



NEW LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS

# Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching The Case of Vietnam and Cambodia

*Edited by*  
Linh Phung · Hayo Reinders  
Vu Phi Ho Pham

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# New Language Learning and Teaching Environments

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Linh Phung • Hayo Reinders  
Vu Phi Ho Pham  
Editors

# Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching

The Case of Vietnam and Cambodia

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# An Overview of the Innovation in Language Teaching and Learning in Vietnam and Cambodia

*Vu Phi Ho Pham, Hayo Reinders, and Linh Phung*

## RATIONALES FOR INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Innovation in language teaching refers to the planned adoption and integration of effective pedagogical strategies, technological advancements, and methodology to improve the learning process. It entails the inventive adaptation of instructional approaches, the use of innovative instruments, and the acceptance of developing trends in language education. Innovation in language teaching often seeks to promote engagement, competency, and cultural awareness in addition to addressing the learners' changing

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needs. According to Thornbury (2006), innovation in language teaching extends beyond conventional approaches, inspiring teachers to consider creative means of presenting material, encouraging interactive learning, and making the most of digital resources. Language teachers contribute to a dynamic and adaptable learning environment by regularly re-evaluating and improving their teaching methods.

A number of persuasive arguments in the field of language education underscore the necessity for constant innovation in instructional procedures and approaches. First, the understanding of the dynamic character of language itself serves as one main justification. Language, according to Baugh and Cable (1993), is a living thing that changes through time as a result of social, technological, and communication trends. To remain relevant and sensitive to the current linguistic landscape, language instruction must alter to reflect these changes. Second, the recognition of the various learning preferences and styles among language learners serves as another essential justification. Educators may foster a more inclusive and productive learning environment by combining effective educational practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The development of technology, in particular, opens up possibilities for multimodal learning experiences that accommodate visual, aural, and kinesthetic learners. Additionally, the need to prepare language learners for communication in a world that is becoming more networked is highlighted by globalization and interconnection. According to Byram (1997), language instruction improvements should foster linguistic and intercultural communicative ability. This instruction entails giving students the know-how to successfully navigate cross-cultural dialogue, encouraging a better comprehension of various viewpoints, and promoting global citizenship. Another justification for innovation is the requirement for higher levels of learner motivation and engagement. Modern language learners react well to interactive and dynamic learning experiences because they are frequently engaged in a digital and multimedia-rich environment (Khamparia & Pandey, 2018). Teachers may build engaging language learning settings that pique students' attention and heighten their inherent drive to interact with the language by using effective technologies and approaches. This introductory chapter will provide an overview of language teaching in Vietnam and Cambodia, followed by a review of top-down and bottom-up innovations in language teaching in the two countries. The final section will summarize the ten chapters of this volume.



## OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA

The complex and dynamic nature of language teaching and learning in Vietnam and Cambodia reflects the historical, political, social, and economic situations of these two nations. With 54 ethnic groups and 110 languages, Vietnam is a multilingual and cosmopolitan nation (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). The majority of schools and institutions use Vietnamese as their primary language of instruction, although the government also supports and recognizes other languages spoken by ethnic minorities. English, in particular, is highly prized and pushed in school since it is seen to be crucial for global integration and advancement.

Over the last several decades, Vietnam and Cambodia's language education has experienced many changes and reforms as a result of numerous internal and external forces. The colonial legacies of French and Chinese languages and cultures have influenced the Vietnamese language and educational systems. Additionally, wars and disputes with other nations, including France, the US, and China, have influenced Vietnam's national identity and ideology (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). In the case of Cambodia, language learning and instruction have a long and varied history. Thai language (in the seventh century), French (between 1863 and 1954), Vietnamese and Russian (after the 1970s) all had an impact on the country (Hum, 2021).

