English teaching and Professional development
for English teachers in Vietnam

1. Introduction.

In some countries in the world, language teaching has changed rapidly in the last twenty years, but in Vietnam the teaching of English has been far from satisfactory. For quite a long time there have not been any contacts with the teaching and learning of English outside Vietnam, and only recently some groups of teachers have been sent to abroad to study. Thanks to the aid of some international organizations and countries, the teaching of English has improved, but chiefly at universities and colleges where English is taught by groups of foreigner lectures. At schools, the situation remains unchanged. This is because of different reasons including unsuitable textbooks, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, but one of the most important factors is unqualified teaching staff.

2. Background:

In recent years, professional development has been one of the issues concerning not only educational leaders, educators, and teachers, but also the community as well as parents and children in most countries. This means education in general, and teaching and learning quality in particular, have been regarded as one of the most important factors in Vietnamese society. In Vietnam, English has been taught for quite a long time, and it is now one of the compulsory subjects in all universities, colleges, and almost all upper and lower secondary schools, and even in some primary schools. Vietnamese students have been spending much time learning English and each year a number of them who come from big cities may achieve high results in the exams, and their level of English is accepted in some international universities. However, the real situation of teaching and learning English is a topic of discussion in the education domain, and more particularly, English teachers' competence with their different levels of knowledge have been a controversial issue for years.
Most teachers, whose pre-training is often inadequate, are unable to carry on even a simple conversation in English because during their teaching process they are dependent on textbooks that are the major source for their teaching. Do (cited in Cam, 2005) also commented that English teachers in Vietnam seemed to like speaking Vietnamese all the time, which has resulted in students’ poor English speaking and listening skills. Do has also indicated that the teaching and learning materials discourage learning, and this combined with the poor quality of teaching staff especially are the main reasons leading to the low quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam. He also claimed that it was necessary to review English teaching in secondary and high schools in Vietnam in terms of teacher training and retraining in order to cater to the requirements of regional and global integration.

3. The current project relating to English teachers’ professional development.

In order to develop English teachers’ profession and to enhance young people in Vietnam to use English more effectively, Vietnam Government has decided to carry out a big project entitled “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008-2020” until 2020. The aim of the project is:

“… by 2020 most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment, making foreign languages a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country”.

The tasks of the projects are:

1. Establish Vietnam’s language proficiency framework consisting of 6 levels to be compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference;

2. Implement new intensive English programs at college and university at level 3 (B1);
3. Teach Math and science in English at high schools
4. Teach university courses at senior year in English: ICT, Engineering, Tourism, Business, Nursing etc.
5. Renovate tests, exams to cover all 4 language skills
6. Apply ICT in language teaching and learning

The current project offers opportunities for Vietnam because it can help a massive group of teachers and young people be aware of the importance of English for career and professional development. In Vietnam English is understood as the official language of ASEAN Community: for trade and business after Vietnam joined the WTO, and English may help Vietnam have a strong international cooperation and partnerships with international organizations (scholarships, teacher development and training, specialists). Moreover, it offers a new investment in Regional Teacher Development Centers, teacher training colleges and universities.

Some solutions given according to the careful steps:

Teachers’ development is considered as the key to the success of the Project; therefore, teachers will be retrained according to the following step:

a. Develop “Language Teachers Competency Framework”
b. Develop Regional Teacher Development Centers and invest in teacher training colleges and universities
c. Renovate Teacher Training Programs at all teacher training colleges and universities
d. Run teacher development programs
e. Train ELT overseas: PhD, post graduate diploma, M.A, short term training

Secondly, there will be curriculum changes:

a. Primary and secondary schools will apply the new textbooks
b. Pre-service and In-service teacher training curriculum renovation
c. Evaluate outcome/quality of English languaguage teacher training colleges
c. Blended solution and the use of ICT application in language teaching and learning

International Cooperation is said to be one of the most effective solutions for the project success:

a. More foreign investment into the teaching and learning foreign language will be mobilized.

b. Encouraging education institutions to establish international partnership with foreign institutions and set up exchange programs for teachers and students.

c. Developing policies to promote international cooperation to attract overseas Vietnamese teachers and foreign experts to teach in Vietnam.

d. Promoting educational exchange, scholarship programs for both teachers and students.

Incentives and policies are also highly evaluated:

a. Review, amend, revise mechanism, regulation and policy to encourage the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system.

b. Revise policies on investment for language training institutions; equipment

c. Create incentive for language teachers

d. Issue regulations on the teaching and learning, testing and evaluation; language certification and degrees; encourage the establishment of qualified foreign language training centers and institutions

The project has been applied throughout the country, at least at the first stage which is assessing English teachers according to European standards; however, some problems have been emerged.

Low result of most English teachers’ language proficiency has caused several unanswerable issues.

First, European standards applied in assessment seemed not to be linked with the teachers’ ability.

Secondly, there should be a careful consideration about universities and institutions where English teachers were trained in terms of curriculum and
model of teaching and learning. Thirdly, there is no English environment in both schools and outside schools in almost provinces in Vietnam. That is the reason why teachers cannot practice their subject even in front of their colleagues at schools. Next, the overall aim of the project is too high or not.

4. Suggestions balancing the impossibility with the real context

Based on my personal experiences, I would like to give some suggestions in order to balance the situation and help the teachers to have a more effective professional development:

First, teachers should be encouraged to participate in non-assessed teaching and learning activities, such as peer group assistance in a secure, trustful and helpful atmosphere.

Second, textbooks should be taught carefully with teaching and learning equipment provision.

Thirdly, teachers should be sent to English speaking countries to learn short courses because only in this way, they may have more opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills.

Next, Moet and provincial Departments of Education and training should connect non-government organizations and volunteers to have foreign teachers work at schools. This seems more effective in terms of cost benefit and suitable for both Government and MoET.

Being insider of the Vietnam education in general, and English project for teachers in particular, I would like international colleagues from APEC economies to think and discuss the above ideas.

I hope, with the contribution from APEC friends, Vietnamese English teachers will be encouraged and enhanced in effective professional development activities.