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From Linguistic Category to Policy Concept: Recontextualising ‘Second Language’ in Vietnam’s English Language Policy

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Abstract

Vietnam has recently formalised the objective of developing English as a second language in schools. Rather than assessing this policy against predetermined criteria for an English-as-a-second-language environment, this study examines how *second language* is constructed as a policy concept. Drawing on recontextualisation and conceptual history, and informed by the Discourse-Historical Approach, it traces the concept through Vietnam's language-policy trajectory from 2016 to 2025, analysing policy documents and related public discourse. The findings reveal a shift from an open national aspiration to an institutionally bounded educational objective, with the meaning of *second language* progressively specified through the functions assigned to English, its institutional settings, and its educational purposes. The study introduces conceptual specification to explain how an initially open policy concept acquires increasingly determinate institutional meaning through successive policy stages. It also distinguishes this process from conceptual slippage, which involves unacknowledged movement between distinguishable meanings rather than semantic change itself. The study contributes to language policy and planning by demonstrating how a flexible linguistic category becomes a more bounded and actionable policy concept.

1. Introduction

English has assumed an increasingly prominent role in education policy across Asia, where its expansion is commonly associated with internationalisation, economic development, educational reform and participation in global knowledge economies. Yet the terminology used to articulate this expansion is far from straightforward. Labels such as *foreign language*, *second language* and *bilingual education* do more than describe existing linguistic arrangements. In policy, they can project desired futures, establish institutional priorities and acquire meanings shaped by particular political, educational and sociolinguistic contexts. Debates surrounding Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 policy, for example, illustrate how familiar linguistic categories can become sites of competing understandings of language, identity, educational development and internationalisation (Chang, 2025). Their policy significance therefore cannot be inferred from disciplinary definitions alone.

Vietnam provides a timely case for examining this relationship between linguistic terminology and policy development. English has long been institutionally positioned as a foreign language within the education system through successive national language education policies (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019), reflecting a broader framework of national language planning, foreign-language development and multilingual governance (Nguyen, 2014). More recently, however, the policy vocabulary surrounding English has shifted. Between 2016 and 2018, the idea of making English a second language (EASL) emerged in ministerial and public discourse. It subsequently became an explicit national policy objective through Politburo Conclusion 91-KL/TW (Conclusion 91), issued on 12 August 2024 (Politburo, 2024), and Government Decision 2371/QĐ-TTg (Decision 2371), approved on 27 October 2025 (Prime Minister, 2025). The latter establishes a national project for developing English as a second language in schools during 2025–2035, with a vision extending to 2045. This trajectory offers an opportunity to examine how a linguistic category moves from public and institutional discussion into formal policy and acquires increasingly specific institutional meaning.

The development raises a conceptual question that cannot be answered simply by asking whether Vietnam currently constitutes a second-language environment. *Second language* has several meanings in applied linguistics, encompassing acquisition sequence, opportunities for language use, societal functions and institutional position (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

Moreover, a policy objective to make English a second language does not necessarily describe an existing sociolinguistic condition; it may project a condition that policy seeks to create. Evaluating the Vietnamese policy solely through the conventional foreign-language/second-language distinction therefore risks treating a prospective objective as a descriptive classification. The central issue is how the concept acquires meaning within policy discourse and what linguistic and institutional future it envisages.

Research on English expansion in Vietnam and other Asian settings has examined English proficiency, educational capacity, English-medium instruction, internationalisation, inequality and the institutional conditions for wider English use. However, less attention has been paid to how the linguistic categories used to articulate policy objectives acquire meaning, change across successive policy stages and become associated with particular institutional functions. Research on recontextualisation and conceptual history offers a basis for addressing this gap by examining how concepts are reinterpreted as they move across institutional contexts and changing policy priorities (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011; Savski, 2020). The Vietnamese case raises a further question: how does an initially open policy designation become progressively bounded and specified as it moves from political discussion to formal educational policy?

This study is distinct from the author's earlier examination of Vietnam's emerging English-as-a-second-language policy (Nguyen-Viet, 2026), which considers comparative policy experiences, institutional conditions and implementation challenges. The present study addresses a different question: how *second language* is constructed and transformed across the policy trajectory. Drawing on a distinct corpus covering 2016–2025, it includes early discussions preceding formal policy adoption as well as subsequent stages of political authorisation and governmental policy development. Its focus is therefore the changing meanings and institutional scope of the designation, complementing the earlier study's examination of policy conditions and implementation.

