Teachers’ Perspectives of Bilingual Education in Primary Schools in Vietnam: A Qualitative Study

Tú Anh Hà
FPT University, Vietnam

Cristina A. Huertas-Abril
University of Córdoba, Spain

Bioprofiles

Hà Tú Anh has finished an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Play and Education, Toys and Languages at the University of Cordoba (Spain), Institute Polytechnique Lisbon (Portugal) and University of Marmara (Portugal). Her research interests include applying literature, drama and play as methods of integrating equality and equity in the class, education for peace, intercultural education, and early childhood education.

Cristina A. Huertas-Abril, PhD. Associate Professor of. Department of English and German Studies, Faculty of Education at the University of Córdoba (Spain). Her research focuses on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), English as a Foreign Language, Bilingual Education, and Teacher Training. Email: cristina.huertas@uco.es

Abstract

English has become an essential language in Vietnam, and innovation in English teaching and learning has received considerable attention in recent years. Recognizing the importance of foreign languages, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has recently developed the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 and, according to this project, bilingual education is encouraged to implement in high schools, but little attention has been paid to primary schools. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews have been conducted to explore Vietnamese primary teachers’ perceptions of bilingual education. According to the participants’ responses, ultimately collected in a SWOT matrix, bilingual education in Vietnam is considered to be more student-centered, creative and practical than the official system, and prepares students with language and knowledge to be global citizens. Nevertheless, there is certain concern over the negative linguistic impacts of English on Vietnamese, as it may have a negative impact on the national language. Finally, in terms of research, the findings of this paper suggest that further research is needed regarding the impact of L2 on L1 in the perspective of Vietnamese primary teachers in bilingual programs, including the L1 loss phenomenon and the L2 writing style in L1 literacy.

Correspondence address:
Department of English and German Philologies
Faculty of Education - University of Córdoba
Av. San Alberto Magno, sn
E-14071 Córdoba, Spain
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Introduction

Located in Southeast Asia, with an estimated population of over 97 million inhabitants (15th most populous country in the world, and 8th in Asia), Vietnam is a booming country where, after the implementation of the Open-Door Policy in 1986, an increasing number of economic and political relations with other countries in the world have been established and developed. Consequently, the country has moved from a centrally planned socialist economy to a socialist oriented market economy (Zhu, & Fahey, 2000). The rapid economic expansion of the country is supported by population growth of about 1% annually. However, as this continued economic rise is not guaranteed, one of Vietnam’s key strategies is the modernization of the education system. For this purpose, Vietnam’s current “Socio-economic development strategy for 2011-2020” aims to advance human capital development, encourage enrollments in higher education, and meet the requirements of the country in a global (and globalized) environment (WENR, 2017).

In this context, English has become an essential language in Vietnam, and innovation in English teaching and learning has received considerable attention in recent years (e.g., Phan, 2009; Nguyen, 2011; Van, 2016; Devanadera, 2018). Recognizing the importance of English, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued the implementation of the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach for bilingual education in high schools for gifted students in formal national education system as a part of the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (Nguyen, 2016), as well as it encouraged public high schools and junior high schools to implement bilingual education if they meet the governmental requirements (MOET, 2018). Nevertheless, there is neither a definition of bilingual education according to the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (MOET, 2008) nor an official document issued by MOET regarding the implementation of bilingual education in primary schools, as it is still in its first steps of implementation (Normand-Marconnet, 2013), receiving both arguments and support, and there is still a lack of research studying on the practical implementation of bilingual education and its real effects in primary schools in the context of Vietnam, especially from the teachers’ perspective.

This paper aims to explore primary teachers’ perceptions and attitudes regarding bilingual education in primary schools in Vietnam, and more specifically to find out and describe the challenges and opportunities, as well as the potential benefits and drawbacks of
bilingual education in Vietnamese primary schools from teachers’ perspective. For this purpose, two research questions (RQs) have been formulated:

- RQ1: From primary teachers’ perspectives, what are the internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) that affect bilingual education in primary schools in Vietnam?
- RQ2: From primary teachers’ perspectives, what are external factors (opportunities and threats) that affect the success of bilingual education in primary schools in Vietnam?

