Problems and Solutions for General English Classes at Junior Colleges

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Teaching English to non-specialized students may seem a daunting challenge, but there are many avenues to success.

This article describes the Workplace-Based Training of the Teacher Inservice Education (TIE) given by the Vietnam-Australia Training (VAT) project to teachers of English in 18 junior secondary teacher training colleges in Vietnam. It also discusses problems currently facing these teachers at these colleges, as they instruct non-specialized students. Finally, it aims to provide suggestions that can be implemented to improve the quality of the teaching and learning of English in these situations.

The Workplace-Based Training

The Vietnam-Australia Training (VAT) project is an Australian educational project working in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam. This project has been operating in Vietnam since 1997. One component of the VAT project is the Teacher Inservice Education (TIE) program, which specializes in training teachers in English teaching methodology, using communicative language teaching (CLT) as the model of instruction. I have been a trainer in the TIE program since 1998.

The TIE program started in 1998 when about 60 English teachers from 20 junior secondary teacher training colleges (JSTTCs) attended a three-month methodology course in Hanoi. In 2000, these teachers were asked to share their experiences in teaching CLT in their own contexts by giving workshops, first with colleagues from their own JSTTCs, and then with fellow 1998 TIE participants from other provinces in a series of workshops organized by the TIE program.

As a result of the 2000 course evaluation, instead of training and assisting the participants in giving such workshops, the component of the 2001 Workplace-Based Training which took place after the Hanoi course focused on classroom observation and action research.

In 2001, the TIE program trained two groups of 92 English teachers from 18 JSTTCs—one group from January to April, and another from May to August. From September 2001 to January 2002, the TIE program then followed up with Workplace-Based Training (WBT), in which pairs of TIE trainers (one Australian and one Vietnamese) travelled to different colleges at which their participant-teachers were working. They conducted on-site training with them, working basically on a one-to-one basis in classroom observation and action research consultations. (The WBT Action Research component is an assignment that requires the TIE teacher-participant to investigate a classroom problem and find strategies for improvement. The teacher then tries out these planned actions and records results in the form of data collection and analysis to arrive at conclusions.)

Recently, a number of JSTTCs have temporarily postponed further training of teachers of English for local junior secondary schools. Most of the TIE participants in 2001 were thus involved in teaching English to non-specialized students—those studying to teach subjects other than English. Teaching English to non-specialized students therefore became more of a priority and received greater attention than in past training.

TIE trainers observed from five to ten lessons targeted by each participant, working on planning, observation, and feedback. Issues inside and outside the classroom that influenced teaching were discussed, with the aim being to improve the quality of teaching English to non-specialized students.

During formal and informal meetings, English teachers working with non-specialized students expressed some key issues of concern. They identified the issues below as being problematic for them.

Problems

Students are not motivated. Some teachers complained that many non-specialized students are not interested in learning English. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that they do not often prepare their
lessons at home, and in class they do not pay enough attention. Additionally, in examinations cheating seems to be widespread.

Strong students often dominate the class. What often happens is that the more able students take the most opportunities to practice English. This leads to uneven levels of participation.

The teacher’s English is often difficult for non-specialized students to understand. Many teachers found that the majority of their students did not adequately understand their English. Consequently, Vietnamese was often used as the medium for instruction, for example, in explaining new vocabulary or structures, and even in giving simple instructions. Commands such as “Stand up,” “Sit down,” or “Go to the board” were observed being delivered in Vietnamese.

Large classes (50 students and above) make classroom teaching difficult. Because of the relatively high number of students in each class, teachers said it was very difficult to attract students’ attention and ensure their participation.

Mixed ability classes add to the problem. The differences in students’ levels also make teaching hard. The teacher may not know how to make a lesson easy enough for less able students, while at the same time challenging enough for more able students. If she wants to cater to the more able students, the lesson will be above others’ heads, but if she does the reverse, the good students will get bored.

Coursebook lessons are often too long and complicated for students and teachers to finish within the required time. For example, the Headway books (Soars) are often chosen to teach non-specialized students in many colleges. Teachers find it difficult to teach the four skills and finish these lessons on time. Consequently, they tend to teach the language of the lessons, rather than the skills developed through the lessons. Furthermore, some teachers thought that some of these texts were not very interesting. The accompanying taped passages were reported to be not only too long but also too complicated and too quick for both students and teachers to understand. As a result, the listening component in supposedly integrated lessons is too often largely ignored.