Treating *second language* as a historically situated and relational policy concept, this study draws on recontextualisation and conceptual history, informed by the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). It examines how the concept is articulated across Vietnamese policy discourse, with particular attention to its changing conceptual relationships, institutional boundaries and associated educational functions. The study accordingly addresses the following research question:

How has the concept of second language been recontextualised and progressively specified across Vietnam's policy trajectory concerning English in education from 2016 to 2025?

The study argues that this trajectory is better understood as the development of a prospective policy concept than as a categorical shift from foreign language to second language. It traces how an initially open national aspiration becomes an institutionally bounded educational objective through the progressive specification of English's functions, institutional settings and educational purposes. It introduces *conceptual specification* to explain this process and distinguishes it from *conceptual slippage*, which involves unacknowledged movement between distinguishable meanings. By examining these developments in Vietnam, the study contributes to language policy and planning research on how linguistic categories acquire increasingly determinate and actionable meanings through policymaking.

2. Conceptualising SL in policy discourse

2.1. From linguistic category to policy concept

SL has an established disciplinary history, but its meaning is neither singular nor reducible to one classificatory criterion. In second-language acquisition, the term may refer broadly to a language acquired after a first language, while distinctions between second-language and foreign-language settings commonly concern opportunities for use and the relationship between language learning and the surrounding linguistic environment (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Sociolinguistic approaches additionally emphasise the social functions of languages and their distribution across domains of use (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). SL therefore encompasses acquisition, exposure, communicative use, institutional function and societal environment instead of denoting a uniform sociolinguistic condition.

Language policy and planning scholarship shifts attention from classification to the institutional organisation of language functions. Languages acquire different positions through decisions about where, by whom and for what purposes they are taught and used (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2004, 2009). Status planning may alter a language's institutional position, while acquisition planning can expand its availability and use through education. Although these processes may interact, formal designation, institutional function and actual language use need not coincide. Linguistic categories entering policy discourse can thus retain established disciplinary associations while also performing policy work: establishing priorities, allocating institutional functions and articulating conditions towards which planning is directed. As Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat (2019, p. 3) observe, language-in-education policy seeks to "project an imagined future linguistic situation". A policy category therefore need not describe only conditions that already exist.

In this study, established understandings of SL provide a semantic background, not a classificatory benchmark. They help identify meanings historically associated with the term, but the analytical question is how the concept becomes meaningful within a particular policy trajectory, what functions and relationships are constructed around it, and what kind of linguistic condition it is used to envisage.

2.2. Recontextualisation and relational conceptual meaning

This study draws on recontextualisation, conceptual history and the DHA to examine how a linguistic category becomes a policy concept. In critical discourse studies, concepts are not merely descriptions of social reality but resources through which institutional agendas are articulated and legitimised (Krzyżanowski, 2016). Recontextualisation involves the movement of discursive elements across social, institutional and political contexts, accompanied by their selection, reinterpretation, foregrounding, backgrounding or omission in line with new institutional purposes and relations of power (Wodak & Fairclough, 2010; Reisigl & Wodak, 2015).

Savski's (2020) analysis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Thailand and Malaysia illustrates this process. CEFR was selectively incorporated into local policy agendas, with its proficiency levels foregrounded as international standards while its plurilingual and pluricultural dimensions received comparatively less attention. It consequently became associated with English proficiency, educational quality, employability and competitiveness within policy configurations positioning English alongside national languages (Savski, 2020, pp. 528, 539–541). Similarly, Krzyżanowski and Wodak's (2011) analysis of European multilingualism policy shows how associations with employability, economic competitiveness and the knowledge economy foregrounded some meanings while backgrounding others, including linguistic diversity and social cohesion.

These studies support a relational understanding of policy concepts. Conceptual history likewise directs attention from isolated lexical items to the historically changing semantic fields within which concepts acquire meaning (Koselleck, 2002). A concept may retain its established terminology while acquiring different policy significance through changes in its institutional context and conceptual relationships.

Applied to SL, this perspective does not assume that an academic definition was transferred into Vietnamese policy and subsequently modified. Shared terminology alone cannot establish such transmission. Instead, the analysis reconstructs the concept through its relationships with foreign-language education, Vietnamese, educational development, international integration, human-resource development, science and technology, innovation and digital transformation. Whether foreign language and SL operate as competing concepts, successive policy categories or complementary elements of the same policy architecture remains an empirical question. The relationship between English and Vietnamese is examined in the same way, with competition, complementarity, hierarchy and functional differentiation treated as possibilities rather than assumptions.

