

Learning English in Vietnam and the United States

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My mother had me take an English course when I was in primary school. It was the first English course on the remote island where I was born and grew up, and I fell in love with English in that class. I decided to become a teacher of English, just like my first teacher of English!

After graduating from Ho Chi Minh City College of Education, I confidently went back to my hometown and started teaching English at my alma matter. I believed that with my Bachelor's degree in TESOL, I could help my students to speak English fluently, and I was very excited to start creating my lesson plans. I eagerly applied the teaching methods that I had learned from college in order to achieve my teaching objectives. My students were very interested in my lessons. They happily took part in class activities. Alas, they still could not speak English as well as I had expected. I started to wonder why.

I thought back to my own learning experience. I had a difficult time learning English during secondary school. Throughout my secondary education, I did not have many chances to practice speaking English. My English input came from the textbooks, which focused on grammatical features and used recordings made by the Vietnamese textbook writers. Since there was little emphasis on speaking and listening, my oral skills throughout my schooling developed very little. What I learned was how to do reading comprehension exercises, read conversations aloud (if they were available), rewrite sentences, complete grammar exercises, and complete multiple-choice questions on tests. To make matters worse, I only had three 45-minute English classes per week, which meant that I had very little exposure to English. The fact that most of my teachers employed the translation method did not help either, because that prompted us to grow accustomed to automatically finding equivalent meanings to English expressions in our mother tongue.

Meanwhile, the Internet came very slowly to isolated and remote islands like ours. This posed another challenge: we could not get exposed to authentic English. Although there were many tourists vacationing in my hometown, I was not confident enough to talk to the ones I occasionally encountered when they asked for directions. As I could not comprehend what they said due to their accents and my lack of listening skills, I often felt embarrassed of my English. Furthermore, my pronunciation and intonation were not natural, and translating Vietnamese ideas into English sentences in my head would take a long time. What I needed to communicate



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in real life with a foreigner differed drastically from what I had learned in school. I soon realized that I also lacked the vocabulary and expressions needed for conversations. I could not hold a real conversation with these visitors (whom I was very interested in!) and I was limited to answering their questions briefly and quickly going away.

As a teacher of English at the time, I had few opportunities to really practice what I preached. My English skill development was zero during those teaching days, due to my students' much lower level and the complete absence of any communication in English with my colleagues. My students, like me, had only three 45-minute classes of English every week. Most of them were at the beginner level, and over half of them had an alarmingly low level of English. Since they could not understand English when they were spoken to in class, I mostly used very simple English while teaching or sometimes only Vietnamese (in an English class!). Second, my colleagues and I did not maintain the habit of using English when communicating with each other in staff meetings or even in some professional development workshops. I felt hopeless when encouraging my students and colleagues to use English, and I began to doubt my ability to even teach English. I observed that I could not make my students speak a word of English in real life. They merely learned what was in the textbook, like I did a long time ago, and it seemed that I could not achieve my goal of really teaching English to my students. "What should I do to solve these problems?" That question stuck in my mind for a long time.

I started to contact my former college classmates. They told me that they had spent two or more years studying abroad right after graduation, which had helped improve their English a great deal. So, I decided to follow suit and applied for a scholarship. Fortunately, I was sponsored to earn a masters degree in TESOL at Hawai'i Pacific University.

During my program, being embedded in the new living and studying environment, I began to speak English more frequently than before. I was very happy about this. I communicated in English not only in classrooms with my professors and classmates, but also in many daily activities outside the classroom, such as socializing with friends at my dormitory, shopping at the market, opening a bank account, introducing Vietnamese culture to international friends, and doing volunteer work as a classroom assistant for Micronesian students. As I began to use English in a variety of environments, I was very excited to be speaking English.

Right at the outset, I met serious challenges. I had difficulty understanding others or getting others to understand me because of my accent and my relative lack of experience in using English. I could not understand most of what my American professors said in class, and I often hid myself or refused to express my ideas when professors asked students to offer their opinions on language teaching and learning perspectives. I also had difficulties reading textbooks, as it was my first time reading so much material in English. It took significant time for me to even read emails and figure out what my professors were asking me to do. I sometimes had to check with my classmates about assignments, and I was even afraid to socialize with many international friends at my dormitory because I sometimes could not understand what they were saying.