**Bilingual Education in Vietnam**

Foreign language teaching and learning has always been a key political concern in Vietnam (Van, 2016). In the second half of the 20th century, especially since the 1960s, foreign language teaching has taken up an interesting place in the Vietnamese language policy, which has been even more emphasized after the approval of the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (Nguyen, 2008). The main objectives of this Project are to renovate the approaches to teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system, to implement a new program at all educational levels, to increase the qualification and use of foreign languages in Vietnam, and to introduce bilingual programs. The Project, composed of three stages (2008-2010, 2011-2015, and 2016-2020), would have in its third phase the following implications:

...by 2020 most Vietnamese young people 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, multicultural and multilingual environment, making foreign languages a competitive advantage of the Vietnamese people to serve the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country.

(Van, 2016, pp. 11-12).

To have an overview of foreign language education in primary education in Vietnam, it is necessary to briefly mention the role of EFL: according to Hoang (2010), since 2002 English was an optional subject from grade 3 (age 8) - or grade 1 (age 6) in some schools -, and it becomes a mandatory subject for students from grade 6 (age 11) until the end of upper-secondary education (age 18). With the Education Reform in 2018, the MOET (2018) issued a Circular No. 32/2018/T廖-BGDDT and English has officially become a compulsory subject for students from grade 3 (age 8) since February 2019, and English is now an optional subject for all students from grade 1 (age 6).
When it comes to bilingual education in Vietnam, the term becomes more complex especially due to the contradiction between the policy of implementing bilingual education, the actual implementation of this policy, and the lack of definition of the term ‘bilingual education’ by the MOET. On the one hand, the implementation of Vietnamese bilingual education is limited to certain contexts: bilingual education is encouraged primarily in high schools for gifted students, although other high schools and junior-high schools can implement bilingual programs if they meet the Vietnamese Government’s requirements (MOET, 2018). It is also interesting that MOET accepts the introduction of bilingual education in non-public primary schools in big cities, such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. On the other hand, it must be highlighted that MOET (2018) states that ‘bilingual education’ in Vietnam is the use of a foreign language as an additional language of instruction of the curriculum (having two languages of instruction: Vietnamese and a foreign language), instead of considering the foreign language a subject as such (Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2018).

The concept of bilingual education in the Vietnamese school system is presented in this paper as the context where there is a combination of two curriculums (Vietnamese and international curriculums) with two languages of instruction applied in a bilingual program, distinguished from the official Vietnamese monolingual program issued by the MOET (2018). The majority of schools in Vietnam apply the official national curriculum issued by MOET, while only several experimental schools such as those identified by Vân Anh (2020) implement the experimental curriculum written and designed by Ho Ngoc-Dai (Dang, 2019). Vietnamese is the official language of instruction of the official national curriculum issued by MOET, as well as the first language in the experimental curriculum used in several non-public schools in Vietnam. Besides the Vietnamese curriculum, schools offering bilingual education implement some international curriculums accepted by MOET, such as the Cambridge curriculum with A-level or International Baccalaureate (Lao động thủ đô, 2019), where English is the language of instruction.

According to Djigunovich and Vilke (2000), for early language learning, there are conditions that need to be met, including: (i) intensive interaction in class, (ii) sufficient class size (10–15) and (iii) teachers’ high English levels. Nguyen (2016) finds several problems in introducing bilingual education for primary students in Vietnam, considering that public primary schools in Vietnam do not meet two key requirements of implementing early language teaching: (i) number of students per classroom (the class size of public schools in Vietnam is often more than 35 students, although the average class size in Ho Chi Minh City is 39.7 while in Hanoi the size can be extent to even 60 students (Hoai, 2015)), and (ii) teachers with an
adequate language level. In terms of English proficiency of primary teachers, Doan (2013) reported that nearly 75% of primary teachers of 42 provinces and cities do not meet the requirement of getting the standard level B2 asked by the MOET.