2.3. Policy labels and English-oriented transformation in Asia

The significance of policy terminology is particularly visible in Asian initiatives that seek to expand the role of English while maintaining established national-language arrangements. Such policies commonly associate English with internationalisation, educational development, economic competitiveness and global participation, but their labels do not necessarily describe existing sociolinguistic conditions. Kachru (1992) highlighted the diversity of English's forms and functions across Asia. Contemporary initiatives build on this diversity while increasingly examining how English is positioned within national educational and developmental agendas, moving beyond the classification of contexts as EFL or ESL.

Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 provides an instructive example. The initiative developed through successive formulations, from proposals to make English an official language to the construction of a bilingual nation and subsequently Bilingual 2030. These shifts implied different understandings of English's status, functions and relationship with other languages. Chang (2025) shows that the bilingual label encompasses intersecting orientations towards English as a resource, language rights, national identity and decolonisation. It therefore acquires meaning through a broader configuration of linguistic and political relationships, including a "disconnect between what is projected in policy discourse and what is received" (Chang, 2025, p. 414). The case also demonstrates why designation, status and function need to be distinguished: assigning institutional status reflects political and ideological choices about national identity and linguistic priorities, while formal status alone does not determine how a language functions across social and institutional domains (Chang, 2025; Ferrer & Lin, 2024; Wright, 2012).

Education further complicates this relationship because acquisition planning can expand a language's institutional role without changing its formal national status. Drawing on Ferrer and Lin (2024), Chang (2025) describes Taiwan's shift from proposals for official-language status towards an educationally centred bilingual project. Yeh (2023) argues that the term "bilingual" may be "a misnomer" (p. 219), given the policy's predominant orientation towards expanding English. Savski's (2020) findings from Thailand and Malaysia similarly show how CEFR was incorporated into policy configurations that foregrounded English alongside national languages while backgrounding other languages. English thus became associated with international standards, skills, employability and competitiveness without necessarily displacing the national language.

These cases are not benchmarks against which Vietnam is classified. Their relevance lies in showing that familiar linguistic labels and policy instruments acquire significance through locally specific relationships among English, national languages, educational institutions, identity and developmental objectives. They provide a regional context for examining Vietnam's designation of SL as a policy concept whose scope, functions and relationships must be reconstructed from its own policy trajectory.

2.4. Prospectivity, conceptual specification, tension and slippage

Recontextualisation explains how policy concepts acquire locally situated meanings through changing conceptual relationships. The Vietnamese case also requires attention to their temporal orientation and degree of institutional determination. Language-in-education policy can project desired conditions and organise intervention towards their realisation. Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat's (2019) account is useful here because it emphasises the relationship between educational language planning and the linguistic situation envisaged for the future (p. 3). Policy concepts may therefore refer not only to existing conditions but also to those policymakers seek to establish.

This study distinguishes between descriptive and prospective uses of policy concepts. A descriptive use represents a linguistic condition as existing, whereas a prospective use identifies a condition that policy seeks to establish. The formulation đưa tiếng Anh trở thành ngôn ngữ thứ hai [make English become a second language], for example, does not assert that English already occupies second-language status. Rather, it presents that status as a projected condition and makes movement towards it an object of policy intervention. Consequently, the absence of characteristics conventionally associated with second-language environments does not, in itself, demonstrate conceptual error. Features such as regular communication, wider opportunities for exposure, institutional embedding and use beyond conventional language lessons may instead become objectives of intervention. The analytical question is therefore what kind of linguistic and educational condition the policy projects and how it is progressively defined.

This prospective orientation makes it necessary to distinguish designation from specification. A policy may identify a desired linguistic condition without initially determining its precise scope, functions or institutional implications. As policymaking develops, the designation may acquire more determinate content through successive formulations and institutional decisions. This study uses conceptual specification to refer to the process through which an initially open policy concept becomes more precisely defined in its institutional scope, attributed functions and projected educational arrangements. Conceptual specification builds on relational accounts of conceptual transformation (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011; Savski, 2020), but foregrounds the progressive determination of policy meaning across successive stages of policymaking. Recontextualisation explains how a concept is selected, reinterpreted and connected to changing conceptual relationships as it moves between contexts; conceptual specification identifies how these transformations may increasingly establish what the concept encompasses and entails. Specification is therefore a possible trajectory of recontextualisation, not an inevitable outcome or a separate process. Recontextualisation may generate new associations, preserve ambiguity or produce competing interpretations, as well as progressively delimit a concept.

