



Thinking globally or “glocally”? Bilingual identity of Vietnamese international school students



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ABSTRACT

This article examines bilingual identity of Vietnamese international school students as reflected in their *language practices* and *language beliefs* (Spolsky, 2004). It seeks to identify the factors related to *sociocultural connection*, *interaction* and *investment* (Fielding, 2015) that influence their bilingual identity. Interviews with three students were the main source of the data. Findings reveal that a number of factors had an impact on the students' ways of practising Vietnamese and English and shaping their beliefs of the languages. As the students attached their imagined future identity to English and global mobility more than to Vietnamese and local experience, schools should play a significant role in encouraging students to think more “glocally” and positively contribute to their local communities.

1. Introduction

In tandem with globalisation, the number of international schools, with the common aim of training “global citizens”, has exponentially grown in recent decades; and, the number of children attending these schools has increased rapidly in many countries worldwide. More attention is being paid to these students who have a unique and different experience of schooling compared with students attending local schools. For the most part, research into international school students has focused on students from expatriate families who regularly change their sites of domicile due to their mobile careers (e.g., Bagnall, 2012; Harrington, 2007; Jabal, 2011; O'Boyle, 2009; Pearce, 2011; Rydenvald, 2015; Sears, 2012). Local students who attend international schools within their own nation have received little attention compared to their expatriate counterparts. The little extant research exploring international school students in the host country invariably focuses on the parents' decisions to choose international schools for their children, students' language proficiency, cultural identity, social responsibility or future aspirations (e.g., Bailey, 2015; Dunne & Edwards, 2010; Kanan & Baker, 2006; MacKenzie, 2009; Tanu, 2014), rather than on the students' perspectives of their language and identity development and how they experience international schooling. The present study not only attempts to fill in this gap, but seeks to redress the imbalance of research into expatriate students and local students attending international schools. In addition, the study contributes to understanding the language lives and the identity of elite bilinguals in the context of English as a foreign language society.

In this article, we examine Vietnamese students' bilingual identity construction through their exposure to English and international education. By unpacking the lived experiences of the bilingual students, we explore their language practices and language beliefs in an attempt to discern the factors that influence their identity as they deal with the Vietnamese and English languages. Our

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analysis suggests that a number of factors had an impact on the students' ways of practising Vietnamese and English and shaping their beliefs of the languages; in effect, in how they practised and portrayed their identity. The students tended to connect English and its instrumental values to their future life more than Vietnamese. Their international schooling provided them a fast track to constructing their imagined future identity attached to English, and inspired them to think globally. Schools, however, should play a more significant role in bridging the gap between students' global expectations and their local interests, and encourage students to contribute to positive social changes both in their respective communities and in their home country.

2. Context

Concomitant with the introduction of the 1986 *Renovation* policy, the demand for English was unleashed and English has gradually replaced Russian, French and Chinese to become the most important foreign language in schools and in the broader social milieu. Subsequent to Vietnam becoming a full member of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1995, and of the WTO (World Trade Organisation) in 2007, the role and status of English has steadily increased. As a result, there has been a nationwide rush to learn English, which broadly perceived as a language of “new trend” and opportunity. English is considered not only a major foreign language, but also an international language (Doan, 2014)—the best means by which people can pursue their dreams of material success and privilege (Bui & Nguyen, 2015) outside their home country. However, although English is currently being taught in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions and foreign language centres throughout Vietnam, the quality of English education still does not meet the country's socio-economic development demands (Vu & Burns, 2014). Most of English language learners still limit their English usage inside the classroom (Ton & Pham, 2010). They do not have much chance to use English outside the classroom unless they have special jobs or opportunities to contact English speakers (Le, 2007).

Along with the emergence of more open door policies and the increasingly important role of English, international educational institutions—from preschool to university level—are being established in many cities in Vietnam (To, 2010). In recent times, economically elite families living in big cities are showing increased interest in investing in their children's education. It seems that Vietnamese-medium public schools—that have been criticised for their overcapacity classes, overloaded curricula, lack of facilities and out of date teaching/learning methods—no longer meet the demands of the parents (Bui, 2014). Although the government encourages mother tongue (Vietnamese) education, many parents consider it better for their children to attend English-medium or Vietnamese–English bilingual schools so that the latter can achieve good English proficiency and gain the necessary linguistic capital for a brighter future (McKay, 2010). Among the different education provider options, international schools are seen as a modern education environment that can help students to attain the knowledge, skills and attitudes of future global citizens. By sending their children to international schools, many parents hope to equip them with internationally recognised qualifications that will enable them to access higher education in Western universities, to work overseas (Bright, 2015; Cao, 2015) and to improve their international mobility, multicultural adaptability and ability to be successful in an increasingly internationalised world (Dunne & Edwards, 2010). There are, however, some who argue that international schools, which focus more on English language, foreign culture and open styles of thinking, may negatively impact on young children's Vietnamese language development and their Vietnamese traditional standards of manners and lifestyles (To, 2015).

International schools are still a topic of some debate in Vietnam. Many people when applying this term are referring to foreign owned/invested or private (non-state) schools which use English as a medium of instruction, employ foreign teachers, offer foreign curricula and/or “international” pedagogical focus (Bright, 2015). According to Bui (2014), there are two main types of international schools: those which apply the whole curriculum of a foreign country, and those—also called bilingual schools—which use an integrated program (that involves the Vietnamese National Curriculum and a foreign curriculum). The international school which the research participants in the current study attended is a bilingual school providing K12 education located in Ho Chi Minh city. It provides the Vietnamese curriculum and some parts of a foreign curriculum, using both Vietnamese and English as mediums of instruction. Since 2013, it has offered the Cambridge International Program as complementary to the national curriculum. These programs are described as being designed to suit Vietnamese students and benchmarked with internationally and nationally recognised qualifications. The participants of this study were following the school's secondary education program in which the subjects of the national curriculum were taught in Vietnamese, and the four subjects—Maths, English, Science, and Information and Communication Technology—of the Cambridge International Program were taught in English. Apropos of its education quality, the school claims that it “not only provides students with a solid academic foundation but also focuses on developing other aspects of the whole child, including imparting life skills, core values and physical development”. As the authors have some professional and private networks here, this particular school was selected as the research site as it provided a sample of convenience in approaching international school students who could otherwise prove hard to reach by other researchers.

3. Theoretical framework

In this paper, we bring together Spolsky's (2004) framework of language policy and Fielding's (2015) identity framework to examine the nexus between language practices, language beliefs and identity of international school students, as well as factors that influence their identity. By exploring the case through this lens, we are able to make recommendations for bilingual identity of the students being exposed to English and international schooling in the Vietnamese context.

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