Thankfully, after months of frustration, my increasingly frequent use of English in this new environment eventually helped me become more confident in my communication skills and fluency. I was delighted with my newfound abilities. This was the first time in my life that I could feel confident speaking English, and I became more active than ever before. I now found that I could speak English without having to translate from my mother tongue into English. I could use many expressions and phrases naturally like native speakers. I did not need much time to think

about what I wanted to talk about. I finally came to understand that frequent use of a language is the essential component to improving that language.

My excitement surrounding my improvement in English dissipated at the end of my program at HPU. I would no longer live and study in such an environment, and I had to go back to my country and my previous workplace. However, I needed to maintain my proficiency in English. I decided to create the habit of using and exposing myself to English frequently.

The first thing I did was to begin to use English more often in the classroom. I speak very simple English with beginner students and more advanced English with higher-level students. It was difficult at first because I needed to pay attention and adjust the words or phrases I use according to my students' level. However, I am happy to use English with them, as I now can maintain my English while encouraging them to use English. Thanks to the development of tourism on my island, students have recently become more interested in learning English. Moreover, I have incorporated more games and other communicative activities in my teaching to encourage my students' confidence in speaking English. I have also told my students of websites with English language learning resources for after-class learning, such as BBC learning English, VOA learning English, and CNN student news.

Another thing I tried was to gather many students with an interest in English and set up an English speaking club. Any students coming to this club are welcomed and can speak English freely. Although the club does not receive much consideration from my school administrators, I have volunteered to join my students, participate in their meetings, listen to them talk, and give feedback on what they have done. I feel proud that my students have a place to practice English together. I am also comfortable in using as well as maintaining my English proficiency. I can let my English flow out naturally and smoothly without doubting my students' comprehension because I know they are proficient enough to understand what I say. Students joining this club also receive some small prizes when participating in games like bingo, singing contests, listening to English songs and filling the gaps, guessing words in English, etc. Despite the short duration of these meetings, only about 90 minutes every Saturday, the club creates a great English speaking environment for students.

Besides students, I also encourage colleagues to use English as much as possible, such as in staff meetings. They seem to be very excited about discussing teaching problems in English. I find it interesting to see that my co-workers have gradually improved their English due to their frequent use of the language. In addition, they also have a chance to pose questions about English to participants in the English speaking contest held annually for the students. They seem to be excited and eager to join the event.

Finally, for myself, I continue to be in touch with native English speakers as much as I can. American films, TED talks, and how-to clips on the Internet are some resources that help me maintain my English exposure. Additionally, social networks like Facebook, Yahoo Messenger, Skype, Line, and Tango are very helpful for keeping in touch with my American friends from the days of my program in Hawaii. It is always a great joy for me to reunite with them when they come for a visit. I take them around my hometown and especially chat with them in English. Welcoming them to my hometown, introducing them to my parents and friends, and taking them to many places of interest on Phu Quoc Island makes me feel proud of the beauty of the island as well as my English proficiency. Now I can talk, express my thoughts, and share my feelings and

perspectives easily with my international friends. More than anything else, English allows me to make wonderful human connections.

If I could offer some thoughts for language teachers, they will be these. I strongly believe that the speaking environment of a language as well as frequent use of that language is very important for language learning and teaching. Language learners should use any chance they can find to speak the target language and get accustomed to the habit of using that language. Additionally, learning materials from the Internet should be employed in order to increase exposure to the language. And finally, if possible, learning and living in the country where that language is spoken is another way to improve proficiency in a language. For teaching, language teachers should apply learning activities that encourage students to use the target language frequently. Students can fall in love with a language if they have a speaking environment where they can use it.

About the author:

Linh Tran received her MA in TESOL from Hawai'i Pacific University in 2013. She has been teaching English at Phu Quoc High School in Vietnam for over ten years.