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CONTENTS

2 **Foreword**

3 **Supporting national education reform: The Cambridge Malaysia
Baseline Project**

This article was first published in November 2014 in issue 58 of *Research Notes*.

12 **The adoption of international certification in the French state school
sector**

This article was first published in May 2010 in issue 40 of *Research Notes*.

16 **Colombia national bilingual project**

This article was first published in May 2010 in issue 40 of *Research Notes*.

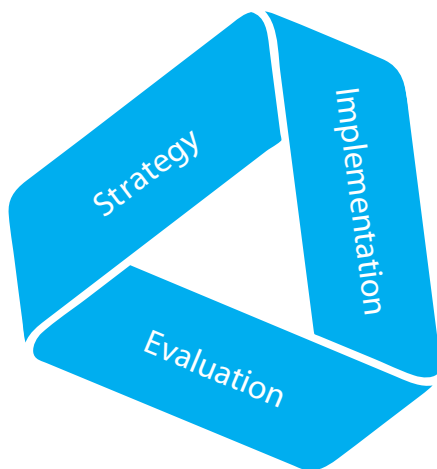
27 **An investigation into the effect of intensive language provision
and external assessment in primary education in Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam**

This article was first published in November 2012 in issue 50 of *Research Notes*.

Foreword

Transforming language education

English is a global language and a global tool for education, mobility, employability and opportunity. Expanding and reforming language education systems can be the key to delivering long-term economic development, creating a sustainable economy and improving quality of life and opportunities for young people. Cambridge English supports the systemic transformation of language education through a holistic approach to strategic planning, implementation and evaluation. We work in long-term strategic partnerships with ministries of education and education institutions to deliver reform in language teaching and learning. We provide a range of services and consultancy targeted at the key dimensions of quality language education: language strategy, benchmarking, curriculum, assessment, learning materials, teacher training and development, and evaluation and monitoring of outcomes



Strategy

- Defining the 'Transformation' strategy
- Goal setting & identifying success indicators
- Alignment to international standards
- Curriculum design
- Technical advice on digital learning

Implementation

- Institutional capacity building
- Teacher training & development
- Learning & support materials

Evaluation

- Curriculum evaluation
- Benchmarking assessment
- Evaluation of digital capabilities
- Assessments & international certification
- Monitoring & impact measurement
- Impact research

Cambridge English aims to work closely with policymakers to deliver the positive educational impacts they wish to achieve. Our expertise and world-leading assessment services deliver international standards that can be integrated with local systems, to improve learner outcomes and meet educational goals.

The articles selected for this issue reflect a range of international English language education reform projects supported by Cambridge Assessment English. All projects began around the same time yet their impact continues to this day. Most notably, the France CEC project has now been successfully delivered to over 300,000 test takers, and the Malaysia baseline study has led to a 5-year nationwide English language education reform project, reports on which shall feature in future issues of *Research Notes*.

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Supporting national education reform: The Cambridge Malaysia Baseline Project

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Project background and aims

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental contributor to social and economic growth as it plays a key role in fostering social justice and equal opportunity. Many countries worldwide, therefore, are focusing on nationwide educational reform in order to improve standards of achievement and make their education system more effective, which will lead to the development of social and economic capital (Tiongson 2005). Malaysia has embarked on an ambitious nationwide education reform and in October 2011 the Ministry of Education in Malaysia launched a review of the education system in order to develop a new National Education Blueprint – the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025* (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2013; referred to as the Education Blueprint in the rest of this article). The Education Blueprint presents the aspirations and goals of the reform, which aim to improve the access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency of the educational system and at the individual level, improve students' basic knowledge, thinking skills, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics, and spirituality and national identity. The Education Blueprint provides a realistic analysis of the strengths and areas for development of the national education system in relation to these aims and outlines a reform trajectory.

Proficiency in English (i.e. bilingual proficiency) plays an important role in the Malaysia educational reform, largely due to the increased importance of English as a global language and its role as a *lingua franca*. One key goal of the Malaysian national educational reform is to ensure that 'every child will be, at minimum, operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and language of unity, and in English as the international language of communication' (Education Blueprint 2013:E-10). An essential starting point for such a goal is to establish a reliable baseline against which future growth and targets can be set. In 2013, the Ministry commissioned Cambridge English Language Assessment to provide such a baseline by undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of the learning, teaching and assessment of the English language in Malaysian schools from pre-school to pre-university. Cambridge English Language Assessment was well placed to undertake such an ambitious project due to its expertise in investigating the impact of examinations and its belief in the principle of 'impact by design', which starts from the premise that assessment and education systems should be designed from the outset with the potential to achieve positive impact (Saville 2012). Additionally, Cambridge English had established experience in education reform through investigating educational standards in a range of international contexts in a comprehensive and evidence-based manner before attempts were made to improve those standards.

The aim of the 2013 Baseline Project was to provide the Ministry with a clear, evidence-based profile of how the Malaysian English language education system is currently performing against internationally recognised standards linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), which could be used to facilitate data-driven decisions on future targets and the means of achieving the aspirations identified in the Education Blueprint.

The key aims of the project were to:

- benchmark students at different school grades against international standards in terms of English language proficiency, overall and by individual language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking)
- benchmark teachers against international standards in terms of:
 - English language proficiency, overall and by language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking)
 - teaching knowledge
 - teaching practice
- explore the role of a range of factors such as the contexts of and attitudes towards learning, school location, school type, class specialisation and gender in language proficiency
- review current national curricula, assessments and learning materials.

The following article describes the comprehensive analysis of the national English language education system in Malaysia in order to create a baseline from which comparisons to international standards can be made, achievement gaps identified, ways to improve performance identified and future targets set.

Conducting the project

A mixed methods approach

A premise recognised in educational reform is that 'a key characteristic of the educational process is that student learning is influenced by many small factors rather than a few large ones' (Chapman, Weidman, Cohen and Mercer 2005:526). Therefore, any recommendations made in the project needed to be based on an in-depth understanding of several inter-connected aspects of the educational system in order to ensure they are achievable and to reduce the chances of any negative unintended consequences. As a result, the project involved the gathering and investigating of different types of information which provide insights into various aspects of this complex project, and focused not only on measuring English language levels of students and teachers, but also on investigating the context of learning, the availability and quality of resources, and stakeholder perceptions.

A mixed methods approach formed the basis of the study and a convergent parallel design (Creswell 2009) was chosen due to its value in collecting qualitative and quantitative data strands in a parallel fashion and in relatively short timeframes. Within the convergent parallel mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative data strands are collected concurrently and independently, are analysed separately and are then integrated to inform the final overall interpretation and discussion of results. This approach allowed Cambridge English to build a rich

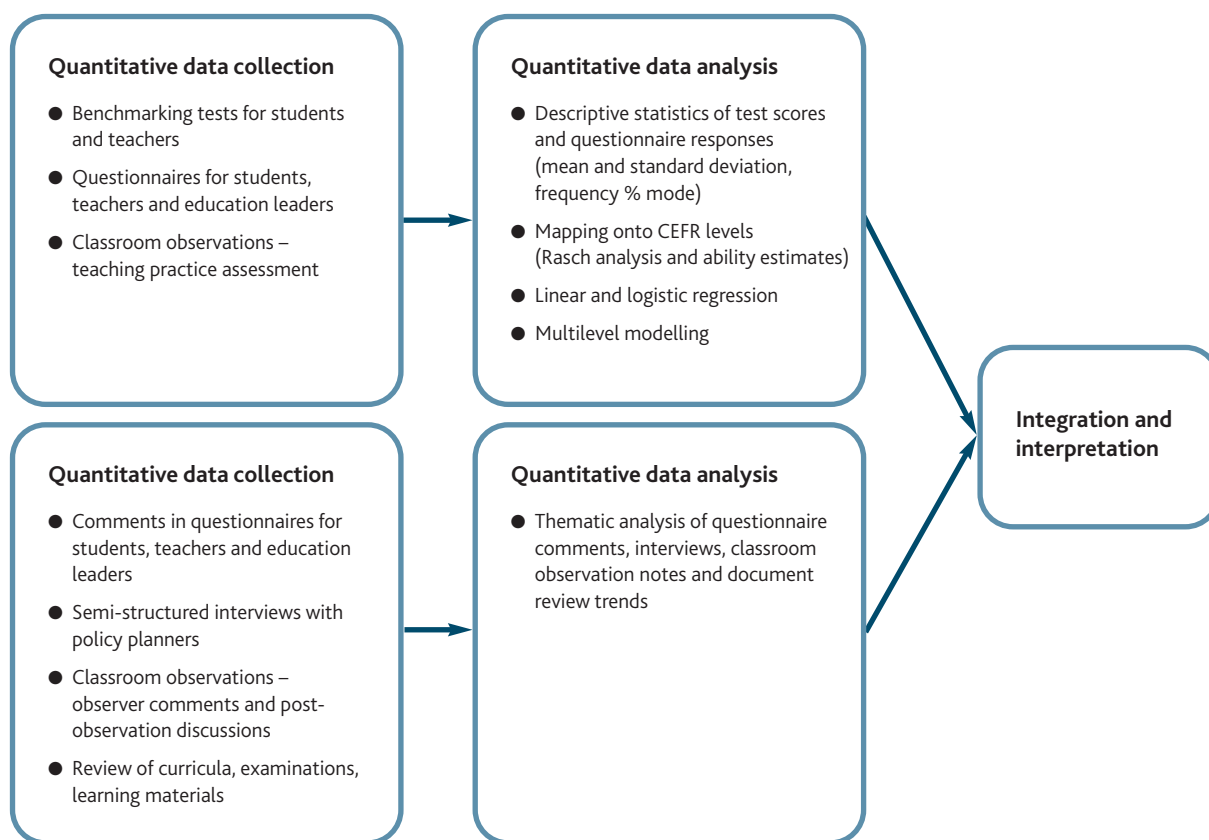


Figure 1: Research design

picture of the current situation with regard to learning, teaching and assessment in Malaysia, as well as enhancing the validity of the findings and recommendations.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the data collection and data analysis procedures which formed the backbone of the project.

Project participants

A total of 943 primary and secondary schools were selected (approximately 10% of schools in Malaysia) using a stratified sampling methodology. The students and teachers in those schools were intended to be representative of the overall target population. All 16 states and federal territories in the country were represented, and schools were selected from urban, rural and remote locations, ensuring a geographically representative sample. In primary schools, there was an added dimension in that alongside Bahasa Malaysian schools, there were also schools that taught in Tamil and Chinese. These schools were proportionally represented in the sample as well.

In total, 20,402 students took a Reading and Listening test, and from that group 9,921 were assessed for Writing, 1,372 for Speaking and 17,104 students completed a questionnaire.

A total of 424 teachers took a Reading and Listening test, with 266 taking a Writing test and 42 a Speaking test; 600 took the *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)*, 78 were observed while teaching and 1,290 completed a teacher questionnaire.

Forty-one Heads of Panel/Head Teachers were interviewed, 31 of them completed questionnaires and four Ministry officials were interviewed.



Photo 1: Speaking Examiners and Ministry officials en route to one of the participating schools (Kelantan)

In addition, 14 Speaking Examiners, four Classroom Observers and a local Ministry of Education task force were involved in the successful implementation and completion of the project. Photo 1 shows Ministry officials and speaking examiners en route to one of the participating schools in Kelantan.

Data collection instruments

A range of instruments was used to allow the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. They comprised:

- **Benchmarking English language tests for students and teachers:** Tests covering CEFR Levels pre-A1 to C2 and aimed at different age groups (i.e. pre-school, primary Year 6, secondary Form 3, 5 and 6 and teachers), which aimed at providing information on language proficiency in terms of Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking as measured against the CEFR.
- **Benchmarking Teaching Knowledge Test for teachers:** Intended to provide a measure of knowledge of and familiarity with teaching knowledge concepts in an objectively scored test.
- **Student, teacher and Head of Panel/Head Teacher questionnaires:** Aimed at gathering stakeholder perceptions of and attitudes towards English language learning, teaching and assessment in Malaysia.
- **Classroom observations and post-observation discussions:** Intended to gather in-depth information on teaching competence and performance for a smaller sub-set of the selected sample.
- **Semi-structured interviews with policy planners and senior school administrators:** Focused on exploring perceptions of the review project and expected outcomes, as well as views on curriculum, textbooks, examinations and teaching practice.
- **Curricula, textbooks and examinations review:** Intended to investigate issues such as the relationship between standards, curricula, textbooks and examinations and the CEFR; information on the extent to which the different documents complement each other and reflect latest trends in learning, teaching and assessment, e.g. student-centred learning and teaching, learning-oriented assessment, communicative-ability assessment.