Students have bilingual textbooks and workbooks with answer keys. Many popular textbooks, such as Headway, Streamline, and English In Focus, have English and Vietnamese versions side by side. These may be accompanied by a translated workbook, together with answer keys. Students often have these bilingual textbooks, with exercises already filled in and notes made by students of previous years. This partly explains why they may not pay proper attention in class—they can answer questions and read translations without truly understanding the lesson.

Suggested Solutions

Adaptation of Textbooks

Adaptation of textbooks could be an effective answer to some issues of motivation, as well as to problems with bilingual textbooks, workbooks with answer keys, and the difficult or irrelevant items found in textbooks. For effective adaptation, it is important that teachers have a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the lessons and tasks, in addition to knowing students’ backgrounds, needs, interests, and levels. This still seems to be a big challenge to many English teachers in the Workplace-Based Training.

No single textbook is completely suitable for any specific class. Therefore, one of the teacher’s roles is to make it more relevant to students’ needs, interests, and abilities. Since the textbooks that students use are often bilingual, some might think they know the lessons and therefore neglect their in-class learning.

If further arguments are needed, consider the textbooks themselves. Headway coursebooks were not written specifically for students of English in Vietnam. They often consist of concepts or vocabulary that Vietnamese students do not need to know. For example, vocabulary related to ice skating, windsurfing, and sunbathing (Headway, elementary book, unit 4) can hardly be motivating for Vietnamese learners.

To avoid all these problems, teachers need to adapt their textbooks. This can be done by simply changing the order of some parts of the tasks, or by getting rid of some exercises or tasks and adding others. Doing so can prevent students from overrelying on bilingual textbooks, especially when teachers pay more attention to practice and give students new tasks. Texts or vocabulary that are not relevant or stimulating should be replaced by others that are more relevant to students’ backgrounds and interests. For example, instead of learning about a ski instructor, a popular Vietnamese footballer might be chosen as subject material. Supplemeting lessons with pictures or recontextualizing materials can also help students to have more understanding and motivation in their lessons.
Adaptation allows teachers to focus on the main points of lessons. They need not worry about finishing all the content of a lesson, because the principal aim is for students to understand the core language taught, not to finish the textbook. Adaptation thus addresses one of the important principles in language teaching: “Teach the students, not the coursebooks” (Lewis).

Communicative Presentations

More communicative presentations of new language in context is advisable in the initial stages of a lesson. This means that teachers need to focus more on the meaning and usages of language, and not just give forms and rules.

Non-specialized students often learn English for basic social communication and professional development, not just for college examinations. The English that they learn in coursebooks such as *Headway*, *New Cambridge*, *Streamline*, and *English In Focus* is the general English which can enable them to communicate in basic social contexts and serves as a basis for them to continue learning. The four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing—not only language components such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—should be the central aims of English teaching and learning.

Some teachers may doubt the value of communicative presentations of new language in non-specialized English classes in Vietnam. They worry that such students may find these types of presentations hard to understand because they are used to formulas, rules, and translated meanings. The VAT program’s WBT, however, has shown that teachers in Vietnamese contexts are able to give effective communicative presentations of new language and, further, that students appreciate it.

Communicative presentations, together with communicative practice, followed by explorations of rules and forms, has been shown during the WBT to work effectively in non-specialized classes. Effectiveness does vary, however, first according to teachers’ language and professional skills, and then according to student competence.

Pair and Group Work

The use of pair and group work can help teachers in dealing not only with large classes, but also with mixed ability classes. By using pair and group work a teacher can increase student talking time and decrease teacher talking time. This helps to change classes from being more teacher-centered to being more student-centered. In so doing, teachers can use students to teach other students; this will make learning less intimidating to students who may not be very confident standing in front of the class.

Teachers must select appropriate pair and group activities and monitor them carefully. For example, they can choose or create activities that have information gaps and interesting topics. In conducting these activities, instructions play an important role. Teachers need to make sure that students understand what is expected of them before actually starting. This often means that teachers model what should be done. Preparation is another important factor. This means that students need to know the basic language structures and vocabulary required for an activity. When monitoring the pairs or groups, teachers need to help and encourage the less able students in participation, and at the same time, give more difficult tasks to the more able students in order to develop their ability. This could also prevent them from dominating activities (Cross, Ur).

Observations during the WBT showed that these three solutions of adaptation, communicative presentations, and effective pair and group work increased students’ motivation. They not only took part in class activities with more excitement, but also expressed more desire to learn English in this way. Data from different action research reports from teacher-participants also support these conclusions.

Increased L2 Use

It is highly recommended that teachers in non-specialized classes limit L1 use to a minimum and increase the use of English to a maximum. This will give students more exposure to the target language, as well as

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improving their listening and speaking skills.