It is necessary to highlight, moreover, that Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) assume that the studies investigating and building the model of bilingual education Vietnamese-English in Vietnam in general and in the level of primary education in particular are scarce. These authors, using a questionnaire with 41 teachers and an interview with two heads of school and two English team leaders, point out that the program that some primary schools call ‘bilingual education’ is not actually bilingual education, but it enhances English language learning. The study also reports that although most of teachers and heads of school participating have positive perspectives of bilingual education, they are still afraid of some influences of English on the learning process of Vietnamese, and prioritize Vietnamese as the first language in bilingual education.

Methods
Research design

In order to explore primary teachers’ perspectives of bilingual education Vietnamese-English in primary schools, qualitative research is conducted by using a semi-structured interview with six primary teachers working in two private primary schools in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. The key objective of conducting a qualitative study is to examine in detail the opinions and experiences of the participants to understand of and/or interpret the phenomena according to the meaning that participants attach to them (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2017, p. 3). With this objective, the methodological procedure of Grounded Theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967) was used to make a first approach to the phenomenon. For this study, therefore, the authors adopted Grounded Theory in order to find out four categories (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) based on the collected data. According to this framework, the researchers established all the stages of conducting this research, from raising research questions to data collection and analysis.

Participants

A non-probabilistic sample based on convenience was used for participants. Eligibility criteria were based on proximity and experience as language teachers or teachers in international schools in Vietnam. A total of six primary teachers accepted to participate in the semi-structured interview, working in two private primary schools in Hanoi, Vietnam (three
teachers for each school): BGS and CGD. Their profiles are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Profile of the respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CGDS1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Vietnamese language arts teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGDS2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Vietnamese language arts teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGDS3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGS1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGS2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGS3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Primary teacher and English teaching assistant of the English program following international standard, oriented by Cambridge English curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration

BGS applies the official national curriculum that MOET supplies, while CGD is an experimental school, providing the experimental Vietnamese curriculum instead of following the national curriculum for primary education provided by MOET. None of the schools offer bilingual programs, but advanced English programs which outsource two organizations teaching English in Hanoi: British Council Vietnam (CGD) and IIG Vietnam (BGS).

All the participants have a clear understanding about bilingual education which is defined in the literature review of the paper, and the two languages mentioned here are Vietnamese and English instead of other languages (e.g., Vietnamese and French or French and English). They also mention that although their schools do not offer bilingual education, they have had opportunities to work with students following bilingual education in international schools in Hanoi as their private tutors.

**Data gathering**

To explore primary teachers’ perspectives of bilingual education in primary schools, the interviews are conducted with the six aforementioned teachers. The data were collected by using a semi-structured interview, and all interviewees were recorded. The semi-structured interview included the following key questions:

- What do you think about bilingual education in primary schools?
- What do you think about teaching contents (i.e., Mathematics, Nature and Society, Arts, Physical Education) in a foreign or additional language, like English, for primary students? In your opinion, what could be the benefits and drawbacks of this trend?
If the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) introduced the implementation of teaching contents in English in primary education and organizes training courses for teachers, including both English and content teachers, would you be willing to take part? In your opinion, what could be the challenges and opportunities of this implementation?

After the data were collected, a SWOT analysis is applied to analyze the data. Therefore, the implementation of bilingual education in primary schools will be discussed and evaluated under the following four aspects: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats from the perspectives of the participants.

**Data analysis**

In this qualitative study, the authors conducted a semi-structured interview, and all interviewees were recorded to understand the perceptions and attitudes of Vietnamese primary teachers’ perspectives of bilingual education in primary schools. To analyze the data collected, the grounded-theory scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed to establish the different categories and topics; then, content analysis was applied; finally, a manual SWOT analysis, which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (Samejima, Shimizu, Akiyoshi, & Komoda, 2006) was created. The SWOT analysis was based on participants’ responses to the questions in the interview which already asked them about benefits, drawbacks, challenges and opportunities of implementing bilingual education in primary schools in the context of Vietnam. Moreover, in order to determine the positive or negative mood of the qualitative responses, text processing in the form of content analysis was required. Regarding the SWOT analysis, it must be taken into account that strengths and weaknesses are the internal (and thus controllable) factors that support and hinder systems, organizations or plans to achieve their mission, whereas opportunities and threats are the external (and thus uncontrollable) factors that enable or not systems, organizations or plans to accomplish their mission (Dyson, 2004).