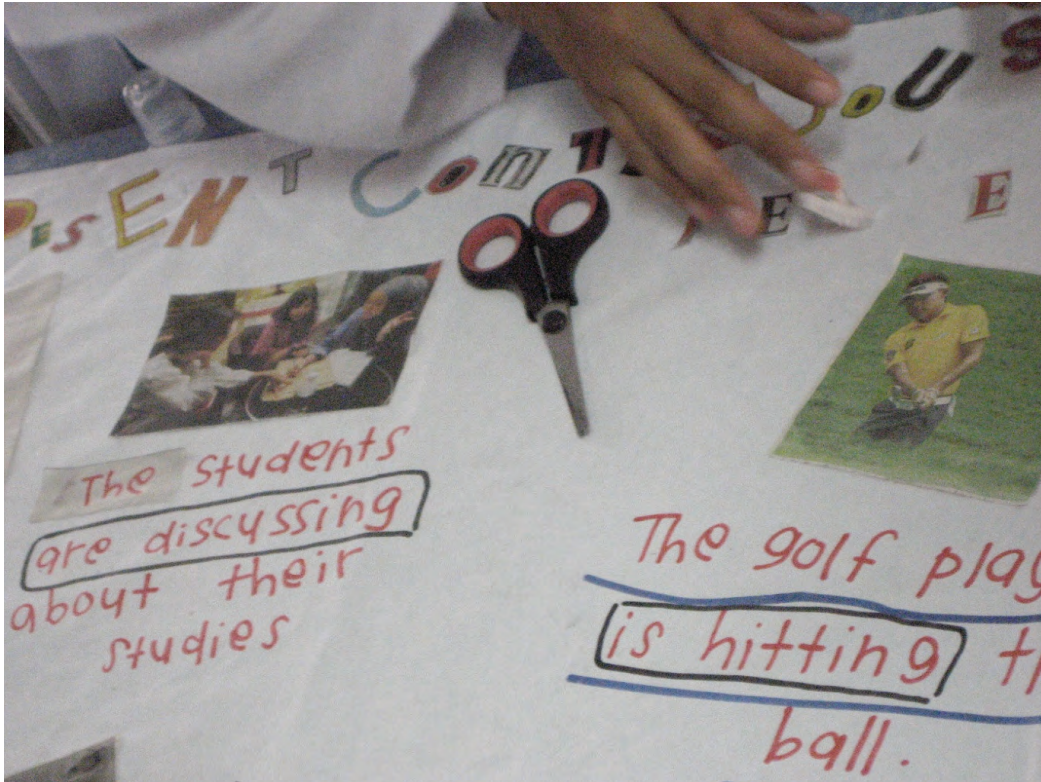


Photo 2: Student work captured during a classroom observation



Photo 3: A Cambridge English observer and a participating teacher

Photos 2 and 3 capture elements of the data collection and show student work during a classroom observation as well as a Cambridge English observer and a participating teacher in discussion following a classroom observation.

Data analysis

The mixed methods research design underlying this project involved both qualitative and quantitative analyses, which comprised:

- **CEFR level mapping:** Rasch analysis and ability estimates.
- **Descriptive statistics:** To provide an overall picture of CEFR language level, teaching knowledge and stakeholder perceptions, as well as the amount of variability within each group. The analysis focused on the cohort as a whole (e.g. all Form 5 students) and on specific variables within the cohort (e.g. Form 5 boys and girls; Form 5 urban, rural and remote students).
- **Linear and logistic regression:** To investigate which background and attitudinal factors play a role in high and low achievement.
- **Multilevel modelling:** To explore and confirm whether any attitudinal and background variables (e.g. student motivation, use of the internet) played a significant role in predicting the language level of students.
- **Chi-square test of independence:** To investigate whether the different variables of interest (e.g. state, location, gender, etc.) were related to questionnaire responses. Standardised residuals were also computed to identify which responses were contributing to the test of significance.
- **ANOVA and t-tests:** To explore whether there was any variance in the teacher group means for questionnaire composite measures. Questionnaire statements on similar topics (e.g. assessment practices, use of English in the classroom, etc.) were grouped together to determine whether teacher variables (e.g. experience, education, school type, etc.) influenced responses.
- **Thematic analysis:** Focused on grouping the wealth of collected in-depth observational, questionnaire, interview and descriptive data into general thematic categories which indicated major issues brought up by the different stakeholders participating in the project.

The final analysis stage involved an integration of the findings from the language and *TKT*, the practices noted in the classroom observations and in the discussions with teachers, the themes from the questionnaires and from the interviews with senior administrators in schools and senior officials in the Ministry of Education, and the review of curricula, assessment and teaching materials.

Project outcomes

The completion of the project was marked by the delivery of three reports: an Executive Summary, a Results Report and a Technical Report.

The Executive Summary and Results reports provided information on student English language proficiency, with a focus on the overall and by-skill performance of the five school grades of interest and the attitudinal and background factors which play a role in English language achievement. The results from the baseline study indicated a range of student language proficiency. As expected in Malaysia, some students in Forms 5 and 6 were found to achieve high levels of proficiency. However, the proportion of students achieving the CEFR C1 and C2 levels was lower than expected. Furthermore, the results indicated that a significant proportion of students in the system are left behind and never progress beyond a basic user level of English. Interestingly, Speaking emerged as the weakest skill for students at all school grades. This is most likely due to a range of reasons including insufficient opportunities to practise in and out of the classroom and the strong emphasis

on reading and writing over listening and speaking found in the reviewed national curricula, assessments and learning materials. The account of the student performance of the cohorts overall was supplemented by an investigation of performance based on key variables and comparisons between them, such as: states/federal territories; urban, rural and remote location; school types; gender; class specialisation. One of the most striking findings to emerge was the achievement gap across students at the same school grade. This achievement gap was pronounced in terms of location of the school, with students in remote and rural areas consistently performing worse than their urban counterparts. A further gap in achievement, which was especially pronounced in Forms 3 and 5, was based on gender, with female students performing significantly better than their male classmates. An achievement gap related to students' subject specialism was also found. In Forms 5 and 6 students in Science specialisation classes were found to perform significantly better than their classmates in Arts, Vocational and Religious class specialisations. The identification of such achievement gaps is vital in providing the evidence required to implement educational reform that is effective in promoting social justice and equal opportunity.

Findings were also presented on teacher English language proficiency, teaching knowledge and teaching practice. In each case, performance overall was given, followed by comparisons based on key variables such as urban, rural and remote location, and primary/secondary school. The vast majority of teachers achieved CEFR Levels B1 and above.

Although many teachers achieved high levels of proficiency, a significant number were found to be below minimum required levels. Speaking was again the weakest skill for most teachers. Importantly, the test performance findings were integrated with the findings on attitudinal and background variables which play a role in teacher attainment and enabled the identification of achievement gaps related to school location and school stage. Achievement gaps emerged indicating that teachers from urban schools performed consistently better in all four skills, as compared to their colleagues in rural and remote locations. Teachers in secondary schools have higher levels of English than their primary school colleagues. In terms of teaching practice, some examples of excellence were observed throughout the participating schools. At the same time, classroom observers noted that although teachers were uniformly strong in establishing a good rapport with students, they were generally much weaker in planning, managing and monitoring learning. In some cases, their limited language ability and/or limited skill in using graded language suitable for their students was negatively impacting their effectiveness. The following comments from an observer and a Head of Panel illustrate this:

'The teacher is held back by her language skills. Her poor grammar and vocabulary and control of prosodic features lead to inaccurate examples and modelling.' (Observer)

'A lot of teachers have not mastered the language, so they are not able to deliver lessons confidently and accurately.' (Urban secondary school, Head of Panel)

The integration of test data, attitudinal and contextual data, including open-ended comments from the teacher questionnaire, interviews with Heads of Panel/Head Teachers and Ministry of Education officials, and extended feedback from the classroom observers provided an in-depth picture of the current educational attainment in English proficiency and factors which impact on it. Specifically, the findings illustrated how a range of factors such as school culture, teaching resources and teacher training and professional development can shape the learning environment, which in turn can influence instructional quality and learning outcomes. The findings indicated that although teachers like teaching English they are overwhelmed by administration. Teachers stated that they

want more professional development; for example, they need differentiation strategies in order to better support learners in mixed-ability classes. The questionnaire responses also suggested that parents need support to participate more fully in their child's education. Furthermore, improved internet access and more ICT resources were found to be required.

A review of key policy-setting documents which shape the learning, teaching and assessment in classrooms was also provided in the report, with a discussion of current curricula, learning materials and examinations. Finally, recommendations based on the mixed methods findings were provided, with suggestions for ways forward.

The Technical Report provided detailed information on the project, including sampling, project participants, instrument development, data analysis procedures and significance testing output.

The successful completion of the project was supported by the collaborative efforts of the Ministry and school teams working alongside a Cambridge English project team consisting of members with a broad range of expertise and experience in the fields of English language assessment, curricula development, teacher training and development, primary and secondary education, sampling, research methodology, data analysis, operational delivery and processing, and educational reform.

Recommendations

The comprehensive set of findings of the Cambridge Malaysia Baseline Project formed the basis of recommendations for further action (Cambridge English 2014). The three main strands of the project – students, teachers and curricula, assessments and learning materials – are inevitably linked in a common 'ecological system', where changes to one affect the others. It was important, therefore, for Cambridge English to provide recommendations which address the complex system of learning, teaching, assessment, materials and policy. Those recommendations related to all three strands of the project and included suggestions for benchmarking language learning to international standards, revising primary and secondary curricula, examinations and assessments.

The recommendations formed the basis for an integrated solution which targeted a wide range of aspects of language policy going beyond the Baseline findings, such as:

- language policy and strategy
- curriculum reform
- materials and resources
- assessment and certification
- teacher development
- programme implementation
- evaluation and impact analysis.

The proposed integrated solution was designed to create the best possible conditions for learning to occur and to assist the Ministry of Education in making the aspirations set out in the Education Blueprint a reality. This would, in turn, provide the young people of Malaysia with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs to enable them to become global citizens of the 21st century.

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The adoption of international certification in the French state school sector

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Introduction and background to the project

The value of international certification

For some years, the *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale* (French Ministry of Education) had been reflecting on the principle of international certification of foreign languages in state secondary schools. The Ministry appeared to see advantages in such an approach, notably that such certification would favour cross-border mobility by equipping students with a qualification of another country, would provide an external, impartial, expert assessment and would, in particular, enable the objective evaluation of oral and written production. There was perhaps a perception that language learning in French schools had relied too heavily on receptive skills, to the detriment especially of speaking, although this is quickly changing.

Positive evaluation

A long-standing French tradition in language assessment was what may be described as 'negative evaluation': for example, in a 'dictée' (dictation) students start with 20 points and one mark is subtracted for each error. This resulted in too much concentration on grammatical accuracy and not enough on communicative effectiveness. A child could go home with -5 as a reward for the day's English learning experience. This tradition is fast changing and the notion of subtraction is disappearing. Reinforcing the notion of positive evaluation in state schools was, however, another motivation for introducing international certification.

The Franco-German origins of the scheme

Following a political agreement between the former President of France, m. Jacques Chirac and the former Chancellor of Germany, Herr Gerhard Schroeder, an agreement was signed according to which German school children at the age of 16 would take a French test and French pupils would take a German one. These tests were voluntary and free to the student. The French *Centre International d'Études Pédagogiques* (CIEP), a member of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), was chosen to provide the French assessment and to train

German teachers to administer and mark it. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (German: Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) was chosen to produce the German test, with the *Goethe-Institut*, another ALTE partner, providing the training. Cambridge ESOL was invited to participate in training sessions and provide the principles of performance testing.

The Franco-German scheme proved very successful and led to an increasing interest in German as a foreign language in France, and in French as a foreign language in Germany.

Extending the scheme to other languages

Because of this success, in 2007 the Ministry decided to launch a call for tender to certifying bodies with a view to introducing similar tests in Spanish and English.

Cambridge ESOL and its partner in ALTE, the *Instituto Cervantes*, were chosen from the various organisations that submitted tenders to provide the certification in English and Spanish respectively. Both contracts were for a duration of three years, covering sessions in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

The students involved

The test was offered free of charge to first-year students of lycées (high schools) with European sections. Schools with these sections have more hours per week dedicated to the study of the language concerned and also teach other subjects in the language, typically History and Geography. The students tend therefore to be ahead of their fellows in other schools, especially in the oral/aural skills, because they are used to listening to the teacher talking in that language and to asking questions in the language too. First-year students were chosen because most of them are 16 years old, the last year of obligatory schooling, which is considered a good moment to measure and compare.

In 2008, the first year of the project, 18,500 students took the voluntary test. This represented 74% of those eligible. In 2009, this number increased to 23,000 (86%). In 2010, the number is expected to increase to over 27,000. The test has therefore proved popular among teachers, parents and pupils.

Development of the English test

The aim for such students is that they reach the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages of the Council of Europe, a framework which is now officially integrated into all levels of the French state and private education system. Any test used, therefore, would have to be demonstrably and effectively aligned to the CEFR and this was a *sine qua non* for the French Ministry.

Cambridge ESOL's Preliminary English Test (PET) would have been an obvious tool to use since it is well-established, well-recognised and closely aligned to the CEFR. However, the French Ministry wanted two features that PET (at the time) did not incorporate. Firstly, the Ministry wanted 'downward certification', allowing candidates who demonstrated A2-level performance to receive a certificate to that effect. Secondly, the Ministry desired what it called an 'élément culturel' (cultural element). This did not mean the testing of knowledge of British or other Anglophone life and culture as such but rather that input material (texts and images) should be predominantly set in such a context. As an example, it would be acceptable to have a reading text about Stonehenge but not about the Colosseum.

As a result, Cambridge ESOL created a new test, called the Cambridge English Certificate (CEC), incorporating these elements but with the same duration and format as PET (see Table 1).

As we can see from Table 1, the four main skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are recognised, and each of these is assessed in a test component of the same name. Each skill carries equal weight and the final mark a candidate receives is an aggregate of the four marks.