Three related dimensions guide the analysis. Institutional bounding concerns the domain and population to which the concept applies, including movement from a broad national aspiration towards a more specific institutional or

educational domain. Functional specification concerns the roles and purposes attributed to the language. Educational and operational specification concerns the institutional environments, educational objectives and arrangements through which the projected condition is expected to develop. These dimensions are analytical reference points, not a fixed sequence or exhaustive checklist. Conceptual specification must also be distinguished from the ordinary accumulation of policy details. Targets, activities and administrative procedures count as evidence of specification only when they clarify or delimit the concept itself, for example by defining its institutional domain, identifying its functions or specifying the educational environments in which it is expected to operate. The focus is therefore on changes in the concept's scope or substantive meaning across policy texts, not simply on the amount of implementation detail in individual documents.

Increasing specification does not necessarily produce a fully settled meaning. A concept may become more institutionally determinate while retaining semantic openness and supporting different expectations or policy interpretations. Conceptual tension refers to the coexistence of meanings, expectations or policy logics that are not fully reconciled. For example, a policy-specific meaning of SL may retain associations with established disciplinary understandings while being defined through a more institutionally bounded educational framework. Such coexistence is not automatically evidence of incoherence; it becomes analytically significant when the different meanings remain active and affect how the concept is understood or pursued.

Conceptual slippage is treated more restrictively. It refers to consequential movement between distinguishable meanings without that shift being made conceptually explicit. This may occur when SL moves without acknowledgement between describing an existing sociolinguistic condition and naming a future policy objective, or between an institutionally bounded educational designation and a society-wide status designation. Recontextualisation concerns the transformation of meaning across contexts; conceptual tension concerns the coexistence of meanings or policy logics; slippage occurs when distinctions between meanings become obscured in ways that may affect policy interpretation. Semantic change, contextual adaptation or divergence from disciplinary definitions is therefore insufficient, on its own, to establish slippage.

Overall, these distinctions provide a framework for reconstructing the changing policy meaning of SL in Vietnam. Prospectivity identifies the future-oriented character of the designation; recontextualisation explains how its meaning develops through changing institutional and conceptual relationships; conceptual specification captures the progressive determination of its scope, functions and educational implications; and conceptual tension and slippage identify different forms of unresolved or obscured semantic relationships. None should be assumed in advance. Their presence and significance must be established through comparison of policy formulations and their institutional contexts.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Data and corpus construction

The documentary corpus covers 2008–2026, although the primary conceptual analysis focuses on 2016–2025. Earlier documents, particularly Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg (2008), establish the historical and institutional context of foreign-language education policy preceding the emergence of the second-language (SL) objective. They are treated as contextual, not as primary evidence of conceptual transformation. Material from 2026 is included separately as supplementary evidence of subsequent operational elaboration. The primary corpus begins with the earliest identifiable institutional articulation in the assembled materials: remarks by a Deputy Minister of

Education and Training at the Ministry of Education and Training's (MOET) annual conference on 5 August 2016. As no official transcript is publicly available, the formulation is reconstructed from contemporaneous reports attributing the statement to MOET leadership (GD&TD, 2016; QDND Online, 2016; VietnamPlus, 2016). It is therefore treated as the earliest identifiable articulation in the available corpus, not definitive evidence of the idea's first expression.

The corpus also includes the 2018 proposal to recognise English as the second language of Vietnam and related public and expert discussion, the National Assembly's explanatory report on the revised Law on Education in 2019, and political, governmental and ministerial instruments issued between 2024 and 2025. These materials have different evidential roles. Public and media discourse illustrates the circulation and contestation of the proposal, while authoritative policy instruments document its political authorisation and the evolving institutional scope, functions and arrangements associated with it. Some instruments provide strategic, administrative or regulatory context rather than direct evidence of conceptual change.

A supplementary 2026 document is MOET's draft circular, *Dự thảo Thông tư quy định tiêu chuẩn, tiêu chí đánh giá cơ sở giáo dục trong việc đưa tiếng Anh thành ngôn ngữ thứ hai* [Draft Circular stipulating standards and assessment criteria for educational institutions in implementing English as a second language] (MOET, 2026). At the time of analysis, the draft was undergoing public consultation and had not been adopted. Its four chapters and 13 articles propose assessment criteria for preschool, general, higher, vocational and continuing education, organised into three institutional development levels: Initial, Developing and Advanced. The draft illustrates a proposed translation of the SL objective into differentiated institutional criteria; it is not treated as an adopted regulatory requirement or evidence of implementation.