Different stages of SWOT analysis were utilized in this study including: (a) data gathering, (b) content analysis, (c) classifying data into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats, (d) specifying the weight of each factor, and (e) reporting the result.

The total of weight scores was calculated and then classified the content of each data into relevant SWOT categories: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. The Rule Model (Thamrin, & Pamungkas, 2017) was adopted to classify the factors based on the
participants’ responses. The authors classified the data based on participants’ responses into two categories: positive and negative. After that, the positive responses related to internal factors (i.e., teachers’ issues) were considered as ‘strengths’, while external factors (i.e., policies, administrators, structures, facilities, etc.) were considered as ‘opportunities.’ Similarly, negative responses related to internal factors were labelled as ‘weaknesses’, and those related to external factors as ‘threats.’ In order to check the inter-rater reliability of the content analysis phase (i.e., categorizing and labelling the different responses according to the Rule Model), the authors checked the data analysis. The cross-checking procedure showed high consistency, confirming then the reliability of the analysis.

Results

This section presents the results of the study on primary teachers’ perspectives of bilingual education (Vietnamese-English) in primary schools in Vietnam. For this purpose, firstly the results corresponding to the different components of the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) will be presented, and finally the SWOT matrix is constructed.

**Strengths of Bilingual Education in Vietnamese Primary Schools**

From the perspectives of the primary teachers participating in the interview, the most commonly identified strength of bilingual education for the Vietnamese context is that it improves students’ attitude to English as well as their English-speaking skills. Participant BGS3 states that bilingual education provides more English exposure for learners. Learners are exposed to an environment that they need to use English to study and follow the lesson. As a result, English becomes an indispensable tool for students to get access to knowledge and to understand the lesson, and students are intrinsically motivated to use English, which has an important linguistic status in Vietnam (point of view also supported by parents according to participant BGS3). Participant BGS3 also compares the advanced English program with an ordinary English program applied in her school. Although both programs provide students with eight English lessons per week, students of the advanced program show that they can communicate in English more fluently due to the fact that they have more opportunities to interact with foreign teachers and use English. The students participating in the ordinary English program only have two lessons with foreign teachers and in their lessons with Vietnamese teachers, they can use Vietnamese as the Vietnamese teacher uses both English and Vietnamese in the class.
Moreover, the participants also highlighted that bilingual education provides students with an interesting international curriculum, divergent creative activities and opportunities to speak out loud their thinking independently. They also mention that bilingual education allows to apply state-of-the-art teaching approaches and give teachers more opportunities to be creative than the national official education provided by MOET. Participant BGS2 reported that students of the advanced English program are very confident to present their opinions independently and critically, and they are interested in Science lessons taught in English.

I had an opportunity to observe students learning Science in English. The students seemed eager to explore scientific knowledge, they were confident to speak and present their thinking independently and critically. They asked questions and had arguments without hesitating. The teacher did not inhibit them from speaking out loud their thinking. They had opportunities to do a model or a product, which engaged them into the lesson. Participant BGS2

Moreover, when comparing bilingual education with official national education provided by MOET, official education seems to be more traditional in teaching and learning with a focus on the final exam, and results of the exam need to meet the outcome standard that MOET requires, where teachers always need to keep up with the standard in order to prepare students to pass the exam, and consequently creative activities are limited. The orientation and objectives of the official primary education as well as the limited acceptable responses in the final exam also inhibit teachers and students from freely discussing and presenting their opinions. On the contrary, bilingual education seems to be beyond the frame of official primary education, encouraging both teachers and students to discuss and present their thoughts independently.

Another strength identified by participant BGS1 is that students can learn scientific terms in English to get access to scientific knowledge without any barriers of translation, which is believed to be better than learning it in Vietnamese. This participant also argues that most scientific knowledge comes from Western developed countries, especially from the United States and the United Kingdom, contributing to the development of science using English as a lingua franca. Using English to learn, students can get access to scientific knowledge ordinarily and more correctly, because there is no barrier of translation from English into Vietnamese. The participants consider that this can be more beneficial for children because they can get access to scientific knowledge in English early, and they do not face some difficulties of translating back and forth between scientific terms in English and the corresponding terms
translated into Vietnamese. Connected to the previous, another strength identified for bilingual education in Vietnam is that students can get access to up-to-date knowledge. The participants highlight that English is used in all parts of the world, and all cutting-edge knowledge is published in English. In this light, with the international curriculum of bilingual education, students can get access to state of the art information.