Implementing and assessing language education in Vietnam confronts several obstacles, including a shortage of trained instructors, authentic materials, multimedia technologies, and internet connection (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Giao & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Second, there needs to be better understanding and preparedness to accept new language teaching and learning approaches and innovations, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), learner autonomy, learner-centeredness, and EMI (Giao & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Third, there is a lack of coordination and coherence between the teaching and learning of languages and other facets of the educational system, such as the curriculum, syllabus, textbook, and assessment system (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). Last but not least, ineffectiveness in language assessment and language teaching and learning has been widely reported (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). In the case of Cambodia, some significant challenges and issues that affect the quality and effectiveness of language education include the lack of qualified and

trained teachers, the low proficiency and motivation of learners, the inadequate resources and facilities, the outdated curriculum and assessment methods, the influence of traditional teaching culture, and the impact of social and political factors (Doeur, 2022; Heng et al., 2022).

The history and development of language teaching and learning in Vietnam and Cambodia are closely related to the political, economic, and social changes. In Vietnam, since the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy in 1986 (Nguyen, 2017a) has marked a significant difference in the country. This policy led to significant achievements in terms of GDP growth and foreign direct investment, which in turn influenced the demand and supply of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction in Vietnam. In Cambodia, various initiatives and reforms have been implemented by the government, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to improve the situation of ELT in the country. First, the introduction of a new curriculum framework for general education in 2015, which emphasizes communicative language teaching and learner-centered approaches (MoEYS, 2015); the collaboration with international organizations and donors, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, British Council, and Australian Aid, to support various projects and programs related to ELT in Cambodia. There has also been a growth of exchange opportunities and funding programs for teachers and students in Cambodia to study abroad or attend regional seminars and conferences.

## TOP-DOWN INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Language policy is a set of decisions and actions that aim to regulate, manage, and promote the use and development of languages in a given context (Ricento, 2006). Various actors and agencies can initiate and implement language policy, such as governments, institutions, communities, or individuals. Depending on the source and direction of the policy, language policy can be classified into two types: top-down and bottom-up (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2008). Top-down language policy is a type of policy formulated and imposed by a central authority, such as a government or an institution, on the target population or group. On the contrary, bottom-up language policy is initiated and developed at the grassroots level, such as a community or an individual, based on their needs and interests.

In Cambodia, top-down innovation in language teaching refers to the changes and reforms initiated by the government and other authorities to improve the quality and effectiveness of language education. First, a new

curriculum framework for general education was introduced in 2005, emphasizing communicative language teaching and learner-centered approaches (Kosonen, 2019). The second top-down innovation referred to expanding scholarship programs and exchange opportunities for Cambodian teachers and students to study abroad or attend regional workshops and conferences (Igawa, 2008). Third, the collaboration with international organizations and donors has supported various projects and programs related to language education in Cambodia (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

In Vietnam, there has also been a top-down innovation, particularly the government-issued Project 2020, relating to the teaching and learning of the English language. Project 2020, also known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Chinhphu.vn, 2008), aims to improve the English proficiency of Vietnamese learners and teachers by 2020 (Bui, 2022; Nguyen, 2017b; Van, 2015). The project was launched in 2008 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with the approval of the prime minister. The project has five main goals. The first is to create a national framework for foreign language proficiency that is compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the second is to make English language instruction mandatory from Grades 3 through 12, the third is to introduce English as a medium of instruction (EMI) for mathematics and science subjects in upper secondary schools, the fourth is to enhance English teachers' English language proficiency (ELP) and pedagogical knowledge, and the fifth goal is to develop a model for teaching English as a second language at selected universities.

As it demonstrates the government's acknowledgment of the significance and function of English as an international language in the context of globalization and integration, the initiative is seen as a breakthrough and an innovation in language policy and planning in Vietnam. The project also aims to address some of the problems and challenges currently plaguing English teaching and learning in Vietnam, such as the low ELP levels among students and teachers, the absence of coordination between the curriculum, assessment, and standards, and the dominance of traditional teaching methods and rote learning (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

## BOTTOM-UP INNOVATIONS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Bottom-up innovations are initiatives and actions that originate from the grassroots level, such as teachers, students, parents, or communities, to improve the quality and effectiveness of education (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2008). Bottom-up innovations can be seen as a response to the limitations and challenges of top-down policies and reforms that are imposed by a central authority, such as the government or the Ministry of Education. Bottom-up innovations can also be seen as a reflection of the needs and interests of the local context and culture.