Table 1: Test format

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Timing</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Test focus</i>
Reading/ Writing	1 hour 30 minutes	Reading: Five parts including a variety of texts ranging from very short notices to longer continuous texts. Writing: Three parts in which candidates produce variations on simple sentences and write a short communicative message and a longer piece of continuous writing.	Assessment of candidates' ability to understand the meaning of written English at word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and whole text level. Assessment of candidates' ability to control and understand a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures and communicate specific information to the target reader.
Listening	30 minutes (approx.)	Four parts ranging from short exchanges to longer dialogues and monologues.	Assessment of candidates' ability to understand dialogues and monologues in both informal and neutral settings on a range of everyday topics.
Speaking	10–12 minutes per pair of candidates	Four parts. In Part 1, candidates interact with a marker; in Parts 2 and 4 they interact with another candidate. In Part 3, they have an extended individual long turn.	Assessment of candidates' ability to express themselves in order to carry out functions at B1 and A2 level; to ask and to understand questions and make appropriate responses; to talk freely on matters of personal interest.

Reading and listening are multi-dimensional skills involving the interaction of the reader/listener's mental processing capacities with their language and content knowledge. Further interaction takes place between the reader/listener and the external features of the text and task. Purpose and context for reading/listening shape these interactions and this is reflected in the CEC Reading and Listening components through the use of different text and task types which link to a relevant real-world context.

Writing ability is also regarded as a linguistic, cognitive, social and cultural phenomenon that takes place in a specific context and for a particular purpose. Like Reading and Listening, CEC Writing involves a series of interactions between the task and the writers, who are required to draw on different aspects of their knowledge and experience to produce a written performance for evaluation.

Like writing, speaking involves multiple competencies including vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, phonological control, knowledge of discourse, and pragmatic awareness, which are particularly distinct from their equivalents in the written language. Since speaking generally involves reciprocal oral interaction with others, it is assessed directly in the CEC, through a face-to-face encounter between candidates and markers. Each of the four skills tested in the CEC provides a unique contribution to a profile of overall communicative language ability that defines what a candidate can do at this level.

Marker training and monitoring

A further specificity of the project is that all test components are marked by French state school teachers (though teachers are not permitted to mark the work of their own students). Each Académie (regional education authority) nominates a number of its teachers or inspectors to attend one of a number of 3-day training sessions. During these sessions, participants are introduced both to the general testing approach of positive evaluation and to the specifics of marking the Cambridge English Certificate.

Prominence is given to the Writing and Speaking components. For the Writing component, training consists of exercises based on nearly 70 candidate scripts displaying every element that a marker may need to take into account and at all levels of performance, whereas for the Speaking component, it is based on a selection of video-recorded Speaking tests showing candidates at all levels of the CEC Speaking test scales. Following the training session, a large number of the participants train other colleagues using the same materials (i.e., a cascade). A research exercise was also carried out to compare the marks awarded by a random sample of newly trained examiners during the 2008 test session against marks awarded on the same scripts by experienced Cambridge ESOL examiners. This exercise confirmed that the training had been successful, and that the markers were marking to the expected standard.

Conclusion and future developments

As the current project has been deemed a success, the Ministry issued, in December 2009, a call for tender both for a continuation of Spanish and English tests at CEFR levels B1 and A2 and for the possible introduction, from 2013 onwards, of similar tests at C1 and B2. Of particular note is that the success of the CEC in recent years contributed to Cambridge ESOL's decision to introduce downward certification into its own Key English Test (KET) and PET tests. The principle fits well with the concept of positive evaluation. The KET and PET, however, remain 'culturally neutral' and make no attempt to frame tasks in an Anglophone context.

Colombia national bilingual project

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Introduction

The Colombian educational authorities value the mastery of a second language as an indispensable tool to succeed in today's world. The Government's educational policy regards learning foreign languages as a way of opening, internationalising and creating a positive foreign investment climate. The 'Plan Colombia Bilingüe' and the National Standards for English constitute outstanding efforts in this regard. Bilingualism is acknowledged as key for academic and labour mobility and for setting the basis for capacity building and competitiveness. While traditionally, Colombia's bilingual education has been the privilege of the higher social classes, the Government of Colombia has sought to change this situation by implementing an ambitious education and language policy. The issuance of the General Education Law (Law 115 of 1994) and the launching of a National Bilingual Program, provided the grounds for Colombia's aspiration for a bilingual education for all of the population. The following article contains a description of the collaboration between the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN – the Ministry of Education), the Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES – the national awarding body), Cambridge ESOL and British Council, Colombia. This was a 4-year project covering the following areas:

- initial benchmarking of student and teacher levels
- new test development and deployment
- transfer of knowledge
- developing local capabilities and quality assurance.

The project successfully delivered new English language examinations in Colombia; specifically for 11th graders at the end of the State secondary education (the State exam, 'Examen de Estado') and for last-year university students (ECAES).

Cambridge ESOL designed and produced the first version of the new English component of the Colombian State exams. Thereafter, the project has involved transfer of skills and localisation to improve the country's capacity to produce its own English tests through ICFES. As a result of important efforts from the Colombian educational authorities, currently hundreds of thousands of students in Colombia are taking these mandatory English tests annually. Training provided by Cambridge ESOL allowed

ICFES to form a team of new item writers who have already produced English test items used in the latest 2008 and 2009 versions of the State exams and ECAES. The success of this initiative has allowed Colombia to both raise its standards for English as a second language, and accurately measure progress attained against international standards.

Background

Up until 2000, the examination of foreign languages had been optional in state exams. However after that year, with less than 2% of the population opting for the language tests, ICFES implemented a mandatory language component for State exams. In general, schools did not have much experience in teaching and testing foreign languages, consequently, a 2-year adjustment period was granted. ICFES began publishing the general results of language exams in 2003. But after a couple of years, unsatisfactory results provoked a strong response from the Colombian educational authorities. With only 1% of the country's population estimated to perform in English as a second language at an adequate level, the educational authorities started promoting bilingualism as an important component of the broader educational reform project.

The broader educational reform context

Colombia has established four strategies to improve the quality of education:

1. Strengthening the education quality assurance system at all levels.
2. Providing professional development for teachers and school directors.
3. Implementing programs to develop competencies.
4. Fostering policy and programme evaluation (see World Bank 2004).

Around the same time, in 2006, the Colombian Government proposed long-term goals on educational policy in the document *Vision 2019 Educación*. This policy document called for the improvement of English language skills for the whole population as a means to improve the country's competitiveness in the global market.

Furthermore, Colombia has engaged its people in the development of a 10-year plan to address these and other issues critical to education, through its *Plan Nacional Decenal de Educación* or National Decennial Education Plan. To galvanise support for its reforms, the Ministry of Education has used the decennial plan as a means of engaging the public in setting the nation's education priorities for the 10-year periods of 1996–2005 and 2006–2016.¹

As a result of its educational policy, Colombia has been strengthening its quality assurance system by developing basic competency standards; monitoring, analysing and using evaluation data for student and teacher performance; fostering school quality through the use of self-evaluation, improvement plans and a certification process; and strengthening sub-national agencies to support schools' improvement efforts, especially schools that are low-achieving. Furthermore, Colombia has been working to increase the relevance of its education system from pre-primary to higher education and to increase access at the higher levels, so as to build the human capital required to increase general productivity and competitiveness.

1. The National Decennial Education Plan is a social pact around a democratic planning exercise, in which the general public determines the main features and guidelines of educational policy for the next decade. It consists of a set of proposals, actions, and goals expressing the will of the people regarding education in the country.

The National Bilingual Program

As a result of the need to improve foreign language teaching skills and student competencies, educational institutions started including English language courses in their syllabus. Bilingualism became one criterion for accreditation of higher education programmes, while the Ministry of Education made important efforts to examine last-year high-school students. In 2004, the Ministry of Education presented the National Bilingual Program 2004–2019, an ambitious and unprecedented language policy. The programme was very influential, not only amongst schools and universities, but also outside the formal education system, and completely changed the way the education community perceives foreign language teaching and learning in the country.

The programme consists of five targeted areas for implementation, which include:

1. Developing standards for English teaching and learning.
2. Continuously evaluating communicative competence in students, as well as in-service and pre-service teachers, within and outside the formal school system.
3. Providing professional development programmes for teachers in order to develop their pedagogical knowledge as well as communicative competence in English.
4. Supporting the use of new information and communication technologies for the teaching of English.
5. Consolidating bilingual and trilingual models in ethnic communities around the country.

Goals and objectives

The project's objectives of providing a range of English language assessment services included the definition of student performance levels linked to international benchmarks. While the main objective was to improve the level of English of students and teachers, it required that ICFES provided a good delivery infrastructure and improved English language assessment.

Colombia's educational authorities sought to evaluate and certify competencies by initiating periodic English language evaluations, to determine the level of competence of students and teachers. Such a certification process for in-service and pre-service teachers provided for accreditation of teachers' competence at the various levels of language and language-teaching skills. This certification was to be issued by fully accredited teaching institutions, and to be closely aligned with international standards. The main goal was to attain a minimum CEFR B2 level for all teachers which required outstanding teacher training efforts at basic and intermediate levels.

The ultimate goals behind adopting new international standards for foreign-language learning was targeted at achieving English language skills at CEFR level B1 for school leavers, level B2 for university graduates, and at least C1 for all English language teachers. These levels correspond to the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Initial objectives were programmed to be completed by 2010, aiming at full achievement (100% of the goal) by 2019. By then, the country's educational authorities expect to have achieved a level of at least B2 for 100% of the English teachers in the country and all last-year university students; and at least B1 for 100% of final year high-school students. The targeted improvement over time is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: English language competence development goals for Colombia

	2005	2010	2015	2019
Percentage of 11th grade students, state school sector in basic level	6.4%	30%	75%	100%
Percentage of public and private school last-year high-school students attaining level B1 of competence in ICFES State exam	8%	40%	70.40%	100%
Percentage of English teachers in basic and intermediate levels, up to level B2 of competence	6.8%	35% (50%)	75%	100%
Percentage of last-year university students attaining level B2 of competence (ECAES general)	28% at B1	70% at B1 30% at B2	100% at B1 70% at B2	100% at B2
Percentage of last-year English teacher trainees in basic and intermediate levels attaining level C1 of competence	58% at B2 0% at C1	75% at B2 25% at C1	100% at B2 50% at C1	100% at C1
Percentage of programmes accredited by English language institutes	0%	60%	75%	100%

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages

The levels for language skills defined for Colombia correspond to internationally accepted standards defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. The CEFR consists of a series of descriptions of abilities which can be applied to any language and can be used to set clear targets for achievements within language learning, and has been invaluable to the project. The new international standards of testing English skills in the Colombian State exam were based on the Cambridge ESOL Preliminary English Test, which stands at level B1 of the CEFR. Colombia's efforts to obtain training and support from Cambridge ESOL were aimed at improving Colombia's capacity to produce its own tests linked to the CEFR.

Language educational policy actions

ICFES has designed and implemented certain strategies to meet the objectives of a bilingual education policy. The main one was the adoption of standards in English language as the common basis for fixing goals, designing curricula and evaluating competences, as well as certifying a person's level of competence. English language standards adopted by the Ministry of Education, based on the CEFR, determined the competences that students are expected to develop, in order to attain a level of English that allows them to understand and be understood in that language.

After launching the National Bilingual Program, the Government issued legislation to regulate the new policy. With Decree 3870 of 28 October 2005, the Colombian Government formally adopted the CEFR for languages; regulated the organisation and functioning of foreign language programmes; provided for accreditation of language programmes in universities; and eliminated the certification requirement for programmes offered by international co-operation organisations.

The adoption of Cambridge ESOL exams was fundamental for policy advancement. Between 2005 and 2009, the National Bilingual Program made important progress with a large-scale collaboration between ICFES, Cambridge ESOL, British Council and the Colombian academic community. The partnership with Cambridge ESOL was aimed at developing an internationally benchmarked English language assessment in the State school-leaving exams and university ECAES exams in Colombia, and made up part of the Ministry's efforts to equip the population of Colombia with English skills for work and higher study. It consisted of a comprehensive programme designed by Cambridge ESOL, which involved benchmarking specific student populations to establish existing levels of language ability, subsequent design of new tests for two test populations, building local capacity by training a Colombian team to write tests in line with international standards, and collaborating on statistical analysis techniques and the development of a measurement scale in order to tie student performance to CEFR levels. This was a 4-phase project implemented in the following phases:

1. Benchmarking of student and teacher levels (Nov 05–Feb 06).
2. Test development and deployment (Mar 06–Dec 06).
3. Transfer of knowledge (May 07–Dec 09).
4. Localisation and quality assurance (Jan 08–Dec 09).

Phase 1: Benchmarking of student and teacher levels with Cambridge tests

In November 2005, the first pilot for the new language tests was carried out in various territorial entities around the country. To provide a benchmark by which to plot progress of the National Bilingual Program, a sample population of 3,759 students in 8th and 10th grades in public schools in 11 departments, and 3,422 teachers, was selected to take part in a benchmarking activity designed by Cambridge ESOL. This exercise showed that only 6.4% of the students in the year prior to leaving school were at B1 level in English, while only 10.5% of the teachers had the necessary level of English to teach at this standard. A second study tested pedagogical and content knowledge of 243 teachers by using the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) administered by Cambridge ESOL; while a third study tested 2,467 students in public schools and 1,293 in private schools, not including bilingual schools.

The TKT study showed satisfactory results regarding teachers' pedagogical knowledge. However, only 1.8% of the teachers were at an advanced level in English language ability, 32.8% at intermediate level, and 65.4% attained only a basic level.