Documents were purposively selected for their relevance to five aspects of the policy trajectory: historical context, initial articulation, public and institutional contestation, political authorisation, and conceptual and institutional specification. The resulting corpus is thematically focused and conceptually bounded in scope, though not exhaustive. Its purpose is to reconstruct the development of the policy meaning of SL across relevant institutional stages, not to represent all documents concerning English-language education in Vietnam.

Table 1
Institutional architecture and analytical corpus

Institutional level	Policy document/discourse	Year	Role in the policy trajectory	Analytical status
Prime Minister	Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg	2008	Establishes the National Foreign Languages Project (Project 2020) and the historical foreign-language policy framework	Historical context
Prime Minister	Decision 2080/QĐ-TTg	2017	Adjusts and extends Project 2020, strengthening the existing foreign-language policy architecture	Historical context
Prime Minister	Decision 1659/QĐ-TTg	2019	Develops foreign-language capacity in the public sector, contributing to institutional preparedness	Historical context
Prime Minister	Decision 131/QĐ-TTg	2022	Advances digital transformation in education and provides supporting institutional conditions	Historical context
MOET	Minister's conference formulation	2016	Earliest institutional articulation of a roadmap for making EASL in Vietnam	Primary analysis
Ministerial/ public discourse	Proposal to recognise English as the SL of Vietnam and contemporaneous expert discussion	2018	Alternative construction through recognition and public conceptual contestation	Primary analysis
National Assembly	Explanatory report on the revised Law on Education	2019	Does not incorporate the proposal for formal recognition at the national level	Primary analysis
Politburo	Conclusion 91-KL/TW	2024	Politically authorises and bounds the objective to schools	Primary analysis (authorisation)
Government (2025a)	Resolution 51/NQ-CP	2025	Provides an administrative mandate for developing the national project	Primary analysis (implementation)
Politburo	Resolution 71-NQ/TW	2025	Establishes a strategic language orientation within national development	Strategic context
Government (2025b)	Decree 222/2025/NĐ-CP	2025	Provides a regulatory framework for educational implementation, including English-medium instruction	Regulatory context
Prime Minister	Decision 2371/QĐ-TTg	2025	Formally specifies the projected second-language policy concept; central evidence of conceptual and functional specification	Primary analysis

Institutional level	Policy document/discourse	Year	Role in the policy trajectory	Analytical status
MOET	Draft circular on standards and assessment criteria for educational institutions implementing ESL (2026)	2026	Proposes operational specification through institutional assessment criteria and development levels	Supplementary evidence

The distinction between contextual and primary documents is methodological rather than hierarchical. Together, the materials enable the reconstruction of the concept's development from early articulation and contestation to political authorisation and formal specification across successive levels of policymaking.

3.2. Analytical procedure

The analysis combines diachronic policy tracing with relational conceptual analysis, informed by the DHA, particularly its emphasis on historical and institutional context. It does not apply the full range of DHA categories; instead, it examines how the meaning of SL develops across successive policy formulations and institutional configurations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015; Savski, 2020).

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, explicit references to SL and related formulations were identified and examined in context. Particular attention was paid to *nghiên cứu, xây dựng lộ trình đưa... trở thành* [research and develop a roadmap to make... become], *từng bước đưa... trở thành* [gradually make... become], and *đưa... trở thành* [make... become], as well as the 2018 proposal for formal recognition. These formulations were compared to distinguish descriptions of existing conditions from projections of a desired future. Second, the policy trajectory was traced from early ministerial discourse and public debate to political authorisation and subsequent governmental and educational policy. Particular attention was given to the shift from *ở Việt Nam* [in Vietnam] to *trong trường học* [in schools], which marks a change in the institutional scope of the objective. Documents were also differentiated according to their institutional authority and evidential role. Third, the analysis examined changing conceptual relationships between SL and foreign-language education, Vietnamese, international integration, educational and human-resource development, science and technology, innovation, digital transformation, and English-use environments. Conceptual specification was assessed through three dimensions: institutional bounding (the domain and population covered), functional specification (the roles assigned to English), and educational and operational specification (the environments and arrangements through which the objective is projected to develop). These dimensions served as analytical reference points, not a predetermined sequence. Policy details counted as specification only when they clarified or delimited the meaning of SL. Finally, the findings were compared across the policy trajectory to identify recontextualisation, conceptual specification, conceptual tension and possible conceptual slippage. Tension refers to the coexistence of meanings or policy orientations that remain incompletely reconciled; slippage denotes unacknowledged movement between distinguishable meanings with potential consequences for policy interpretation or implementation.

