

A Teachable Commodity: English in Hanoi

"Hello, how are you?" shouted young Vietnamese boys and girls as my *cyclo-pousse* driver shuttled me through the streets of a Hanoi teeming with other *cyclos*, bicycles, Simson motor scooters, United Nations vehicles, and thousands of people afoot carrying goods across their shoulders to market. "Mr. Bac," I asked the driver, "How do they know I speak English? How can they tell?"

"Oh, English very important now," he said in a very broken attempt at the newest language to surface in the northern part of the Indochinese country since the French military withdrawal in 1954. For years, Vietnam geared up for the day the devastating U.S. trade embargo would end.

From my experience as the first American English instructor at Hanoi University for Teachers of Foreign Languages (HUTFL), most Vietnamese seem to feel that education, along with limited free enterprise, is changing for the better and that the ability to study English is a part of the shift. Things were not always so progressive, however. "Five years ago an American professor at our college was kicked out of Vietnam for teaching English through Western newspapers," says Nguyen Ngoc Hung, a former platoon leader in the North Vietnamese Army stationed in Quang Tri Province during the war and now vice-director of the English Center of the Hanoi Foreign

Language College. "Because of *doi moi* (the Vietnamese rendition of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*), that wouldn't happen today. We hope that the war is finally behind us."

"It's time to let bygones be bygones," adds Professor Nguyen Tat Thanh, senior lecturer of Vietnamese and English linguistics at HUTFL. Hundreds of undergraduates, mostly young women of eighteen to twenty-three, echoed that feeling as they posed questions to me with zesty humor. "Whom do you think will be the next U.S. president? Are you married? What do you think of Vietnamese women? How are the Vietnamese in America? What's your favorite Vietnamese food? Do you know Nguyen Cao Ky (past premier of the former Republic of South Vietnam and now a southern California resident)?"

Those quickly fired queries were asked in remarkably good English—no doubt the result of the three hundred hours of English-language study required for admission to the university, according to Nguyen Phuong Suu, chief of the university's Foreign Relations Office and my "minder" at the university. But it is also due to the devotion and instruction of a staff of professors who could not undertake graduate studies in the United States because of a lack of diplomatic relations until last year. During the embargo, Vietnamese educators turned to nearby Australian and faraway British universities for their preparation. Still the professors wonder whether they are doing a good job.

Part of their dilemma has been the pro-

hibitive cost of textbooks at a time when, with Vietnam still economically strangled in spite of massive investment, the exchange rate is 10,000 Vietnamese *dong* to US\$1. The average professor's salary is 150,000 *dong* per month (US\$15), although graduates of the Hanoi Foreign Language College can earn much more working for a foreign company.

Although various countries, France and Australia among them, have funneled assistance to the university in an attempt to modernize facilities, Vietnam's poverty can be seen first-hand at HUTFL. A walk around reveals an institute that reminds one more of Berlin at the close of World War II than a campus. Classrooms windows have no glass. Paint long ago peeled off the walls. Air-conditioning is nowhere to be found, and fans are scarce (quite trying in the tropical climate, although no one but Western visitors pays it much mind). Chalk crumbles as professors press it to blackboards that appear not to have been cleaned in months. Old rags must suffice as erasers. Card catalogs resting outside the library are half-empty and covered with ancient dust.

When I asked the librarian where in the catalog I could find a book about General Vo Nguyen Giap, mastermind of the battles at Dien Bien Phu (against the French in 1954) and Khe Sanh (with the Americans in 1967-68), she appeared embarrassed not to be able to furnish a card; minutes later she proudly produced an English biography.

"The materials we have are very limited," confessed instructor Nguyen Mai Hoa. "And we

have so much trouble teaching writing." Nguyen's colleague, a Mr. Suu, concurred: "Though we Vietnamese ask questions very directly, when we talk amongst ourselves or write, we go around the subject; we don't get right to the point. Hence, it is very difficult for us to teach the students to write effective paragraphs."

Today, Americans, including many young Vietnamese-American university grads, are trekking to Vietnam to teach English in cram schools and colleges. Some even tutor Vietnamese nationals in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The new popularity of teaching English troubles some professional educators. As the need for English instruction in Vietnam rises, says one American educator who chose anonymity, "English schools are everywhere and not many are very good." Indeed, one sees various bootlegged editions of TOEFL preparation books in bookstalls along the streets of Hanoi, as much a result of the absence of copyright laws as of the country's economic situation.

Business negotiations in English are a daily occurrence now. Late into the steamy nights, restaurants are full of international business people discussing prospects for dealings in Indochina. As Vietnam reaches out for relations and capital, as it undoubtedly must to survive, English might well be the language that gets it back on its economic feet.

—Marc Phillip Yablonka is a journalist based in Los Angeles.