Additionally, the First Certificate in English exam was applied to a sample of 300 final-year trainee English language teachers, fully sponsored by the Ministry of Education. This survey showed that over 50% of trainee English teachers were below B2 level.

In total, this illustrates that Colombia's ambitious policy for bilingualism has a lack of qualified English teachers, with an estimated 40,000 extra at the appropriate language level still needed. This is one of the largest challenges faced today by the country's educational system.

Phase 2: Strategic alliances for Cambridge ESOL test development and deployment

Cambridge ESOL presented new test designs for the English component of the State school-leaving exam and for the English test for final year university students. These designs were accepted by ICFES and MEN. The first of these tests was administered between July and September 2006. Cambridge ESOL also processed and delivered the results in this period. These tests contained items from Pre-A1 level up to B2 level in order to measure performance up to B2 on the CEFR.

Cambridge ESOL Colombia Test Structure

The new foreign language tests designed to replace the old elective tests focused on evaluating students' communicative competences. The exam relied on a distinction between different levels of competence, where the knowledge of grammatical rules and semantic aspects of the language are only meaningful when used in specific contexts.

In terms of overall general ability, the English exam developed by Cambridge ESOL and implemented by ICFES evaluates skills in the following areas:

- can understand straightforward instructions or public messages
- can understand dictionary-style definitions for common objects
- can understand routine information
- can follow routine interactions covering a wide range of functional language
- can understand factual articles in newspapers, books and letters
- can understand the general meaning of non-routine articles, including writer purpose, overall intention and writer opinion
- can appreciate cohesion in a written passage and select appropriate vocabulary from options.

The English language exams implemented in the annual tests for last-year high-school and university students, consist of 45 multiple-choice items (the previous language exams used to have 24 items). The test has been developed to assess across several levels of proficiency (from Pre-A1 to 'B1 or Above' on the CEFR). All 45 items are distributed amongst seven parts or sections of increasing difficulty. The basic and independent user levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages define the assessment levels.

A simultaneous alliance between ICFES and British Council worked to promote the basic standards for English competences. As a result in 2006, the Government introduced the *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés*, a set of basic standards that English teachers should follow to guarantee the levels of proficiency the CEFR presents for Europe. The Minister of Education, Cecilia Maria Velez White, in an open letter introducing the standards (2006) made the following statement:

'The National Government has the fundamental commitment to create the conditions for Colombians to develop communicative competences in another language. Having a good proficiency level in English facilitates the access to job and education opportunities that help ensure quality of life. To be competent in another language is essential in a globalized world, which demands better communication, to open frontiers, to understand other contexts, to make knowledge your own and make it circulate,

to understand and make yourself understood, to enrich your being and play a decisive role in the development of the country. Being bilingual broadens the opportunities to be more competent and competitive.'

Phase 3: Local capacity-building

The new English language tests that were developed under the ICFES–Cambridge ESOL alliance made possible the application of national English exams to more than 800,000 students a year, in line with new international standards.

The first step in enabling test production to take place locally was for Cambridge ESOL and ICFES to recruit and train a team of locally based item writers to produce their own materials for the English components of the State exam and ECAES test. The British Council played an important role by facilitating and mediating this process, which commenced with the appointment of two Team Leaders, responsible for training and managing teams of locally based item writers, as well as other duties including the production of item writer guidelines.

Having agreed upon a detailed schedule for local capacity building covering a period of two years, the first activity in May 2007 was for the Team Leaders to attend an intensive 5-day training course specifically designed by Cambridge ESOL and held at its offices. The training was delivered by staff from Assessment and Operations, Research and Validation, and one of its leading external consultants. The purpose of the training was to provide the Team Leaders with all the necessary knowledge and skills they would require to perform their role, and covered the following aspects: familiarisation with the levels of the newly designed Examen de Estado (State exam) and ECAES tests and how they are related to the CEFR; a detailed consideration of the test parts and issues involved in producing successful test materials; the aims of editing and pretest review meetings; and how to effectively train and support item writers.

Immediately after returning to Colombia, the Team Leaders drafted a set of item writer guidelines for the Examen de Estado and ECAES tests detailing the test specifications and providing advice on producing the test items. Once the guidelines had been drafted with support from Cambridge ESOL, the Team Leaders went on to devise a training session for the newly recruited team of 15 item writers (eight from Bogotá and seven from other cities). The content of the session largely mirrored the content of the Team Leader training, except there was less focus on the Team Leader's role. The training was delivered at the British Council in Bogotá, and attended by the Cambridge ESOL consultant who had previously trained the Team Leaders. The alliance with Cambridge ESOL was a key factor in enabling test production to take place locally. Furthermore, to support these efforts, British Council, the Ministry of Education, ICFES, Cambridge ESOL and other educational authorities were involved in devising teacher training programmes for in-service teachers, to strengthen the provision of English language teaching for students.

Phase 4: Localisation and quality assurance

This stage focused on quality assurance, with the aim of ensuring that ICFES and the new Colombian item writing team were supported by Cambridge ESOL so that the locally produced tests continued to measure candidates' English language ability according to the new Colombian Standards and the CEFR.

Cambridge ESOL supported ICFES in achieving this aim by enabling them to calibrate tasks and by providing anchor items for inclusion in pretests and live tests. The development of a successful pretesting system was crucial to ensure that test items were at the right level for the live tests, and this was another area in which Cambridge ESOL gave significant support and advice to ICFES, besides providing feedback and editing comments on locally produced test materials via videoconference, teleconference and email. In addition to this, analysis of live results was undertaken by Cambridge ESOL Research and Validation Group to help ICFES with grading and to help refine the mapping of test items to the CEFR.

Via this means and by developing a network of item writers, ICFES has continued to build up its bank of test materials and was able to anchor test items to previous tests, and this was seen as the turning point for the Ministry of Education in guaranteeing the country's own capacity to implement locally produced English language tests. The first tests produced locally were piloted in November 2007. Currently the State exam is a pre-requisite for the admission of 11th grade students to enter into higher education.

Test anchoring and comparison

Anchor items are a set of common items that a certain test shares with another in order to enable comparison of test results on a common scale of measurement. Anchor items are also used in the creation and expansion of an item bank; the known properties of anchor items inform the analysis of new items and enable their calibration to a common scale. Both of these types of anchoring have been employed to ensure that the ICFES tests are aligned to an international standard – in this case the CEFR – and to build a psychometrically sound item bank.

Cambridge ESOL provided ICFES with a set of anchor tasks which had been calibrated to the CEFR. These anchor tasks were incorporated in pretesting and live administrations of the new ICFES tests and were used (i) to calibrate new ICFES test items during pretesting and thus build an item bank, and (ii) to analyse results from the live tests in order to provide grading information based on the CEFR levels.

In 2009, ICFES decided to analyse together the results of its 2007, 2008 and 2009 English tests. In order to achieve this, ICFES, with the support of Cambridge ESOL, identified suitable anchoring items among the tests that linked the 2007–2009 tests to the English Benchmarking Test administered in 2005. Working together Cambridge ESOL and ICFES also established a set of guidelines for the selection of anchor items and/or tasks for future ICFES tests that will ensure the successful linking of new test versions to the existing ones.

Findings from the new ICFES tests administered from 2007 to 2009

Figures 1 and 2 display CEFR performance in ECAES and Examen de Estado examinations from 2007 to 2008. In the ECAES exam, the percentage of candidates at A1 level is higher than at pre-A1 level in ECAES 2008–1 in comparison to the ECAES 2007–1 or 2007–2. The same is true at B1 and B2 or

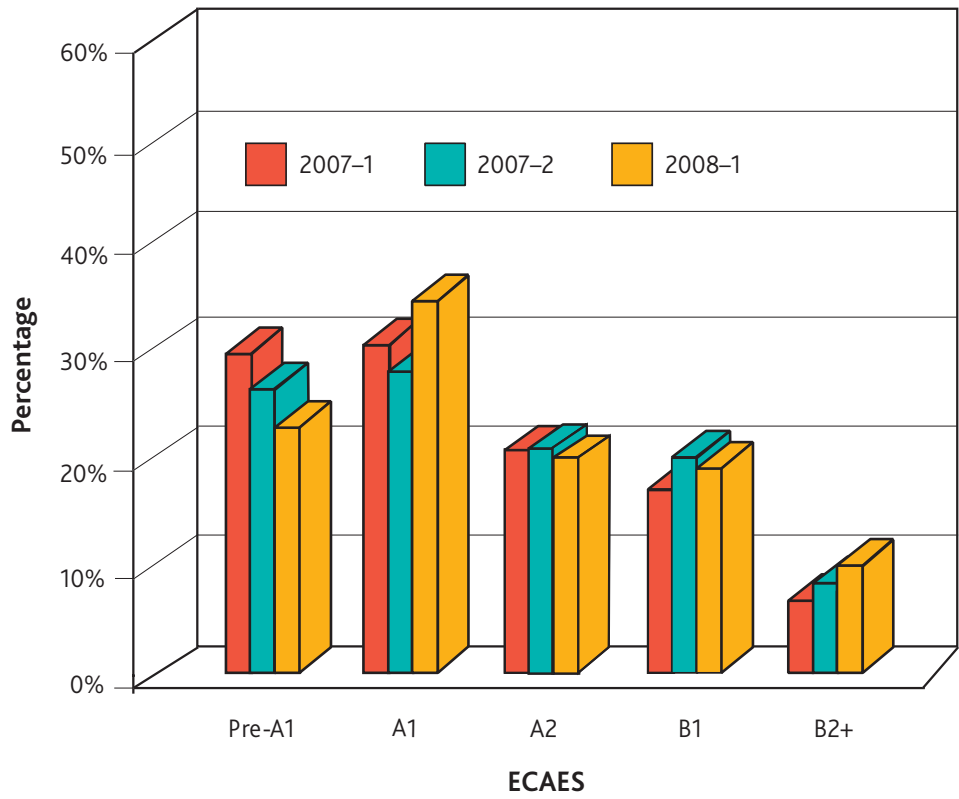


Figure 1: English test result comparisons between ECAES 2007 and 2008

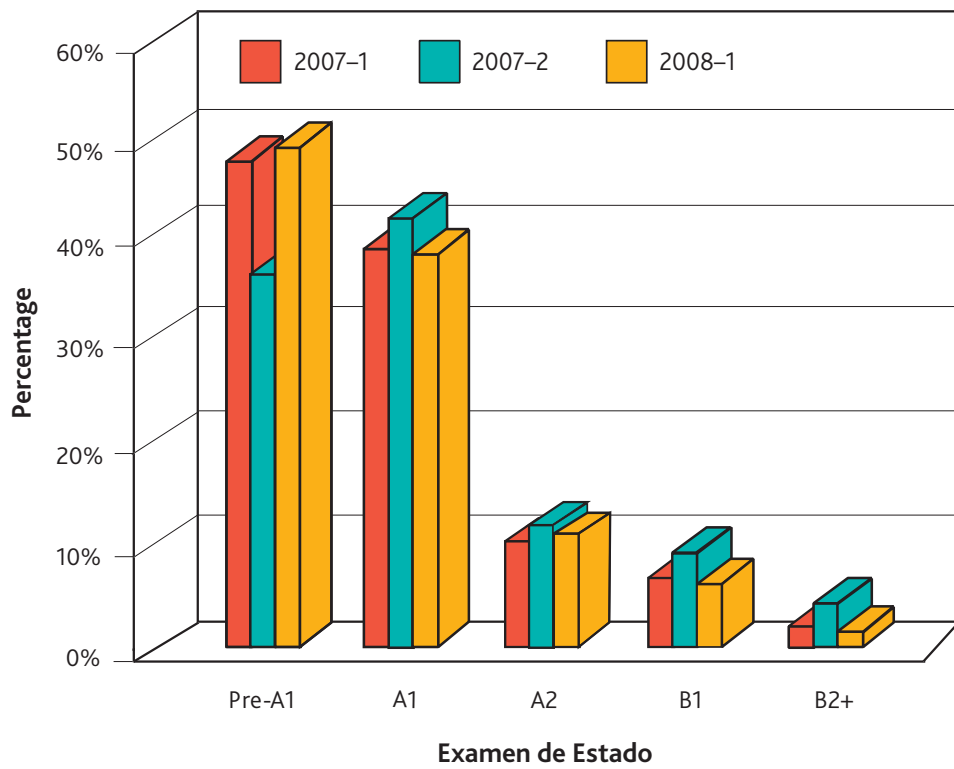


Figure 2: English test result comparisons between State exams 2007 and 2008

above CEFR levels – on average the percentage of candidates falling at these two levels increases in the later administrations of the test (with the exception of 2007–2 and 2008–1 at B1). These first results indicate a tentative improvement of proficiency for the ECAES cohort in the lower (pre-A1, A1) and higher (B1, B2 or above) CEFR spectrum of the exam. The Examen de Estado results present a steady picture across all three administrations of the exam in 2007 and 2008. It should be noted here that these results are preliminary and more longitudinal data is needed in order to better monitor progress.