Finally, the respondents considered that bilingual education can satisfy the requirement of being a global citizen in the era of globalization with the trend of studying and working abroad. Participant BGS1 believes that English is a vital tool to help students become a global citizen. By going abroad, they can enhance their knowledge and broaden their horizons, and bilingual education is a preparation in terms of both English and intercultural knowledge for students to live overseas.

Weaknesses of Bilingual Education in Vietnamese Primary Schools

To start with weaknesses identified for bilingual education in Vietnam, the first threat that primary teachers are afraid of is the negative influence of the second language (L2) on the first language (L1) and students’ thinking in L1. Participant BGS2 argued that with bilingual education, students can be better at English (L2) than at Vietnamese (L1). For proficient English students, they seem to prefer using and responding in English and, in some cases, they may even forget words in their L1.

Consequently, it is thought that bilingual education can negatively impact Vietnamese literacy. Participant BGS2 said that students who often have very good results in English speaking often make mistakes in terms of Vietnamese orthography. Similarly, participant CGDS1 complained about the English writing style of students following bilingual education that she had previously taught.

They often write short sentences and short paragraphs with adequate information like in English. Their Vietnamese vocabulary is limited. They do not exploit rich Vietnamese alliterative adjectives when they describe something. They do not use complex sentences and tend not to expand sentences. Their writing lacks images and emotions.

Participant CGDS2

However, this opinion is opposed by participant CGDS1, who considers the development of Vietnamese literacy is not relevant to English learning, but it depends on teaching methods of teachers.

Another concern identified as a threat for bilingual education in Vietnam is that it can
cause language disorder for some children with specific educational needs. Participant BGS3 stated that for some students who face difficulties in using language, bilingual education can make that problem becomes more serious.

A key weakness identified by all the participants is the teachers’ limited linguistic competence in the additional language of instruction, which may hinder directly the quality of instruction in bilingual education.

*Not all teachers are good at English, and if they do have English, it is only in basic level, and they do not have English academic vocabulary for specific purposes, therefore it is very difficult to conduct.* Participant CGDS1

Moreover, another weakness identified by the participants is the heavy workload of the bilingual curriculum. In this light, participant CGDS1 believes that bilingual education is heavy for primary students, as there are many foreign words that are difficult in terms of concept, inhibiting students from understanding the lesson—even for English proficient students. This teacher also stated that learning Mathematics in Vietnamese, which is students’ main language, is even a harder work, requiring students to think actively to comprehend. Furthermore, if the concept is totally explained in English, most students cannot get the notion. The perception of bilingual education as challenging and demanding programs is shared by the participants, who also highlighted the increased academic pressure in students.

In addition, bilingual education requires primary students to prepare too much before each class. In order to understand the lesson in English, students need to look up the words in the dictionary, and they must learn not only the vocabulary but also the concepts, which is actually high demanding. Similarly, participant CGDS3 believes that only students with very high English levels who are exposed to English in their early childhood can follow bilingual education, and considers that the scientific terms in English are challenging for students to understand and remember.

Finally, participant BGS2 reported that the lack of communication between content teachers and language teachers can be a problem in bilingual education:

*Because language teachers are trained in terms of language, they might not have enough knowledge of other subjects like Science, Mathematics, therefore, there can be a gap when they teach academic or scientific terms in English if they try to translate from Vietnamese to English. If the content teachers do not cooperate with language teachers, there can be mistakes in terms of either content knowledge or language knowledge in a lesson. And it is difficult to implement without cooperation.* Participant
Opportunities of Bilingual Education in Vietnamese Primary Schools

All the participants expressed their interest in specific teacher training for bilingual education, which is actually the key foundation of educational changes.

