training program.

Of all those difficulties, according to teachers, teaching methodology and classroom management as well as teaching facilities are the big problems for them. Through some suggestions of this study, they can help teachers deal with the problems they are facing. Some of them can make the teachers deal with several difficulties effectively.

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