

## Teaching foreign languages under the ability development orientation for students of universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam today

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**ABSTRACT :** In the process of integration and development, students of universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam need to be able to use foreign languages to seek job opportunities, increase their ability to adapt to the socio-economic conditions in the new era. Teaching foreign languages under the ability development orientation can both meet the requirements of higher education in Vietnam and help students achieve their set goals. To be effective in teaching foreign languages, regional language lecturers and universities play an important role.

**Keywords** -ability, ability development, foreign languages, universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the process of integration and development of Vietnam with the world is taking place more and more rapidly and strongly. Foreign languages are an extremely important factor, an effective means of integration. Improving the efficiency of foreign languages teaching for students has become a target in Vietnam's education system today. For students, foreign languages are not only the key to receive new and updated knowledge of humanity but also a prerequisite in the process of seeking a job after graduation. Studying foreign languages at universities helps students gain a good language foundation, providing high-income job opportunities at foreign companies opened in Vietnam as well as job seeking opportunities in many other countries in the region and around the world. With such a target, the universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region has considered teaching foreign languages under the ability development orientation is inevitable to help students use skillfully at least one foreign language after graduation.

### II. HEADINGS

#### 1. Characteristics of students in universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam

##### 1.1. *An overview of the northern midland and mountainous region of Vietnam*

The Northern Midlands and Mountainous region has always been considered by the Party and State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as a region with special strategic significance in terms of socio-economy and national security. This area is adjacent to two Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan in the north, to Laos in the west, to the Red River Delta and North Central in the south and southeast [1, p.4]. This is the territory with the largest area in the economic regions of Vietnam, accounting for 28.8% of the total area of the country. Currently, the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region including the following provinces: Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Son La, Hoa Binh, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Lang Son, Tuyen Quang, Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang, Phu Tho. The Northern Midlands and Mountains, with a population of nearly 12 million people, is the residence of ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, Dao, Thai, and Muong, etc.

In recent years, the Party and State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have always had special policies for the socio-economic development of the region, in which the role of education has been specially emphasized. Decision No. 1379/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam emphasized: "The target of developing education, training and vocational training in the northern midland and mountainous provinces and the western districts of Thanh Hoa province, Nghe An province in the period of 2013 - 2020 is to comprehensively improve the quality of education in all level of education, train on-site

human resources and high-quality human resources; focus on the education in areas of ethnic minorities and regions with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions" [5]. Among the specific objectives, the Decision mentioned the higher education development of the region: "By 2020, on the basis of the approved network planning, from 01 to 02 new universities ; 01 to 02 multi-disciplinary colleges shall be established to prioritize the development of industries and occupations of industrial production, agriculture - forestry - fishery, health care, meeting the requirements of on-site human resource training, consistent with the regional socio-economic development planning; the proportion of students from ethnic minorities reaches over 30% of the total number of students of universities and colleges in the region" [5].

### **1.2. Characteristics of students in universities in the Northern midland and mountainous region**

Based on the guidelines and policies of the Party and State together with the efforts of the provinces, currently, there are 4 universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region, namely Thai Nguyen University, Tay Bac University, Tan Trao University, Hung Vuong University attracting a large number of students in the region and many other localities all over the country. In which, Thai Nguyen University is a university classified in the national key university group, based in Thai Nguyen, rated as one of the 17 best universities/groups of universities in Vietnam; is a mainstay in Vietnam's higher education system [10]. Thai Nguyen University was established under Decree No. 31/CP dated April 04, 1994 of the Government on the basis of organizing and rearranging universities in Thai Nguyen city. As a university implementing national strategic tasks, Thai Nguyen University mainly focuses on developing training professions from university and higher. Currently, Thai Nguyen University includes: University of Information Technology and Communication, University of Education, College of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, University of Technology, University of Economics and Business Administration, University of Sciences, Economics and Engineering School, Foreign Languages Studies Faculty, International School, Thai Nguyen University Campus - Lao Cai campus [11].