In both Cambodia and Vietnam, the teachers and learners take the initiative to make changes and reforms to improve the quality and effectiveness of language education in the countries. Teachers have used online learning platforms and digital tools to facilitate language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pham & Vo, 2021), creating professional learning communities and networks among language teachers and researchers to share experiences, resources, and best practices for language education (Doeur, 2022), involving learners in the design and implementation of language learning activities that suit their needs, interests, and goals.

### IN THIS VOLUME

Inspired by the top-down innovation policies, language teachers in both Vietnam and Cambodia implemented their innovative teaching methods into their professional contexts. In Chap. 2, Nguyen and Dinh examined how a public institution in Hanoi, Vietnam, adapted its curriculum to fit the demands of transnational undergraduate programs in Business Studies. The Intensive English Course track was initially targeted to meet the IELTS 5.5 admission criteria for an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) program. However, difficulties occurred when students had to grapple with subject-specific terminology and international academic standards. The authors and their team used Macalister and Nation's (2019) curriculum design method to improve the program, including environment and needs analyses relevant to EMI programs where students would later enroll. The backward design highlighted critical long-term outcomes, leading to the development of a more comprehensive English course. The innovation helps to enhance transnational education in Vietnam by

bridging gaps across educational levels and providing a strong basis for students' following studies.

In Chap. 3, Eriko Yamato introduces the Vietnam-specific Bachelor Japanese language program of HCMC RMIT University Vietnam, which has been implementing participatory, active language learning since 2017. It emphasizes genuine assessment, interactive digital learning, and community participation to match the university's aims. The writer describes the program's framework to generate work-ready trilingual graduates. The unique use of hybrid-mode "flipped classrooms" and "authentic assessment" without textbooks preserves program integrity and signifies its core innovation. The merits and downsides of various techniques are discussed using student feedback, industry input, and teacher comments to inform language program development.

In Chap. 4, Louw and Reaksmey reported the launch of Siem Reap's first trilingual K-12 curriculum in 2016, including Khmer, English, and Chinese. The curriculum used the transitional immersion program design to blend content instruction and language acquisition. The authors then used interpretative phenomenology to assess the program from English, Khmer, and Chinese department heads' viewpoints. Results showed differing views of achievements and failures, suggesting a lack of interdepartmental collaboration due to rivalry for students' classroom time and school resources. This perspective is essential for comprehending the challenges in implementing innovation from administrators' perspectives.

In Chap. 5, Ng and Mannion present details of the development of a new MA in English program in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. The authors discuss their participation in curriculum creation and execution against the backdrop of a city undergoing fast expansion and an institution with limited or diminishing finances and support. The quest for alternate sources of assistance, the utilization of technology, and the fortunate collaboration of key stakeholders are highlighted. The difficulties encountered are also documented, which is instructional to similar endeavors.

In Chap. 6, through developing and piloting a Grade 5 Vietnamese practice book, Do et al. provide an innovative way to teach Vietnamese to ethnic minority primary children in Vietnam. The project employed a culturally and linguistically responsive technique to create pedagogically sound resources for effectively acquiring Vietnamese as a second language (L2). Materials, such as texts and visuals, were carefully chosen to reflect students' cultural beliefs and traditions while also promoting language acquisition through familiarity with their home language. Teachers have

responded positively to the book's culturally relevant visual components, role models, texts, and learning activities. Following a review of the material pilot and teacher comments, the writers underline the need for continuing efforts to offer varied and comprehensive resources that appeal to all ethnic minority groups.