*I am willing to participate because as far as I know it is a trend now, and there are public schools registering to implement teaching some subjects, such as Science and Mathematics in English. However, it is still not popular at that moment. If there is a training course, I really appreciate and want to participate.* Participant CGDS3

*For me, to develop my teaching career, I am always ready to participate in a training course.* Participant BGS3

Moreover, all teachers participating in the interview believe that nowadays English is essential in Vietnam’s society, and it increases the opportunities to study or work abroad. This is connected to the improvement of social communication, as participant CGDS3 states:

*I think the fact that students learn content in English can help them in their social communication, especially benefits students who intend to study abroad or are likely to research because they will like this trend. Actually, there are Science contents that students already learn in Vietnamese, and when they learn those contents again in English, their knowledge of the contents is widened.* Participant CGDS3

The participants argued that more and more parents realize the crucial role of English and invest considerable money to develop their children’s English proficiency at the early stage, as well as Vietnamese as their main language. Consequently, a potential reduction of the tuition fees in public bilingual education programs would increase the accessibility to this type of programs for all Vietnamese citizens.

Finally, participant BGS3 defends that bilingual education should be introduced in the Vietnamese curriculum at the earliest stage possible, as it is a good moment for children to familiarize with both languages.

*I think children in primary schools are in the age of being easy to absorb, acquire a new language. Therefore, if in primary schools, children have an opportunity to follow a bilingual course book, it is easy for them to develop their language ability. With bilingual education, children not only learn subjects but also are exposed to English input every day, therefore their English response is improved.* Participant BGS3
**Threats of Bilingual Education in Primary Schools**

Regarding the threats, the first issue of bilingual education identified by the participants is that tuition fees are much more expensive than regular public education. Participant BGS1 argued that the tuition fee of bilingual education is nowadays too high for the majority of Vietnamese parents to afford. As a result, bilingual education seems to target and benefit the rich who can pay for these tuition fees. Therefore, it cannot be applied to all Vietnamese citizens and it consequently may reflect the socioeconomic status of different people in the country.

Paying special attention to factors threatening bilingual education in primary schools, all teachers are afraid of the lack of language requirements for teachers in public education. They agree that most Vietnamese primary teachers do not have enough English proficiency and skills to teach a subject in English. If bilingual education is implemented in primary schools at this moment, most of them think there will be a great inadequacy of teaching staff to deliver lessons.

*It is even difficult to teach a concept in Vietnamese. The teacher needs to think hard to find tools and choose appropriate methods to transfer knowledge to students and to help them understand the concept. It will be much more difficult when using a foreign language. And most primary teachers are not proficient enough to use English to teach.*

Participant CGDS1

Four of the participants contend that students’ English level is also a significant factor threatening bilingual education. It is argued that it is clear to accept that learning contents in the L1 is easier than in an additional language. Consequently, for many students who do not have enough English proficiency it is difficult to follow bilingual education programs.

In addition, the gap between the two languages (Vietnamese and English) as well as the concepts and words that exist in one language but do not in the other language also become a factor challenging bilingual education. Participant CGDS1 (who believes that teaching in Vietnamese is also difficult) emphasizes the gap between the two languages and how teachers feel ‘useless’ when expressing concepts in a foreign language.

*Vietnamese is the mother tongue and we think in Vietnamese. There are some Vietnamese words that cannot be translated or expressed in English. In the opposite way, sometimes instead of explaining by many sentences in English, using one Vietnamese word can help students understand.* Participant CGDS2
Furthermore, although English is a lingua franca, many parents still want their children to fully develop their Vietnamese literacy. Therefore, they are satisfied with the fact that English is a foreign language subject instead of the language of instruction for other subjects. In addition, the high cost of bilingual education is another factor threatening its development and expansion.

Two BGS participants agree that bilingual education is only applied in non-public primary schools in big cities, because of several issues, including the cost of teaching and learning materials, the payment for foreign teachers to deliver lessons, and the fee for training Vietnamese teachers. All these are actual challenges to implement bilingual education in public primary schools in Vietnam.