Measuring teachers' English skills

Throughout the 4-phase project, over 13,000 state English teachers were tested and 6,500 teachers at different levels participated in development programmes. The same English test used for ECAES was implemented for measuring teachers' language ability. Four different forms of the test for teachers were produced based on the ECAES test for 2008 (EK2008–1 and EK2008–2). The following are the results obtained for each of the forms applied:

Table 2: Teacher language level baseline by form applied

Level	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4
Pre-A	5.4	4.8	6.7	2.8
A1	6.0	9.5	8.3	9.5
A2	16.6	15.1	11.3	15.1
B1	46.3	43.0	47.5	46.7
B1+	25.7	27.6	26.2	25.9

Table 3: Overall Teacher Language Level Baseline

Level	Number of teachers	%
A1	3,288	24%
A2	3,911	30%
B1	4,069	31%
B2+	1,966	15%
Total	13,234	100%

Conclusion

The first pilot tests of English as foreign language in Colombia, aligned to the CEFR, were taken in November 2005 and February 2006 involving more than 5,000 students. Cambridge ESOL conducted the analysis of performance and the results have been used by MEN and ICFES to inform on standards, to benchmark the performance of foreign language education against international

standards and to adapt policy so as to progress towards the achievement of those standards. In 2007, new national English examinations were introduced in Colombia in line with the new CEFR standard. Cambridge ESOL designed the English component of the Colombian state sector exams and developed the early test versions. These are now produced locally following capacity-building in Colombia. Today, Colombia has its own capacity and know-how with a team of Colombian item writers to build its own tests, under the Cambridge ESOL format, totally linked to the CEFR standards. These tests are delivered to approaching a million students annually.

This case study illustrates a highly successful collaboration with mutual benefits for ICFES and Cambridge ESOL. Both organisations view the 4-year project as a major learning and development opportunity that has spanned a wide area of activity, enabling ICFES to produce tests with results linked to the CEFR, and Cambridge ESOL to further develop expertise that can be utilised for other state projects into the future.

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An investigation into the effect of intensive language provision and external assessment in primary education in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Context

Education has always had a central role in Vietnamese culture and society. It is seen as the avenue of advancement and families routinely sacrifice much to ensure their children have the required education. The Vietnamese government has for some time given priority to education in terms of its budget. Currently, education occupies approximately 20% of all state budget expenditures and accounts for 5.5% of GDP (Department of Finance and Planning, Ministry of Education and Training 2008 as cited in Runckel 2008).

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam has a long-standing strategic objective to raise English language learning standards by 2020 so that students are better prepared for the workplace, for studying abroad and for becoming global citizens. The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) is used to indicate target levels set for the primary stage (CEFR A1 level), junior high school (A2), senior high school (B1), university students with non-English majors (B2) and university students with English majors (C1).

This paper focuses on the implementation of the Ministry's strategic objective by the Department of Education and Training (DOET) in Ho Chi Minh City (HCM) and the intended/unintended effects of the implemented interventions. HCM was selected for the study given that it is the largest city in Vietnam in terms of size and population and the fact that HCM DOET interventions in the learning and teaching of English to young learners are considered to be a pioneering initiative within the Vietnamese context. The Intensive English Programme (IEP), one of HCM DOET's initiatives, started in 1998–99 with one school but by 2011–12, a total of 194 schools out of 495 state-funded primary schools had joined IEP. The other initiative was the introduction of a standardised external assessment in 2010–11.

HCM DOET intervention

The Intensive English Programme

In 1998–99, the DOET in HCM initiated the provision of an Intensive English Programme for primary students in state-funded schools whereby students are given additional English lessons. State schools typically operate on a half-day basis for students due to high demand, insufficient classroom capacity and high class density. English lessons, like other lessons, are taught in two lessons per week (35 minutes/lesson). However, IEP schools offer a whole-day programme to students which allows for an additional eight English lessons per week.

HCM DOET's drive for additional classes did not only stem from the desire to meet MOET's strategic objective but also out of a sense of social responsibility. Until the introduction of IEP, only students from financially able families had the opportunity of increasing their English proficiency through attending private language institutes. With the IEP initiative, it is hoped that all students have the chance to increase their English proficiency at affordable fees without the need to go to private institutes or tutors where fees are exorbitant for families with average incomes. (The GDP per capita per annum is estimated at \$3,400 (CIA – The World Factbook 2011)). Students can opt in or out of IEP. If students opt out, they are offered another less intensive programme, referred to as a selective programme (four additional lessons of English per week) or they can choose the standard programme, which consists of two English lessons per week.

IEP is not mandatory for HCM schools. However, schools who wish to offer or continue offering IEP must adhere to guidelines set by HCM DOET in terms of physical requirements such as classroom size (maximum 35 students per class), layout and suitable chairs as well as resources such as teaching materials, aids and realia. Where needed, HCM DOET provides support in terms of processes and procedures, teacher training courses, support materials such as book lists for reading, establishing reading circles, provision of lesson plans, and as of 2010 aligning the curriculum to *Cambridge English: Young Learners (YLE)* exams and designing textbooks to complement these exams. According to Mr Le Ngoc Diep, the Primary Education Division Manager in HCM DOET and one of the initiators of IEP:

[the] IEP curriculum developed organically; support materials were given to schools, criteria for joining IEP were formulated and standardised. The initial apprehension of introducing a foreign language at an early age and its potential negative effect started to diffuse within the first year of IEP after close inspection of results, weekly meetings among decision makers, regular school visits and classroom observations

(personal communication, March 2012).

IEP schools are committed to further develop their teaching staff and to seek support from the local community. For example, some schools arrange a flexible schedule for their teachers so that they are able to enhance their language proficiency via preparing for a B2-level test, i.e. *Cambridge English: First (FCE)*. Since 2010, teachers wishing to teach in IEP must pass a three-step recruitment process:

1. candidates are short-listed based on professional qualifications (e.g. have obtained at least a BA in English Language and Literature or in English language teaching and methodology),
2. candidates take a written test and make a voice recording (to check pronunciation) and
3. candidates are interviewed by a native speaker.

Cambridge English: Young Learners

As of 2010–11, HCM DOET introduced an external assessment as mandatory to IEP. There are two main reasons for this. One reason is the high demand on IEP which led HCM DOET to need a fair and reliable measure for student selection and continuation purposes in IEP. The other reason is for accountability and quality assurance purposes. External assessment is used as a measure to evaluate the effectiveness of IEP in terms of students' learning progression, to benchmark the level of IEP students to an international standard and to monitor their progress over the years. Hence, they chose *Cambridge English: Young Learners* examinations (see Cambridge ESOL 2011). The tests have three proficiency levels beginning with *Cambridge English: Starters* set at a Pre-A1 level, followed by *Cambridge English: Movers* set at CEFR A1 level and ending with *Cambridge English: Flyers* set at CEFR A2 level. Each test level comprises three papers covering the four language skills. The *Cambridge English: Starters* Listening paper has four parts containing 20 questions and candidates are given 20 minutes, the Speaking paper has five parts taking between 3 and 5 minutes to complete, the Reading and Writing paper has five parts with a total of 25 questions and lasting 20 minutes. They are designed to make learning fun and children are encouraged by working towards certificates and earning shields that record their progress. A maximum of five shields is awarded per test paper. *Cambridge English: Young Learners* was selected not only because of its international recognition and use in similar contexts but more importantly because it introduces children to everyday written and spoken English in a fun and motivating way. According to a key decision maker in HCM DOET, Mr Nguyen Hoai Chuong, DOET Vice Director, *Cambridge English: Young Learners* 'is child friendly, takes into account child psychology, is very motivational and covers all skills ... if the exam is child friendly and encourages learning in a fun way, then the teaching will change accordingly, so it is a win-win situation' (personal communication, March 2012).

HCM DOET decided that students finishing Grade 2 (age 7–8) would need to take *Cambridge English: Starters*, Grade 4 (age 9–10) to take *Cambridge English: Movers* and Grade 5 (age 10–11) to take *Cambridge English: Flyers*. This decision was based on local expert judgement rather than local empirical evidence. It was also based on a belief that the earlier a second language (L2) is introduced in school learning years the better the grasp of it. In 2010–11, DOET decided that the minimum number of shields required by students to continue in IEP would be 10. However, in 2011–12, post discussion with Cambridge ESOL during the conduct of this study and given the motivational nature of *Cambridge English: Young Learners*, DOET decided to use the number of shields received not for gate keeping purposes but to place students into levels within Grade 3 for homogeneity purposes (DOET document 1355/ GDĐT-TH dated 28 May 2012).

Schools which offer *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams have organised awareness-raising events for parents to explain the rationale behind introducing external assessment and to familiarise parents with the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* curriculum, learning objectives and outcomes. Some schools also have offered free test preparation courses for the children. Other schools have invited qualified native speakers of English to teach once a week.

Study purpose

Interventions are usually based on the expectation that 'if' a set of activities is undertaken, 'then' some set of changes or improvements in the situation those activities address will occur.

Thus, two years into the introduction of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams, Cambridge ESOL initiated a research study as part of its impact studies programme to look at the effect of this decision. This is in line with Cambridge ESOL's concept of impact by design (Saville 2010) which is built on the organisation's four maxims for achieving and monitoring impact, namely, PLAN, SUPPORT, COMMUNICATE and MONITOR AND EVALUATE (Milanovic and Saville 1996).

The findings of this study are intended to inform HCM DOET of notable changes in learner motivation and progression as well as notable changes in teaching practices as a result of the intervention. The study also would provide DOET with an insight into stakeholders' (see Figure 1) perceptions of IEP and of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams. Such information would allow DOET to record success stories, lessons learned and take subsequent actions whether it is sustaining conditions for success or working on areas which warrant improvements.

The study was conducted over a period of three months (March–June 2012) in collaboration with HCM DOET. It focused on Grade 2 given the interest of HCM DOET in tracking the performance of these young learners through their primary school years. As such, this study is seen as Phase I of the investigation of the effectiveness of IEP and the use of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams with the intention to start Phase II in 2013–14 when Grade 2 students are in Grade 4 and expected to take *Cambridge English: Movers*.

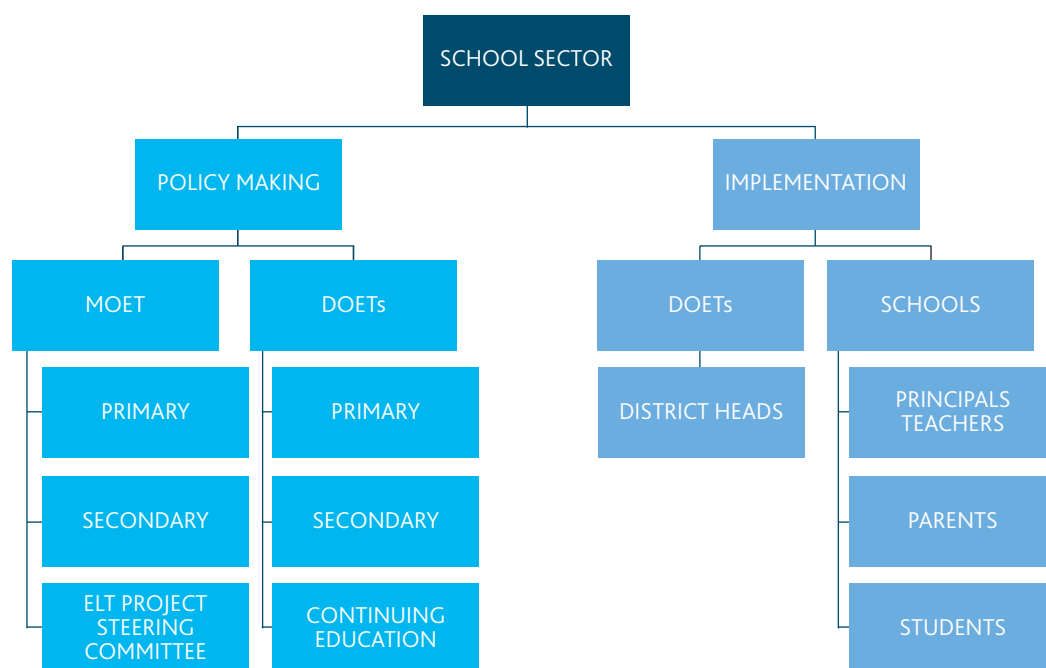


Figure 1: IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners* participant and stakeholder community¹

1. Figure supplied by Ms Uyen Pham, Cambridge ESOL Business Development Manager in Vietnam.

Study design and methods²

Key question

The study addressed one broad question:

- What is the intended/unintended effect of HCM DOET's strategic decision to increase English language provision through IEP and to ensure the quality of the provision through the use of external assessment, i.e. *Cambridge English: Young Learners*?

Research sample

HCM has 24 geographical districts subdivided as follows: 11 central districts, five on the outskirts of the city, and eight districts referred to as semi-outskirts (see Appendix 1 for typical characteristics of district areas). Within the 24 districts, there are 194 schools with 446 classes currently enrolled in IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners*. All primary schools in HCM are mixed with a gender balance. Sample selection went through two stages. The first stage was a stratified random sample to select schools according to geographical location and a minimum of two years' involvement in IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners*. The second stage was random sample of classes within a single school.