Teachers are generally afraid that students in general English classes do not have enough English to understand them. They therefore do not often speak English in class; if they do, they immediately translate into Vietnamese. This helps form bad habits in students, of either translating what the teacher said or waiting for the teacher to translate into Vietnamese.

Observations during the WBT have shown that students did not have much difficulty in understanding teachers’ English when they spoke in a clear and simple way. An increase in the use of the L2 will help to give students more exposure to the target language, and has proven to be applicable and desirable in general English classrooms. To be effective, teachers need to be aware of students’ levels and monitor their use of English to meet these levels. Gestures, body language, examples, and demonstrations are essential complements to L2 use, along with frequent checks of students’ understanding.

Teachers need to understand that other students in the class, not only the teacher, can sometimes help explain instructions. This helps the class not only in understanding the teacher’s English, but also reduces teacher-centeredness, increases students’ participation, and promotes their self esteem.

These ideas have been tried out by the teachers involved in the WBT from September 2001 to January 2002, with positive results. Non-specialized students responded to these methods favorably, both in class and as reported through formal and informal questionnaires, interviews, and surveys.

**Ongoing Assessment**

Ongoing assessment and more communicative tests are also necessary for effective teaching and learning of English in non-specialized classes.

At present, students do written tests after every 15 periods; these marks are the prerequisite for students to sit for final written exams at the end of the semester. These tests do not play an important role in deciding students’ final grades, do not motivate them in learning, and do not encourage them toward class participation. These tests often emphasize vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, but fail to accommodate the four skills, especially listening and speaking.

Since communication should be the final aim of English learning and teaching in non-specialized classes, examinations should be used as tools to this end. They, therefore, should be communicative.

I suggest that ongoing assessment which emphasizes class participation should take up 60% of the final mark. The remaining 40% can be from the final written exam. Class participation should focus more on speaking skills; in the written exams, listening, reading and writing skills should be the focus, not pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, as is the present situation.

To further improve the quality of learning and teaching English with non-specialized students, there should be more cooperation among the teachers doing this work. This will require an increase in reciprocal classroom observations among the English faculty, and a great deal of effort from individual teachers. Teachers and staff also need to clearly define the aims and objectives of teaching English to non-specialized students, and make students cooperating partners in the teaching and learning process.

This idea was tried out by myself at Nha Trang Junior Teachers’ College. The shift from testing language components (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary) to testing language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) has been done experimentally for two years in all non-specialized English classes. The transition was well-supported by teachers and students in these classes, and exam results improved.

**Conclusion**

This article was written as a result of my observations during the Workplace-Based Training, with the intention of helping teachers in non-specialized classes be more aware of challenges they face, and to offer a number of solutions. Ideas such as the adaptation of textbooks, communicative presentations of new language, appropriate pair and group work, and increased use of L2, as well as ongoing assessment, were tried out in different junior colleges during the WBT and had positive results, though degrees of effectiveness varied from college to college due to differences among teachers’ and students’ skills and competence. I warmly welcome all discussions about and contributions to these important issues.

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References


Additional information was taken from various documents and meetings of the Vietnam-Australia Training project and Teacher Inservice Education staff.


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### Ideas on the Go

#### My Geography Is Not Very Good

**Goal:** Improve students’ abilities to speak and bear countries and nationalities.

These activities were originally designed to supplement *Interchange*, Book 1, Unit 3, “Where are you from?” The goals are to increase students’ awareness of world geography; to practice pronunciation of countries and nationalities; and to practice use of forms of “to be.”

In a beginner English conversation class, I discovered that many of my students were unfamiliar with world geography. In addition, because of pronunciation and listening comprehension difficulties, they could not distinguish between similar-sounding countries or nationalities—for example, between “Austrian” and “Australian,” or between “Sudan” and “Sweden.”

After practicing basic pronunciation of nationalities and countries, we focused on syllable stress. We also used a world map to locate countries and continents. As a follow-up exercise, each student received three sentences:

- *I am [nationality].*
- *I am from [country name].*

It is a country in [continent name].

I gave each student either a nationality or a country name. Working on their own, they had to supply the rest of the information.

With the whole class or small groups sitting in a circle, the first student said his three sentences. The second student repeated the information using the third person singular, then gave her own three sentences. The third student repeated the second student’s information and added his own. We continued in this way around the circle. A variation is to do this as a class choral response—one student says her sentences, and the entire class repeats the information using the third person singular.

I reviewed this in a later unit, “Clothes and Weather,” by handing out copies of newspaper weather forecasts. Each student had to find one city’s weather conditions. Then they told a partner where they were from and what the weather there was like now.

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