Tay Bac University was established under Decision No. 39/2001/QĐ-TTg dated 23 March 2001 of the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It has a long history, with a tradition of educating children of ethnic minorities in the Thai Meo Autonomous Region (in the past) in particular and the Northwest region in general. Currently, it is located in Son La city - Son La province. Its tasks are training human resources with bachelor's and postgraduate qualifications; fostering professional skills for cadres and officer; studying science, transferring technology, implementing technical services for socio-economic development in the Northwestern region [13].

Hung Vuong University was established on April 29, 2003 under Decision No. 81/2003/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister, on the basis of Phu Tho Pedagogy College. It offers training for graduate, university and lower levels in the fields of Education, Agriculture - Forestry, Economics - Business Administration, Engineering - Technology, Tourism ... in order to train qualified human resources for Phu Tho province and neighboring provinces. By 2030, Hung Vuong University will have become one of the highly prestigious, application-oriented, multi-disciplinary universities in the region. Graduate learners are capable of working in a global environment [12]. Tan Trao University was upgraded from Tuyen Quang College under Decision No. 1404/QĐ-TTg dated August 14, 2013. Tan Trao University is a training institution for undergraduate, graduate, scientific research, technology application and transfer in the fields of education, economics, culture, science and technology; plays a key role in the system of professional training schools of Tuyen Quang province; is ready for international integration [14].

With 4 universities, many colleges and vocational training schools, the system of higher education and vocational training in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region basically meets the requirements of training human resources for the region, aims at the goal of training high quality labor force for the country. The universities in the region have attracted a large number of students from the provinces in the region and many other provinces in the country. Students of these universities have the following characteristics:

*Firstly*, the students of universities in the Northern midlands and mountainous region, like other universities in the country, are strongly influenced by the tendency of globalization and internationalization. The integration process takes place in all areas of social life, including education. Globalization also has a significant impact on students' orientation in learning and using foreign languages. When Vietnam conducts international commercial transactions, the inevitable requirement is to use a foreign language. Globalization also increases students' awareness of languages other than English. Currently, students from universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region, apart from English, also choose from many other languages such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese ... to study.

*Secondly*, students of universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region are the excellent youngsters of the region and neighboring localities selected through the national exams, meeting the requirements for learning ability. These are the subjects trained to become a highly educated, scientific, technical and professional workforce to be able to carry out industrialization and modernization in Vietnam, in particular the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region as the target set by the Party and Government of the

Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Despite the attention of the Party and State, the proportion of highly trained labor in the region is still quite modest. According to the results of investigating the socio-economic status of 53 ethnic minorities in 2015, the majority of ethnic minority workers are trained only to the vocational training level, only a few ethnic minorities have a relatively high proportion of trained workers, some ethnic groups have almost no trained workers [8, p.38]. This also makes it difficult for the training process of universities in the region.

*Thirdly*, most of the students from universities in the northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam are from provinces in the region, in which ethnic minority students make up the majority. The majority of the population resides in the remote and mountainous areas, with difficult access to infrastructure and community services such as health and education. Although there are 4 universities in the region, but these schools are located in relatively developed cities compared to the region, geographical distance is still a significant barrier for students to access to school. Besides, in the Northern midlands and mountainous region, ethnic minorities are also divided according to language systems. The languages of the ethnic groups in Vietnam are divided into 8 groups: Vietnamese - Muong, Tay - Thai, Mon - Khmer, Mong - Dao, Ka Dai, Nam Dao, Han and Tang [15]. 96% of ethnic minorities living in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region speak their native language. Students in the region are also influenced by their own culture, so most of them know their native languages, Kinh's language is the second language [8, p.82]. This makes it difficult to learn a foreign language for the majority of ethnic minority students in universities in the Northern midlands and mountainous region.