The selected sample comprised 24 schools (13 in a central district area, six in a semi-outskirts area, and five in an outskirts area) for qualitative data collection. Focus groups were conducted with 5–10 Grade 2 students in each school. Students' age ranged between 7 and 8 years old. For quantitative data collection, the selected sample consisted of 59 schools where survey data was gathered from 113 teachers and 2,683 parents of Grade 2 students. The profiles of the teacher and parent respondents are as follows:

Teacher profile:

- **LT experience:** The highest percentage of respondents (52%) had between four and 10 years of experience followed by 42% who are considered novice teachers (1–3 years of experience) while the remaining 6% had 11 or more years' experience.
- **Academic qualifications:** 81% are university graduates (4-year degree) and 19% have a college diploma/degree (3-year degree). Both degrees offer pedagogic training if students are trained to become English teachers.
- **Teaching qualifications:** 52% of the respondents had a local qualification while the remaining 48% had an internationally recognised teaching qualification, namely, *TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test)*, *CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)* or *Delta (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)*. The latter is an interesting fact. It reflects the importance teachers and their employment institutions put on international certification.
- **Geographical location of teacher schools:** 52% of the teachers work in schools located in a central district area, 35% in a semi-outskirts area and 13% in an outskirts area. Although this distribution is a result of the first stage of sampling, it is not surprising to find more schools in central areas than in rural areas.

2. In conducting this study, ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2004) were followed.

- **Academic qualifications:** The majority of parent respondents (88%) are educated with 43% of them holding a university degree and 4% holding a postgraduate degree. This is quite interesting as Ermisch and Pronzato (2010) among other researchers have shown that parental education generates a positive correlation with children's educational attainments.
- **Socio-economic status:** This was a self-assessed category. Most parents (67%) stated that they are in the middle socio-economic stratum with 21% in the low/low-medium strata and 12% in the high/medium-high strata. This is an important piece of information given that IEP is intended for families who are less financially able. So it is interesting to note that according to the self-assessment, it is the more financially able families who are taking advantage of IEP.
- **relationship to child:** 71% of those who completed the survey were mothers, 27% were fathers and 2% were the grandparents. Although the majority of respondents are mothers, it is interesting to note that fathers and grandparents have also responded, which shows their involvement in the child's education.
- **Geographical location of parent schools:** 63% of the parents have children in a central district area, 23% in a semi-outskirts area and 14% in an outskirts area.

We will return to teacher and parent profiles when discussing the results of this study.

Research design

Quantitative and qualitative data were simultaneously collected in a mixed method research design (MMRD). The analysis of each data strand was carried out independent of the other, but when interpreting the results information was drawn from both strands. This approach enabled us to build a rich picture and the triangulation of information derived from multiple data sources enhanced our confidence in the findings (see Greene, Caracelli and Graham 1989 for a discussion on reasons for mixing methods). This type of MMRD is referred to by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) as a 'convergent parallel design' (see Figure 2 for an MMRD procedural diagram).

Instruments used in this study were selected from Cambridge ESOL's 'impact toolkit' (see Saville's article in this issue) and adapted for the Vietnamese context where necessary using expert judgement reviews prior to implementation in field work. In addition, minor amendments were made on the first day of field implementation to ensure reliable data collection and entry. Table 1 presents an overview of the key investigative points and demonstrates how triangulation of data sources was achieved through a variety of data types.

Qualitative data collection instruments

Qualitative data collection instruments comprised interviews with policy makers, district heads, principals (or other school leaders) and focus groups with students. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in both English and Vietnamese and were audio recorded (with participants' consent) as an aide memoire in addition to live note taking. The interviewer/ moderator was supported by a local assistant throughout the face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions.

One-to-one interviews with focal persons

Focal persons are defined here as policy makers at the national level (i.e. MOET), and at the regional level (i.e. HCM DOET); as decision makers at the district level (i.e. district vice heads in HCM) and implementers at the school level (school principal, vice principal or head of English). The interviews served as a basis for gathering contextual information, carrying out situational analysis, and

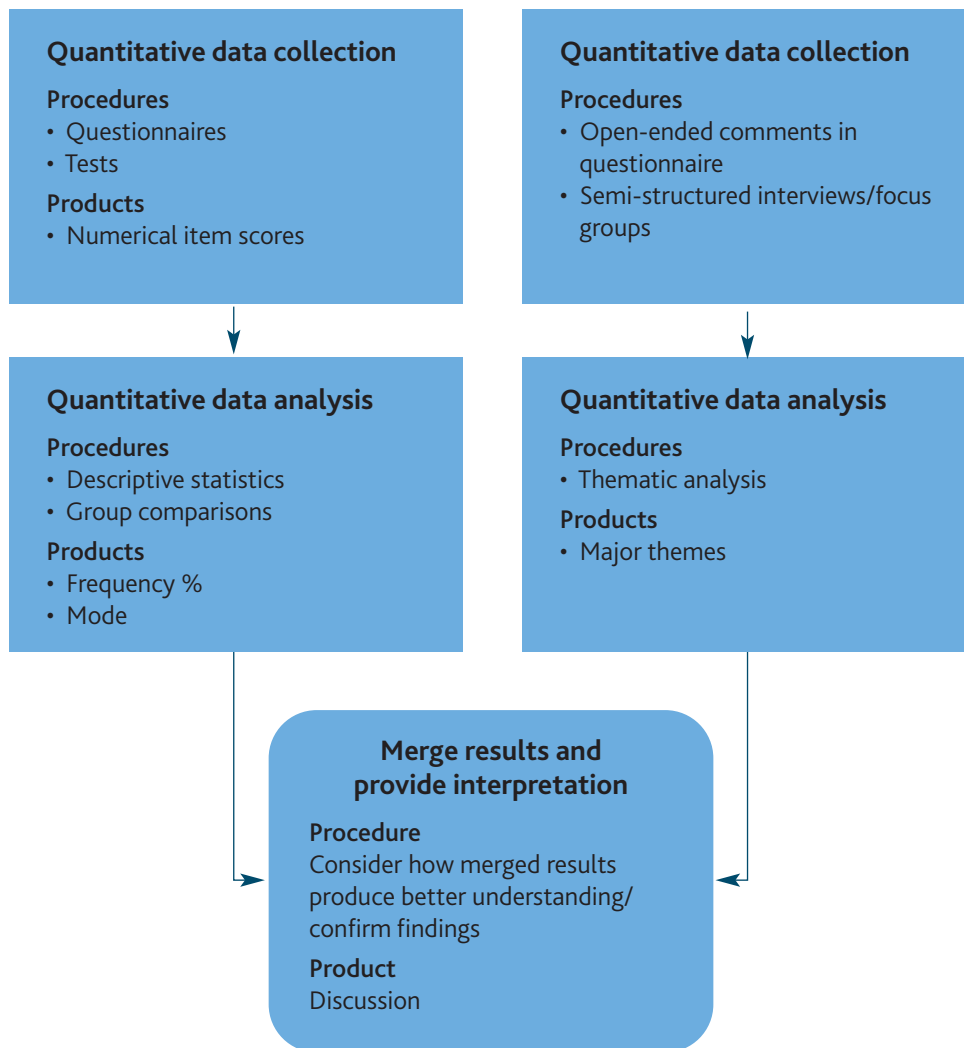


Figure 2: Convergent parallel design procedural diagram Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark (2011:118)

Table 1: Overview of key investigative points and data type/sources

<i>Key investigative points</i>	<i>Data type</i>	<i>Data source</i>
1. Attitude to assessment, English learning, and teaching	Quantitative Qualitative	1. Questionnaire to parents and teachers 2. Focus groups with young learners 3. Semi-structured interviews with focal persons
2. Learner motivation Qualitative	Quantitative	1. Questionnaire to parents and teachers 2. Focus groups with young learners 3. Semi-structured interviews with focal persons
3. Learner progression	Quantitative Qualitative	1. Questionnaire to parents and teachers 2. Focus groups with young learners 3. Test score data 4. Semi-structured interviews with focal persons
4. Changes in teaching practice	Quantitative Qualitative	1. Questionnaire to parents and teachers 2. Focus groups with young learners 3. Semi-structured interviews with focal persons
5. Changes in decision making	Qualitative	1. Semi-structured interviews with focal persons

investigating perceived potential effects. Some of the data gathered fed into the 'Context' section of this article while the remaining information is reported on in the 'Results and discussion' section.

Student focus group

The focus group was designed to take into account the young age and cognitive development of the participating students (see Banks 2001, Capello 2005, Morrow and Richards 1996). The focus group was conducted in a way that provided a detailed picture of learner motivation and language progression. Throughout the focus group, the facilitator maintained patience, enthusiasm, understanding and organisation. She was able to build rapport with the children. Children were encouraged to speak freely and spontaneously on five identified topics: (a) why they have joined IEP, (b) reasons behind their desire to learn English, (c) incidences of using English in the classroom, (d) their views on *Cambridge English: Starters*, and (e) whether they feel their English has improved and why.

Quantitative data collection instruments

Surveys and test score data were used in the quantitative analyses. The surveys were administered to teachers and parents. They were positively worded, provided a 4-point Likert scale for each statement and finished with an open-ended commentary section. The parents' survey was translated into Vietnamese to ensure reliable data collection.

Teacher survey and parent survey

The teacher survey sought their views on tests in general and on *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams in particular; their perceptions of the DOET intervention; and their expectations of learner progression as a result of the intervention. The survey also aimed at gaining an insight into IEP classroom practices. The survey contained specific statements about commonly used teaching practices described in ELT literature (Assessment Reform Group 2000, Brown 1993, Nunan 1999). Similar views were also sought from parents who have enrolled their children in IEP. Parents were asked to express their opinion on the influence of IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams on their child's motivation to learn English and their language learning progression.

Test score data

Cambridge English: Starters test results in consecutive academic years 2010 and 2011 were investigated to see whether standards of English have improved over time. To obtain comparative information, *Cambridge English: Starters* test data from other contexts within Vietnam and from the rest of the world was also examined.

Results and discussion

The results have been summarised below according to the investigation points identified in Table 1. Overall the survey results are positive with nearly all statements having a mode of 3. Where the percentage of disagreement was 20% or more, in-depth analysis was performed to check the influence of variables in teacher and parent profiles as well as school district area.

Investigation point 1a: Attitudes towards assessment

This section addressed attitudes towards assessing young learners in general and the use of Cambridge English: Young Learners exams in particular.

Parents' perspective

Eighty-seven per cent of parents view the tests to be the most effective means of assessment, while 90% of them see continuous assessment as the most effective form of assessment. In addition, 88% responded that it is important for progress to be assessed using a variety of methods.

Despite the fact that 92.5% of the parents are happy that the school has introduced Cambridge English tests, 41% of the parents expressed concern that the tests will bring additional work and pressure to their children. A typical comment was: 'The English programme at school includes so many things: the intensive programme, Starters, Cambridge, ... that it sometimes leads parents to confusion as they lack information of the efficiency of study'. This concern can be partially explained by the fact that parents reported a lack of information from the schools about the introduction of the Cambridge English tests. Typical comments include: 'the school should provide more information about the Starters exam so that students can prepare for this exam as well as to achieve the best result. I am looking forward to hearing feedback from the teachers' and 'we have not received any information on English in schools'.

Teachers' perspective

In general, the teachers were positive about assessment. At least 96% of the teachers see tests as important and as a tool for them to understand students' level and ability. Only 18% of the teachers worry about their students taking exams at a young age.

When asked specifically about *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams, 95% of the teachers were pleased with their introduction into the school and found the topics interesting. At least 80% of the respondents indicated that their students like the exams and receiving a Cambridge ESOL certificate. One of the teachers from Tan Binh district (central) commented: 'I find Cambridge English test interesting. It makes me excited in my English teaching. The students like doing test so much, they are very confident when they speak English through colourful pictures'.

However, 27% of the respondents perceived the selected level of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* to be incompatible with the level of their students and 37% of the teachers stated that their students will not perform well on the tests. It is interesting to note that the higher levels of disagreement were by teachers from schools in central areas. Teachers' experience or qualifications did not influence their comments or viewpoints.

One teacher from a centrally located school commented that the 'Cambridge English test is rather difficult for Grade 2 students'.

Students' perspective

One of the questions in the focus group explored students' feelings about taking *Cambridge English: Starters*. The student responses are grouped under five core themes.

- **Affective:** 'I am not afraid of taking the test' (outskirts district), 'the test doesn't scare me because the teacher prepared me well' (semi-outskirts district), 'the test centre is so big. It is a lot bigger than my school. That scares me a lot' (central district).

- **Fun element:** 'The test is interesting, I can match, colour and write the words' (outskirts district), 'it is fun taking the test, we all like colouring, matching and moving the picture' (semi-outskirts district), 'Speaking is fun because it has lots of pictures' (central district).
- **Test practice:** 'I can learn by heart 34 over 36 questions for Starters Speaking' (outskirts district).
- **Test difficulty:** 'The test is as easy as a piece of cake', 'listening to spelling and write the name down is difficult but I can do it very well' (semi-outskirts district), 'the test has a lot of difficult words', 'I like the writing part just because I can think of the word by myself' (central district).
- **Oral examiner effect:** 'The oral examiners are kind, sweet and always smile', 'I like the speaking part ... when I say something right, she said very good' (semi-outskirts district).

Focal persons' perspective

Overall, the focal persons view the introduction of an internationally recognised external assessment as a quality assurance badge for the efforts made by the school and the teaching team. They realise that although it puts pressure on them, it increases motivation in teaching and learning English. They see *Cambridge English: Young Learners* as a fair assessment – as one principal said: 'nothing is fairer because it is international, independent and professional institution which gives the assessment and results reflect on what we have done on teaching and learning English'. Another principal said: 'it is a motivation for parents and students in IEP to have more focus on learning English. Also it sets the standard for the school to have plans to develop outstanding students and to support students who do not get average number of shields'.