To sum up the following SWOT matrix (Table 3) presents primary teachers’ perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding bilingual education in Vietnam.
Table 3 SWOT Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Improvement of students’ linguistic competence due to more exposure to the language</td>
<td>— Potential negative influence on Vietnamese (limited knowledge): written expression, vocabulary, emotions…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Parents’ interest in bilingual education</td>
<td>— Potential language disorders for children with specific educational needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— English status as an important language in Vietnam</td>
<td>— Teachers’ limited linguistic competence in the foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Support for diverse, interesting, creative activities</td>
<td>— Challenging and demanding programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Development of students’ critical thinking, autonomy and confidence</td>
<td>— More difficult than learning in the L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Direct access to updated scientific knowledge</td>
<td>— Academic pressure on the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Growth as global citizens and increased awareness of more points of view</td>
<td>— More preparation needed before the lessons (teachers and students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Potential reduction of tuition fees in public bilingual education programs</td>
<td>— Lack of communication between content teachers and language teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Willingness for teacher training</td>
<td>— High tuition fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Improvement of social communication</td>
<td>— No specific requirements in the foreign language to work in public schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Further opportunities to work or study abroad</td>
<td>— Limited knowledge of the foreign language (teachers and students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Improvement of both languages (Vietnamese and English)</td>
<td>— Students may not be able to follow the lessons in the additional language due to their linguistic competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Potential reduction of tuition fees in public bilingual education programs</td>
<td>— Some parents want their children to develop mainly their literacy in Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Primary education as a good stage to acquire the new language</td>
<td>— High cost of teaching and learning materials, and foreign teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Potential reduction of tuition fees in public bilingual education programs</td>
<td>— High training fees for Vietnamese teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not only private schools)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration

Discussion

From the results of this exploratory research, teachers interviewed have in-depth
understanding about both positive and negative effects of bilingual education in primary schools in Vietnam. In terms of strengths of bilingual education, the findings are in line with previous studies (Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018) that emphasize that bilingual education can help students improve their English (especially their speaking skills), get access to up-to-date knowledge, and prepare them to work and study overseas as a global citizen. Moreover, the results of this study also show other noticeable strengths of bilingual education from primary teachers’ perspectives, including (i) the diverse, creative activities that students can experience with the bilingual curriculum, (ii) the opportunities for students to develop their independently critical thinking which are not limited by the orientation of MOET’s official primary curriculum, and (iii) state-of-the-art teaching methods and techniques that are applied in bilingual education. From interviewed primary teachers’ perspectives, bilingual education poses issues of not only foreign language development but also ways of educating and teaching. While bilingual education seems to be more student-centered and keep up with modern educational changes in the world, official national education in Vietnam seems to be still traditional, focusing on exams and theory rather than practice.

Discussing the point that bilingual education in primary schools poses the issue of ways of teaching and learning, it is apparent that to get access to both the Vietnamese curriculum and an international curriculum (due to the fact that there is no bilingual curriculum offered by MOET yet) at the moment gives teachers opportunities to experience and compare the former with the latter. For teachers, this is a chance to learn and keep up with educational trends in the world and to have a place to apply modern techniques that can be hampered in official primary education as the result of time distribution for each subject and the outcome standard required by MOET. Teachers can also have a clearer view of advantages and disadvantages of the official primary curriculum when comparing it with bilingual curriculums. Without other programs and curriculums to compare with the official system, it can be difficult for teachers to come out from their ‘coconut shell’ to critically think about and reconsider limitations of the national education. From this point, bilingual education can broaden teachers’ horizons, helping them think more and ask more about purposes of education and ways of teaching and educating.