## **2. Teaching foreign languages according to the orientation of developing foreign language ability for students of universities in the Northern midlands and mountainous region**

### **2.1. *The viewpoints of the Party and State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on foreign language training***

First of all, learning a foreign language is compulsory for students at universities in Vietnam's education system. In the curriculum at universities, foreign language is compulsory and will be usually throughout the semester during training period. As we learn, Universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region will arrange the appropriate number of credits depending on the students' English input and output standards, usually ranging from around 10 credits for the students not specialized in foreign languages. Normally, foreign languages in schools are regulated as English, French, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian ... According to the Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg dated December 22, 2017 of the Prime Minister on "Approving the amendment and supplement of the Scheme for teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system in the period of 2017-2025" [6], foreign language teaching and learning is emphasized and poses practical requirements to improve learners' foreign language abilities. The Decision also sets a general target for the foreign language ability of each educational level: "By 2025, 100% training branches specialized in foreign language strive to implement foreign language programs according to the output standards and training branches; 80% of other branches implement language programs according to the output standards and training branches; a number of teacher training programs in foreign languages will be implemented"[6]. For students not specialized in foreign languages, each school will have specific learning output standards. Based on Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT on "6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam" issued by the Minister of Education and Training on January 24, 2014 [2], universities normally regulate the foreign language standards for students not specialized in foreign languages are at least level 3 following graduation course (B1, equivalent to intermediate level). With this standard, students are equipped with the necessary foreign language skills to be able to read documents, participate in some terms taught entirely in foreign languages.

For the Northern midlands and mountainous region, the requirement in education is to train a workforce to meet the requirements of building a country in a new period as the Decision. No. 449/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister indicated: "To form a team of laborers, entrepreneurs and intellectuals of ethnic minorities who are healthy, have professional qualifications and industrial style to meet the requirements of the industrialization and modernization period. To implement training programs and models to improve workmanship, form a new generation of farmers knowing how to apply scientific and technical advances and adapt to market mechanisms in ethnic minority areas" [4]. With the above guidelines and policies, improving foreign language ability for students in universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region is an urgent and important requirement. That requires the efforts of lecturers, students, educational supporters as well as the necessary material conditions to improve the quality of foreign language teaching and learning.

### **2.2. *Actual situation and solutions of teaching foreign languages for students at universities in the Northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam today***

Teaching foreign languages under the orientation of ability development for students is to ensure the output quality of teaching, to achieve the goal of comprehensive development of personality qualities, to focus on the

ability to apply foreign languages in practical situations in order to prepare for students to actively use foreign languages in their lives and careers. This program emphasizes the role of the learners as the subject of the cognitive process. Therefore, the role of the lecturers and schools is crucial to achieve this goal.

*For lecturers*

As shown above, students of universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region are mostly ethnic minorities, using Vietnamese as the second language, and students from ethnic minorities have many difficulties in accessing foreign languages, so the first requirement is to create excitement and motivation for students to learn foreign languages. Accordingly, at the beginning of the class, lecturers must have a strategy to introduce the importance of learning foreign languages. Lecturers not only give general benefits but also need to specify the benefits that students can get from a good command of a foreign language such as being able to find jobs with better wages, having the opportunity to seek scholarships and work in many other countries in the world, being able to develop more skills such as better communication, faster thinking, judgment skills, generalization.... Instead of imposing on students the requirements for certificates to be obtained, lecturers should encourage the practical values that students gain when mastering a foreign language. This stimulates students to develop themselves by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations and improving their own abilities instead of trying to pursue the goals set by the schools and lecturers. Self-Setting goals and trying to achieve helps students actively and proactively make and adjust study plans to achieve the goal of improving their own language skills.