Focal persons also commented on the different test parts in relation to students' ability level:

Writing: *'The writing part of the test seems reasonable – looking at the given words and rearranging them or copying the given word.'*

Speaking: *'One of my students has a problem with pronunciation. When taking the exam, he got a lot of encouragement from the oral examiners and that made him more confident in using English. His shields on Speaking is quite high – 4 out of 5.'*

Listening: *'Listening is the most difficult part of the test, especially listening to names and numbers.'*

Discussion

The above results show that the attitudes of key stakeholders (teachers, parents, students, policy makers, policy implementers) towards assessment in general and towards *Cambridge English: Young Learners* in particular are very positive. Two key issues were raised, though. The first one is about parents' view that they have not received adequate information about *Cambridge English: Starters* and the second one is about the suitability of *Cambridge English: Starters* for Grade 2 students, which was brought up by teachers.

Although parents complained about having insufficient information about the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams, a number of focal persons specifically mentioned meeting with parents to explain the exams to them. This suggests that information dissemination about the exams may not have been consistent across all IEP districts. It is therefore recommended that a better information dissemination plan is put in place. The plan should include comprehensive information about the content of *Cambridge English: Young Learners*, its motivational value, how it fits with the overall

teaching and learning strategy at a classroom level, at a school level and at a DOET level. Also it is important to clarify and quantify how much extra work, if any, is required on behalf of the teacher, student, and parent. It is hoped that with a better information dissemination plan and a better communication strategy, teachers' and parents' anxiety about the test would be addressed. It is also essential to ensure that all schools in IEP have consistently provided information to parents about new initiatives and interventions. This recommendation is in line with Cambridge ESOL's third maxim of impact, which is COMMUNICATE (see Saville's article in this issue).

With regard to the suitability of *Cambridge English: Starters* for students in Grade 2, the comparative test score data (see 'Investigation point 3: Learner language progression') should shed light on the teachers' concerns. Additionally, it would be worth considering a classroom observation exercise in order to have an external voice assessing level suitability.

Investigation point 1b: Attitude towards learning english

Parents' perspective

Research suggests that parental attitude towards education and learning has an effect on their child's level of attainment (see Bartram 2006, Gu and Saville's article in this issue). Therefore, we asked parents about the value of their children learning English and whether they are happy about the introduction of English in IEP schools from a young age. Even though one parent (a father with a postgraduate degree) stated that 'as children are only in Grade 2, they are not good at Vietnamese, so English should be considered as a foreign language and should not be paid too much attention with unnecessary pressure', the survey results showed that at least 92% of parents saw English as a means to better life opportunities whether it is for social, study or work purposes. In addition, 88% of the parents stated that 'it's important to me that my child learns English even if he/she finds it difficult'. Interestingly, however, despite the introduction of IEP, 77% of parents continue to enrol their children in English lessons outside school. The frequency of opting to do so increases as the parents' socio-economic status increases and as their level of education increases.

Teachers' perspective

All teachers reported that learning English is essential for students today. Although the majority of the teachers (94%) agreed that grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills have equal importance in terms of learning English, 30% of the

teachers disagreed on spending much of classroom time on grammar activities. Once again there was no conclusive evidence from the teachers' profile to say that it is the teachers' experience or qualification which is affecting their views. When asked to prioritise what they would like to see classroom time spent on, the result was as follows in order of priority: speaking, listening, reading and vocabulary, followed by writing and grammar.

Students' perspective

When asked why they have joined IEP and the reasons behind their desire towards learning English, the following are some of the typical responses students gave. Responses are grouped under four key themes.

- **Family support:** 'If my English is good, I can save my parent's money by winning scholarship to study abroad' (central district), 'my parents want me to', 'I study English well so I can teach my younger brother' (semi-outskirts).

- **Functional purpose:** 'If I don't know English, I could not communicate with people outside Vietnam' (central district), 'If I know English, I can show the foreigners how to get to the place they want' (semi-outskirts district). Students also mentioned for study purposes: 'When I grow up, I want to go to America to study', for travel: 'English is a popular language, when you travel or when you go on business you have to use English' and for work purposes: 'I can get a good job' (central, outskirts district), 'I want to be a singer and sing English songs' (semi-outskirts district).
- **Knowledge gaining:** 'Learning English helps me enrich my knowledge' (central district), 'in the English class, I can learn many new things such as Egypt, Spain' (semi-outskirts district), 'I want to get more knowledge' (outskirts district).
- **Fun element of learning:** 'Funny classroom ... games, songs, story', 'learning English at school isn't as fun as learning English at the Centre' (central district), 'in the English class, I have much fun ... draw picture, play games' (semi-outskirts district).

Discussion

In general, the responses given by the three key stakeholders demonstrate a very positive attitude towards learning English in a Vietnamese context. There are a couple of things to focus on from the results reported above. First of all, despite the introduction of IEP, 77% of the parents reported that they continue sending their child to English lessons outside school. Since one of the reasons of introducing IEP is social responsibility and a desire to alleviate the financial burden from parents, it is worth reflecting on why this is the case and attempting to address it. Is it because of the importance parents place on learning English irrespective of their socio-economic status or educational level? Is it because IEP is not as effective as it is perhaps thought of? Is it lack of awareness of what IEP goals and practices are? Is it peer or social pressure? These questions need to be investigated by HCM DOET.

Another point to focus on is the order of priority which teachers give to skill teaching and learning. Teachers prioritised speaking and listening over other skills. According to focal persons in the one-to-one interviews this shift of priority signifies the positive washback *Cambridge English: Starters* has on the classroom. A further point that is worth noting is the comments provided by the students in the focus groups. Despite their young age (7–8), the comments given are insightful and in some cases moving, which could be an indicator of students' realisation of the value of English. Some of the reasons given by the students could be used when raising parents' awareness to the value of IEP.

Teachers' decision on which skill they should focus on during classroom time and how this decision would affect students' performance on external assessment is something we return to when examining students' score data later in this paper.

Investigation point 2: Learner motivation

Parents' perspective

Parents were asked to voice their opinion with regard to changes they have perceived in their child's motivation to learn English as a result of being part of IEP and taking a Cambridge English examination. The results are discussed below.

The majority of parents (87%) believe that their children like the English classroom and getting an international certificate which shows their level of attainment. Most parents (87%) view the

introduction of IEP as having a positive effect on their child's motivation in terms of learning the language. However, on three occasions, 20% or more of the respondents indicated that their children dislike the test and get anxious about it and as a result are not motivated to learn English. On further analysis of these three statements, no affecting variable in the parents' profile was detected. Typical comments once again reflect the fact that some of the parents in this sample are unaware of the content of *Cambridge English: Starters*. A typical comment was: 'at the moment, parents are not clear about the structure of the exam paper'. Respondents also expected frequent test practice. A typical comment reflecting this is: 'students have not taken the trial test'.

Teachers' perspective

Teachers' comments focused mainly on the fact that good students like taking the test so their motivational factor is quite high, but 'average students feel nervous and worried about it', hence a lower motivation.

Students' perspective

The focus groups with students showed that their motivation to join the programme and to subsequently take the test stems from a desire to gain knowledge, to be able to study abroad and to gain a good job in the future. Motivation is also due to parental involvement in their learning and encouragement. One student from a central district area said: 'I want to take the test so I can go to Grade 3 IEP class, mom told me that'. Another student from a semi-outskirts area said: 'My mom said if I do well on the test, she will take me to ice cream shop'. Teachers' encouragement is also a factor. A student from the same district said: 'When we speak English right, the teacher rewards us by giving us candy, pencils'. Similar statements are echoed in semi-district areas: 'When I speak English well, the teacher gives me happy faces, candy and she says "very good".'

When focal persons were asked about how the introduction of IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams have affected students, most of the statements revolved around children enjoying the English classroom and being motivated to learn English. One principal of a semi-outskirts district area school said: 'The students seem not afraid of taking the test. They get more chances to speak English', while another from the same area said: 'The students have no motivation in learning English. They show no responsibility for English learning'. A principal of a central district area school voiced a typical opinion of other principals from the same area when saying: 'They speak more English in the class'.

Discussion

Survey and focus group data shows that student motivation to learn English is quite high. A recurring theme here is test anxiety which may affect motivation, which was voiced by parents and teachers and interestingly enough not by students. This could be due to the fact that parents lack adequate information about *Cambridge English: Starters* (a recurring comment) and are not very clear on DOET's intended use of the test results. Because of lack of information, parents may have speculated that results would be used for gate-keeping purposes. Another recurring theme is parental involvement and teacher encouragement playing a key role in learner motivation. When a school principal states that students are not motivated to learn English, we need to stop and ask why this is the case. Is it because of teaching practice? Is the level of English higher than they can cognitively deal with? Is it too much pressure from parents on passing the test? Seeking answers to these questions would inform HCM DOET's subsequent actions.

Investigation point 3: Learner language progression

Parents' perspective

Parents were asked for their views on their child's proficiency of English as a result of being part of IEP and taking a Cambridge English examination. Ninety per cent of the parents agreed that their child's English has improved due to these two interventions. However, 24% of the parents (mainly parents with a university degree) disagreed that their children know more about their level according to international standards. One possible reason could be that at the time of administering the survey, some children may not have received their certificate as indicated by the following comment: 'We want our children to get high results in examinations'. Another reason could be lack of awareness of the value of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams as illustrated by this comment: 'I hope that the quality is proportionate to the cost to satisfy parents'.

Teachers' perspective

Teachers were asked about improvements they have seen in students' English language ability as a result of being part of IEP and taking a Cambridge English examination. With respect to IEP, teachers' responses showed that improvements are clearly seen in terms of speaking and reading abilities followed by listening and vocabulary acquisition, and then by writing and grammatical knowledge. A similar picture emerged in teachers' responses as far as *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams are concerned. They reported improvements as follows: speaking and listening abilities followed by reading and vocabulary knowledge, then by writing and lastly by grammatical knowledge.

Students' perspective

During the focus groups, students were asked if they feel that their English is better now when compared to the beginning of the year. Here are some of the typical responses:

- **From central district schools:** 'Now I can read the story to my mom and dad', 'I can write the words in English correctly', 'I can watch cartoons in English and understand it', 'before I speak English a little, now I can speak English to my teachers and foreigners'
- **From semi-outskirts schools:** 'Now I can speak English to my parents and can read English on the street', 'my mom said now my English becomes better'
- **From outskirts district schools:** 'In Grade 1, I didn't know many new words now I know a lot of new words', 'now I can read more fluently'

Students' score data

Table 2 shows the average shields obtained by the number of HCM DOET student cohorts taking *Cambridge English: Starters* over a period of two years. Over the two-year period, students' performance has been consistently high with 11 as an average total number of shields. The reader will note that when schools started using *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams the highest shield average was that for Reading/Writing in 2010. In 2011, a slight shift occurred towards Speaking, which showed the highest average shield, indicating that perhaps in 2011, classroom practices may have put more emphasis on speaking. What is interesting to note is that Listening has consistently received the lowest shield average. All in all, the results are very encouraging given that in most cases the amount of exposure students have to English inside the school is only in the English classroom.

When looking at comparative test score data, we looked at candidates who took *Cambridge English: Starters* in other Vietnamese contexts and those who took it in the rest of the world. Before we examine the data, it is important to note the following two facts: (a) data from the other Vietnamese context comes from private language institutes where students receive English language training at a more intensive rate; and (b) the 'Rest of the World' (ROW) context is a mixture of mainly fee-paying schools and private language institutes and some state schools who use *Cambridge English: Starters*. In other words, the comparison is not a straightforward one.

Table 2: Average number of shields received by HCM DOET students for *Cambridge English: Starters*

	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Reading/Writing</i>	<i>Total</i>
2010	3.94	3.23	4.03	11.06
2011	3.89	3.43	3.85	11.17

Figure 3 provides average shields obtained per test paper in the three contexts. The figure shows that overall there are slight differences in the number of shields obtained per test paper. It shows that irrespective of the context, Listening receives the lowest number of shields and in terms of rank ordering the skills per context, HCM DOET has the same profile as the rest of the world with Speaking receiving the highest number of shields followed by Reading/ Writing followed by Listening. Both HCM DOET and the rest of Vietnam have a total average of 11 shields. This is an encouraging picture for HCM DOET given that those who take *Cambridge English: Starters* in the rest of Vietnam come from private language schools and not state schools, where stereotypically the former would have many more resources available to them. The rest of the world has a total average of 12 shields.

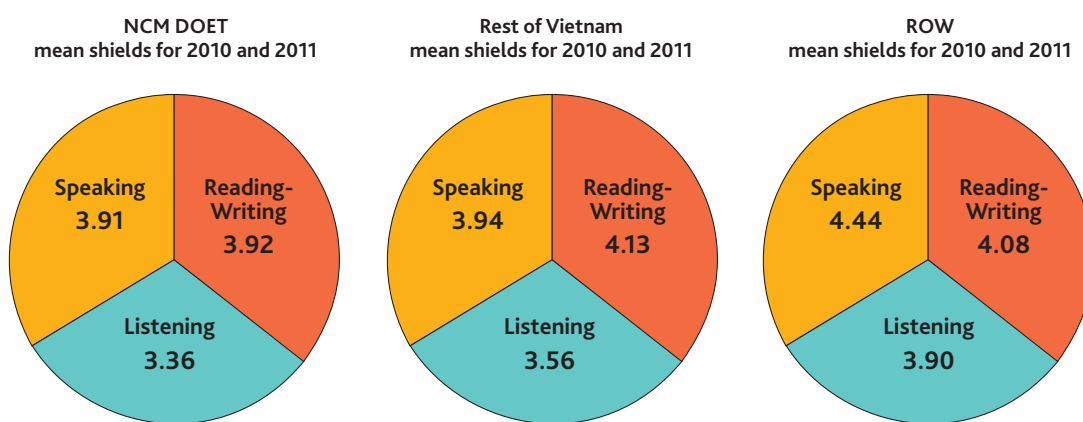


Figure 3: Comparative test score data – Cambridge English: Starters

Focal persons' perspective

School principals or their deputies agreed that there has been a notable progression in students' English, especially in speaking, when asked whether they have perceived any change as a result of the intervention.