In terms of negative points of bilingual education, the concern of negative influences of the foreign language (English) on literacy development of the first language (Vietnamese) supports findings of the study by Nguyen and Nguyen (2018). This concern is noteworthy, which comes back to a controversial issue – the influence of the L2 on the L1. One of the most significant studies on the impact of the L2 on the L1 was carried out by Cook (2003). This
author argues that neither the separation model (model that believes that L2 users either speak L1 or L2 without any association between the two languages) nor the integration model (model that contends that L2 users can choose which language to use in a specific context, similar to the way a monolingual is able to choose which style or register to use in a certain circumstance) is totally correct. Instead, this author puts forward the idea that between the two extremes (separation and integration), does exist the impact between two language systems in the same mind with different degrees and types of interconnection. According to Cook (2003, par. 39), ‘the continuum does not necessarily imply a direction of movement. It may be that some people start with separation and move towards integration or vice versa, or the languages might stay permanently separate.’ The continuum is closely connected with different stages of L2 development. In the interview, one teacher reflected the language loss of students (e.g., vocabulary that students forgot in their L1), and two teachers reflected the interconnection between L2 and L1 in different possibilities. One considering point is that the subordinate possibility (Figure 1) of the interconnection can be different from Cook (2002) in the way that, instead of reaching the concept by translating the L2 into the L1, the opposite direction happens. This is the case of saying an English word first then translating it into Vietnamese when seeing an image in a communication in Vietnamese. Another case of interconnection is that resolving a Mathematics problem in Vietnamese takes more time than in English with the translation of scientific terms from English into Vietnamese as the support.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1. Relationships of concepts and language in interconnected L1 and L2 (Source: Cook, 2002, p. 15).**

Furthermore, the gap between the two languages, Vietnamese and English, and how to use these two languages in instruction effectively, as well as the distribution time for the two curriculums in bilingual education are worth noticing for educators, researchers and managers.
in order to develop two languages for primary students. The shortage of teachers to carry out bilingual education and the requirement of English proficiency for learners that the participants pointed out support the findings of Nhan (2013), Nguyen (2016) or Nguyen and Godwyll (2020) about challenges of the implementation of bilingual education in Vietnam.

Conclusion

This paper explores teachers’ perspectives of bilingual education (Vietnamese-English) in primary schools in Vietnam by using a semi-structured interview with six teachers coming from two private primary schools in Hanoi. The findings of the paper point out both benefits and drawbacks of bilingual education in the primary level in Vietnam. In terms of benefits, bilingual education seems to be more student-centered, creative and practical than the national primary education system, which is more traditional and exam based. Bilingual education is also assumed to help students improve their English-speaking skills and prepare them with language and knowledge to get access to up-to-date information and technologies as well as to become a global citizen. Despite the benefits above, there is certain concern among the participants over the negative impacts of the L2 (English) on the L1 (Vietnamese) including language loss, orthographical mistakes and English writing style in Vietnamese literacy. The high cost of bilingual education is also another notable weakness that hinders its implementation in the country. It should also be highlighted that, from teachers’ perspectives, low English proficiency of both primary teachers and learners is a great challenge for the implementation of bilingual education in primary schools in Vietnam, despite the fact that it can receive support from a great number of parents, which can be its opportunity to develop and expand.

The findings presented in this paper should be interpreted in the light of two limitations. First, due to the nature of an exploratory study, as a starting point, only six teachers located in one context, Hanoi (Vietnam), were considered as target population. Consequently, the findings may not be applicable to other participants located in different contexts or with different backgrounds. Future research should consider recruiting participants from different schools, institutions, regions and sociocultural contexts so comparisons with the current research could be performed. Second, the qualitative findings were only based on self-reported data, so they may be affected by respondents’ subjective opinions about the topic. For this reason, future studies should also consider obtaining data through additional sources (e.g., questionnaires, focus groups, observations) in order to obtain more reliable data.

Finally, this paper has implications in both practice and research. In terms of practice,
the differences in curriculums and ways of teaching between bilingual education (which seems to be more student-centered, creative and practical) and official Vietnamese education (which seems to be more traditional, theoretical and exam-based) pointed out in this paper can raise the awareness of educators, teachers, administrators, education managers and even policy-makers in terms of approaching modern and student-centered teaching methods as well as reconsider the objectives of the curriculum and education. More specifically, the current unaffordable fees of bilingual education for average income people, how to use two languages effectively in a bilingual program, and the insufficiency of English competence of both teachers and learners presented in this paper may contribute to help education managers analyze challenges of implementing bilingual education in Vietnam. Furthermore, in terms of research, the findings of this paper suggest that further research is needed regarding the impact of L2 on L1 in the perspective of Vietnamese primary teachers in bilingual programs, including the L1 loss phenomenon and the L2 writing style in L1 literacy.

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