In Chap. 7, T. L. Nguyen suggests that pronunciation instruction be revised to go beyond an ad hoc approach, typically consisting of incidental recasts and/or prompts, despite empirical data demonstrating the effectiveness of communicative pronunciation training on second language learners' comprehension and/or intelligibility. This may be due to the fact that instructors often need more training on how to incorporate communicative pronunciation training into their language programs successfully. The chapter reports a project in which a group of six Vietnamese tertiary EFL instructors introduced communicative pronunciation instruction into their English courses. A detailed review of successes and challenges helps to inform other efforts in implementing pronunciation instruction in Vietnam and beyond.

In Chap. 8, Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc presents a mock conference (MC) that has been introduced into the graduate internship course for final year English translation students at a member university of Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. This novel technique gives seniors hands-on experience in the professional preparatory processes for successive conference interpretation. The MC design comprises research articles provided by Vietnamese teachers and administrators from multiple university faculties, as well as an authentic situated-learning environment. A poll completed in the school year 2022–2023 reviews the innovation after four years of deployment. The writer examines mock conferences, discusses the design and organization process, and evaluates students' input on organization, lecturer assistance, advantages, obstacles, and performance variables. The findings have significance for preparing translation majors with professional knowledge and abilities.

In Chap. 9, Vu Thi Thanh Nha discusses how Vietnamese English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly group work and online student interaction. Online group collaboration (FCOG) and locally accessible technology were used in the action research project with 25 postgraduate students in an English-medium course. Students worked in asynchronous and synchronous groups for 12 online sessions. Results included improved communication and collaboration, academic advancements in critical thinking and

knowledge, and peer support. Time management, technological difficulties, involvement, group dynamics, work distribution, and complexity were challenges. The study emphasizes the need for novel online learning solutions for future education and research.

In Chap. 10, Nghi Tin Tran et al. examine how mobile applications are used to teach English at a Vietnamese university to improve students' language abilities, engagement, and motivation. The study assesses these applications' effects on student perceptions and instructor expectations. Mobile apps may motivate and engage students in student-centered education. Interactive learning experiences through these applications boost attitudes and English learning engagement, suggesting its role in innovating language education. The writers strongly advise language instructors and policymakers to use modern teaching methods and technology to build dynamic and effective learning settings that meet today's language learners' diversified needs.

In Chap. 11, Thi Nguyet Le examines blended learning (BL) in Vietnamese university EFL programs and its confusion and ineffectiveness. The study of 20 EFL professors from ten institutions found that personal, institutional, and socio-cultural/economic variables affect BL integration. Personal elements include instructors' views, pedagogies, and agency. Policy, technology, and professional assistance are institutional elements. Confucian teachings and Vietnam's economy are socio-cultural and economic variables. Personal and institutional variables align for effective BL implementation, but socio-cultural and economic considerations typically provide hurdles. The chapter presents conceptual implications for efficient BL implementation in Vietnamese EFL instruction.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this introductory chapter has explored various innovations in language teaching and learning in Vietnam and Cambodia. These innovations have emerged from both top-down policies and bottom-up classroom practices, aiming to enhance language education and meet the evolving needs of learners. At the policy level in Vietnam, the government's implementation of Project 2020 has been a significant top-down innovation. In Cambodia, the government has implemented a new curriculum framework for general education to promote communicative language teaching and learner-centered approaches and provide a wide range of scholarship programs and collaboration with international partners to

support various projects and programs related to language education in Cambodia. Furthermore, bottom-up innovations have emerged within classrooms, with teachers implementing various approaches and methods to enhance language learning. The employment of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), flipped classrooms, backward design in curriculum development, linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy, communicative pronunciation teaching, mock conferences for translation classes, virtual classrooms, MALL, and blended learning have opened up new possibilities for language teaching and learning in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Looking ahead, the development of language teaching and learning in Vietnam and Cambodia will continue to evolve. Future innovations may focus on further integrating technology, such as ChatGPT and AI Tools, addressing the needs of specific learner groups, and fostering intercultural communicative competence. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must collaborate and provide ongoing support to ensure the success and sustainability of these innovations, ultimately contributing to the overall advancement of language education in these two countries.

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