Discussion

With regard to language progression, survey data and focus group data indicated that in most cases there is a notable progression as a result of the intervention. The skill which showed the most observed improvement was speaking, as reported in teacher and student responses. This was also substantiated when looking at the score data (see Table 2). The overall average number of shields obtained is 11 out of a possible 15, which indicates that *Cambridge English: Starters* is within the ability level of students who have taken it.

Earlier in the paper there was a discussion concerning the suitability of *Cambridge English: Starters* for Grade 2 students; these results show that the level is suitable for HCM Grade 2 students given the high number of shields acquired per skill and overall. The teachers earlier indicated that they would like to prioritise the teaching of listening in classroom time. Their views are supported by the data in Table 2 where the Listening paper has the lowest average number of shields – a picture which is replicated across all three contexts.

Investigation point 4: Changes in teaching practice

This section reports mainly on findings from the teachers' survey and where relevant views were sought from other participants in the study.

When teachers were asked whether their teaching practices have changed as a result of the intervention, 96% of them said they had changed as a result of teaching in IEP and 92% said that their practices had changed as a result of the introduction of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams. The changes which have occurred from the teachers' perspective are grouped under the following categories:

- increased adoption of some Assessment for Learning (AFL) principles
- introduction of collaborative teaching
- improved teacher motivation
- increased use of target language versus L1
- best practices utilised.

Increased adoption of some AFL principles

As a result of the intervention, the majority of teachers (as seen in percentage agreement in Table 3) adopted some of the principles of Assessment for Learning (Assessment Reform Group 2002, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William 1990, William 2009). For example, goal sharing with learners and ensuring that they know the standard or level they are aiming at. Similarly, teachers adopted the principle of working together with the learner to review and reflect on assessment information and giving feedback to learners in ways that enable them to improve and plan their next steps.

Introduction of collaborative teaching

Ninety-three per cent of the respondents stated that joining IEP has allowed teachers in school to work more as a team and share resources and discuss things more. Similarly, 94% said that they discuss planning and outcomes with team members/colleagues as a result of the programme.

Table 3: Adoption of some AfL principles (percentage agreement and mode)

		Strongly agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)	Mode
1.	I share success criteria with my students	26	68	5		3
2.	I give oral and written feedback to help identify next steps in learning	28	65	6		3
3.	I use assessment data to inform the learning and teaching process	28	63	8		3
4.	I give opportunities for learners to demonstrate that they have taken feedback into account in their learning	27	67	5	1	3
5.	I discuss learning objectives and outcomes with my students	28	63	8		3

Improved teacher motivation

Eighty-nine per cent of the teachers reported that the use of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams has increased their motivation to teach English.

Increased use of target language versus L1

The statements found in Table 4 were designed to find out whether there has been an increased use of the target language (English) versus L1 (Vietnamese) in the EFL classroom as a result of the intervention.

Table 4 shows that the majority of teachers prefer and practise the use of the target language inside the classroom. When looking at statement 3, a further analysis of the data to see whether the result is due to teachers' experience or school district area revealed that no conclusive finding can be stated. Similarly, there were no comments by the teachers to shed light on the level of disagreement on this statement.

Table 4: Use of target language vs L1 (percentage agreement and mode)

		Strongly agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)	Mode
1.	I teach in English more than in Vietnamese	51	49			3
2.	Students talk to other students in English more than in Vietnamese when they do classroom activities	22	59	19		3
3.	Students talk to me in English more than in Vietnamese	25	43	32		3
4.	I give opportunities for learners to demonstrate that they have taken feedback into account in their learning	43	54	3		3

Students' perspective

One of the elements the focus group with students tried to elicit is how frequently the target language and L1 is used in the classroom. Typical responses are as follows, irrespective of the geographical location of the school: 'We speak English to each other and to our teachers', 'the teacher speaks English a lot', 'we speak more Vietnamese in the class', 'we don't often speak English to one another', 'the teacher speaks more Vietnamese in the classroom', 'the teacher speaks more English while we speak more Vietnamese'.

Parents' perspective

When considering parents' comments, we find that they tend to be divided between 'let students use English more frequently in place of Vietnamese' and 'as children are only in Grade 2, they are not good at Vietnamese, so English should be considered as a foreign language and should not be paid too much attention with unnecessary pressure'.

Best practices utilised

Teachers who have been engaged in the intervention have advocated the following best practices to colleagues within their schools (with at least a 94% acceptance rate):

- **Adaptation of teaching methods** so that they are appropriate to students' learning goals and styles. In the same vein, ensuring that resources are appropriate, accessible, and relevant to students' learning needs.
- **Frequent use of interactive tasks** so that students can speak among themselves and with their teachers in English.
- **increased use of pair and group work** so that students have an opportunity to use the target language.
- **better lesson plan formulation**, for example, a plan including aims, methods, stages, timing, aids, anticipated problems, assumptions, and interaction patterns.
- **increased reflection** on how the lesson went and on own teaching.

Parents' perspective

When asked about perceived improvement in teaching practice as a result of the intervention, 88% of the parents agreed that English lessons have become more fun (e.g. through games and communication activities), are intellectually challenging and have provided their children with clearer learning objectives and outcomes. Parents also perceived change in the way feedback is provided to their children; in the way that their children are encouraged to reflect and assess their own progress. The following comment reflects the parental perspective on perceived changes:

- 'although my child's English level is intermediate, I like the intensive English programme as it has outdoor lessons which make him feel more comfortable and interesting in English'.

Focal persons' perspective

When asked about changes perceived in teachers' attitude towards teaching and their teaching practices, the responses could be summarised under three main categories. The first is a sense of responsibility: 'The teachers are more responsible for the teaching: they prepare more activities in class ... they pay more attention to the students and are ready to stay after school to help out'. The second is status: 'The test is a chance for us to be named "international teachers" because it is international standardised assessment', 'I will be famous among the parents if my students do well on Starters', 'if my students did not get high number of shields, parents will think I am not qualified for teaching English'. The third is application of best practices, as outlined above.

Discussion

Data collected from surveys and focus group discussions indicated that in general there has been a positive change in teaching practice as evidenced in improved teacher motivation, increased use of

the target language, increased adoption of AfL principles and the introduction of collaborative teaching. One thing to note as an unintended effect of the intervention is teachers' view of themselves as 'international teachers' since they are teaching towards international standards.

Investigation point 5: Change in decision making

The semi-structured one-to-one interviews with focal persons sought to find out if, during the course of implementing the initiative, changes occurred in decisions which have been made prior to implementation. Responses given were affirmative and changes have occurred as follows:

- Some of the schools who were involved in IEP and used *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams decided they wanted to opt out of the programme because they could no longer meet criteria set by HCM DOET. For example, they lacked qualified teachers due to teacher movement or they had to exceed the maximum class size of 35 students because of the demand to provide additional student spaces.
- Prior to this study, HCM DOET had suggested that the guiding principle for continuation in IEP is achieving an average of 10 shields in *Cambridge English: Starters* exams with no fewer than three shields per skill area – a decision that has been borne out by cohort-consistent results over a period of two years (as seen in Table 2). During the course of this study and as a result of extensive discussion between Cambridge ESOL (test developers) and HCM DOET about the nature of *Cambridge English: Young Learners* and its intended purposes (not to be used in what can be perceived as a high-stakes decision making context), a decision was made to waive this condition and leave it to individual schools to decide on their minimum requirement. As of May 2012, each school stipulates the number of shields their students are required to achieve, based on the *Cambridge English: Starters* test results, in order to continue into the Grade 3 IEP. Students from the selective English programme (non-intensive) can move to the intensive programme if their *Cambridge English: Starters* results meet the school's requirements and there are spaces available in the school. This change in decision is also in response to recurrent comments made by focal persons on the criteria set and how it may be impossible to meet given certain school conditions.
- At the time of writing this paper, HCM DOET announced the launch of a project to further enhance English language skills in 2012–13 with an estimated investment of approximately \$204,000. 'The project aims at a comprehensive renewal of teaching and learning methods in every grade and at every training level, so as to achieve dramatic progress in students' speaking, listening and reading skills. The project will then stretch over a 10-year period in which English language will be a compulsory subject from third grade onwards in schools' (Linh 2012).

Key findings and recommendations

The key question under investigation was: 'What is the intended/unintended effect of HCM DOET's strategic decision to increase English language provision through IEP and to ensure the quality of the provision through the use of external assessment, i.e., *Cambridge English: Young Learners*?'

Lessons learned

The study revealed areas where improvements can be made such as:

- better plan to disseminate information on the intervention
- ensuring information is provided consistently and adequately to stakeholders
- level assessment via empirical evidence in addition to classroom observation
- further in-depth investigation as to why 77% of the sampled parents continue to send their children to private language institutes despite the introduction of IEP
- probe further as to why some principals felt that learners are not motivated to learn English.

Positive effects

The study also revealed areas where positive effects have been achieved as highlighted below:

- The above findings showed some clear effects such as the focus on speaking, which is a direct positive effect of the introduction of *Cambridge English: Starters*, which is designed based on a communicative approach to language learning. What is more important is that this focus did not detract from attention being paid to the other skills as evidenced by test score data. Although there is a notable language progression in terms of speaking, students also performed well on the other skills.
- Another notable effect is the positive change in terms of teaching practice with the adoption of certain AfL principles, the introduction of collaborative teaching, and the utilisation of best practices such as teacher reflection or adaptation of teaching methods to support students' learning goals and styles.
- It might also be deduced that the intervention led to increased parental involvement in their child's learning in terms of encouraging them to learn English, taking them to extra English classes as provided by IEP and providing incentives for better performance as seen from the comments made in the focus group discussions. Parental involvement and teacher encouragement were a recurring theme in the findings of this study as playing a key role in learner motivation.

Unintended effects

- The study illustrates that when decentralisation of decision making is well executed, innovative approaches that suit the local context can lead to positive effects. Although the strategic objective for improving language standards came from MOET, it was up to HCM DOET to decide on how to achieve this and it is also up to schools to decide whether to be involved in the initiative or not, which provided a sense of ownership and faith in the intervention.
- One of the unintended effects is the change in decision making based on discussions that took place with focal persons during the course of this study. We are referring here to the decision about the use of *Cambridge English: Starters* and the number of shields obtained (see 'Investigation point 5: Change in decision making').

- Another unintended effect is better utilisation of children's free time. After a half-day of schooling, children are engaged in IEP and *Cambridge English: Young Learners* study. This alleviated parents' anxiety as to how to engage their children's free time once the half day of schooling is over.
- A further unintended effect of the introduction of an internationally recognised external assessment is a heightened sense of status. Teachers view themselves as 'international teachers' because they are teaching towards international standards.
- It was mentioned earlier that with the introduction of the IEP initiative, students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds would have the opportunity to increase their English proficiency. However, 67% of the parents participating in this study have self-assessed themselves as belonging to the middle socio-economic stratum. It may be a sampling issue, but HCM DOET may want to think of how to engage more parents from the low/low-mid strata so that their children can benefit from IEP.

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APPENDIX 1: TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL DISTRICT AREAS

<i>Geographical area</i>	<i>Typical school profile</i>
Central consisting of 11 districts	Schools in this geographical area are considered affluent in comparison to other areas. Some districts are heavily populated by Chinese Vietnamese so schools offer Chinese in addition to English. The majority of parents are educated with both parents working. Jobs vary from government officials, to businesspeople, to manual workers, to street vendors. Parents care very much about their children's education and apply pressure on schools to accept their children in selective programmes. There is a high uptake of external assessment – nearly 80% of students in IEP schools take <i>Cambridge English: Young Learners</i> assessments. There are more schools in this area which are considered to be model schools than in other geographical areas. The majority of schools teach English through Maths and Sciences.
Semi-outskirts consisting of 8 districts	This area of HCM is where industrial zones are located and the area is moving slowly towards urbanisation. Some schools in this area have large class sizes and sometimes library space is sacrificed to make way for classroom space. IEP dictates that schools joining IEP should have a maximum of 35 students per classroom. As a result, some schools in this district area drop out of the programme. The majority of parents are office workers, owners of small businesses, street vendors and factory workers. Some of the schools in this area are considered model schools and some schools teach English through Maths and Sciences.
Outskirts comprising 5 districts	Outskirts district areas are considered to be one of the most difficult areas in terms of living conditions in HCM. The majority of parents are small retailers, manual workers, farmers, housekeepers or unemployed. The uptake of external assessment at Grade 2 ranges from 20% to 85%. Where there is a high uptake, parents tend to be aware of the importance of learning English. Where there is a low uptake, parents tend to believe that learning a new language should be at an older age from Grade 6 upwards. Despite this, English teaching centres are a thriving business in this area.

Source: Focal persons (personal communication) and second author in this article.

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