In addition, lecturers need to renew the content of lectures, associating with life issues instead of emphasizing on grammar and fixed lessons as before. According to many researchers, foreign language teaching is shown through linguistic material teaching techniques (grammar, phonetics, vocabulary ...) and communication skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of that language. According to our survey at universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region, most universities do not have an inappropriate approach to teaching and learning foreign languages of students. Most lecturers encourage students to understand the lesson through using grammar rules and looking up dictionaries in the mechanical manner, making it difficult for the speaking and writing skills of students. Besides, students are still forced to learn new words mechanically, understand the meaning of word from 1, 2 monotonous examples, which are separate from specific situations, not related to actual actions. Many exam questions lack practical context. This makes it difficult for learners to understand and memorize lessons. According to language experts, this outdated teaching method mentioned above has caused consequences such as passive language acquisition, only grasping the external appearance of words, not knowing how to use them in specific contexts. This method of teaching and learning makes students quickly forget words or they can pass a test to obtain foreign language certificates but cannot use foreign languages in practice. The ability development-oriented language teaching requires lecturers to change the content, the learning method as well as the way of assessment.

To improve students' ability of using foreign languages, lecturers need to be aware of the strengths, skills, attitudes and knowledge that students gain when entering school. As shown above, students of universities in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region have unequal qualifications. Students have different language proficiency and cultures, different life backgrounds and career goals. To bring high effectiveness in teaching foreign languages, lecturers need to have an understanding of each student to design appropriate training programs. Currently, this is relatively difficult to do at universities in the region. Most of the reason comes from the fact that the sizes of classes are large, lecturers must be in charge of teaching many classes, many courses, so it is difficult for them to pay attention to specific capabilities of each individual. In addition, income at university training institutions is too low, making foreign language lecturers not motivated and interested to change the content of the lectures. To meet the living needs, foreign language lecturers must increase their teaching to external institutions and loosen the quality of their teaching. To change this situation, it is necessary to change the remuneration policy for the lecturers as well as the necessary educational institutions for teachers to be more attached to the teaching work in the lecture halls.

**For universities in the Northern midland and mountainous region**

*First of all, it is required to* continue to invest financial resources in building infrastructure, increasing teaching and learning conditions, and enhancing teaching support tools for lecturers. In particular, the classrooms need to have internet access to serve the exchange, discussion or practice of skills with high quality and efficiency, which easily assists lecturers in finding specific and practical illustrative examples on the internet. Financial resources are also needed to increase the income of the lecturers so that they can work with peace of mind, dedicate their wisdom, hearts and minds to the teaching at the school.

*Besides that, schools need to be more flexible and proactive in* reforming the curriculum towards practical content, improving students' abilities instead of using outdated textbooks that are not close to reality, especially for foreign language textbooks. According to our survey, although the curriculum of universities in the region has been innovated and updated, it is still heavy in theory or the content is too heavy on grammar and vocabulary. Meanwhile, graduate students do not seem to apply this knowledge to work practice. Therefore, the

duration and frequency of knowledge in the textbooks need to be studied and adjusted to be more suitable with changes in the socio-economic context. Schools should also invest in organizing extracurricular activities such as clubs of foreign language, storytelling or rhetoric in foreign languages ..., which both create conditions for students to have the opportunity to communicate in foreign languages and inspire them to learn foreign languages.

In addition, schools should also organize seminars, meetings, and exchanges of experience on modern teaching methods with other regional as well as national and international universities to bring lecturers the opportunity of studying and improving study, improve professional qualifications, better meeting educational requirements in new conditions. In particular, in the context of financial autonomy of a number of universities today, it is necessary to pay attention to methods of dialogue, interaction and exchange of experience in online teaching to both save costs and bring high efficiency.

### III. CONCLUSION

To be able to communicate and transfer knowledge from generation to generation, humans have used language as the most effective and important tool. In the era of globalization and internationalization, the proficiency of at least one foreign language other than the native language is necessary and important. The ability development-oriented language teaching method not only aims at helping students master a foreign language, be able to use a foreign language associated with life and career situations, but also enhances students' understanding about the culture and history of the nation and the country using that language. In order for students of universities in the Northern midlands and mountainous region of Vietnam to achieve the above educational goals, not only the learners need to make effort, but the teaching and assessment method of the lectures must be actively innovated as well as other universities in the region are required to support.

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