The analysis draws on the original Vietnamese documents. Translations are provided for key formulations, but interpretation is grounded in the Vietnamese texts. Disciplinary understandings of SL serve as interpretive reference points rather than classificatory criteria. The findings therefore concern meanings and institutional arrangements projected in policy discourse, not actual implementation or reception by policymakers, teachers and learners.

4. Recontextualising SL in Vietnamese Policy

4.1. From aspiration to formalisation: Early circulation of SL

The conceptual development examined here traces the emergence of SL as a policy objective, initially without formal adoption as a language category. Its earliest identifiable institutional articulation in the available corpus appears in remarks by a Deputy Minister of Education and Training at a national MOET conference on 5 August 2016. He called for research into a roadmap for making EASL in Vietnam:

Tổ chức nghiên cứu, xây dựng lộ trình đưa tiếng Anh trở thành ngôn ngữ thứ 2 ở Việt Nam.

[Conduct research and develop a roadmap for making English a second language in Vietnam.]

Although no official transcript is available, the formulation can be reconstructed from contemporaneous reports (QDND Online, 2016; VietnamPlus, 2016). Its wording is explicitly prospective. The verbs *nghiên cứu* [research] and *xây dựng lộ trình* [develop a roadmap], together with *đưa... trở thành* [make... become], present second-language status as a condition to be developed rather than one already attributed to English. At a subsequent conference on 17 September 2016, the Project Management Board reiterated the objective within the implementation of the National Foreign Languages Project (Can Tho University, 2016). The MOET Minister also emphasised that a proposed roadmap should identify necessary resources, activities and expected outcomes without imposing a fixed timetable (Dan Tri, 2016; GD&TD, 2016). SL thus initially entered policy discourse as a long-term educational aspiration requiring gradual planning.

The concept nevertheless remained open to competing interpretations. In 2018, the Minister of Information and Communications proposed recognising English as the second language of Vietnam (VOV, 2018), shifting the discussion from educational planning towards national status and legal recognition. Public debate questioned whether English in Vietnam had the broad societal functions, everyday use and institutional embedding commonly associated with second-language environments, arguing that it remained primarily a foreign language (Dan Tri, 2018). Two interpretations consequently came into contact: SL as a prospective condition that policy could seek to create, and SL as a designation whose appropriateness depended on existing sociolinguistic conditions.

The proposal for formal recognition was not incorporated into the revised Law on Education in 2019. The National Assembly committee's explanatory report referred to the constitutional designation of Vietnamese as the national language and noted that the Constitution contained no provision for a second language (National Assembly's Committee, 2019; VOV, 2019). This outcome concerned the proposed legal recognition of English as a second language of Vietnam; it did not preclude the subsequent expansion of English's educational functions. Before its formal institutionalisation, SL therefore circulated through three overlapping policy logics: a long-term educational objective, a proposal for national status and legal recognition, and a sociolinguistic designation assessed against existing patterns of language use. These interpretations were not fully reconciled. Early formulations also referred broadly to English becoming a second language in Vietnam without specifying the institutional environments, functional domains or arrangements through which the objective might be realised. The concept consequently remained open in both scope and practical implications.

This early phase is significant not because it established a settled definition of SL, but because it introduced a prospective policy concept around which different expectations could be articulated. The subsequent trajectory

retained this aspiration while reconfiguring its institutional scope. In 2024, the political formulation relocated the objective from Vietnam broadly to schools, providing a more clearly bounded direction for policy development.

4.2. From “in Vietnam” to “in schools”: Institutional bounding

Conclusion 91 (Politburo, 2024) formulates the objective as follows:

Tập trung nâng cao năng lực ngoại ngữ của học sinh, sinh viên, từng bước đưa tiếng Anh trở thành ngôn ngữ thứ hai trong trường học.

[Focus on improving the foreign-language competence of pupils and students, step by step making English a second language in schools.]

Two changes are salient. First, the earlier call to *research and develop a roadmap* becomes an authoritative objective to *step by step make* EASL. The qualification *từng bước* [gradually/step by step] nevertheless preserves the prospective orientation: second-language status remains a condition towards which policy is directed, rather than one represented as already existing. Second, *ở Việt Nam* [in Vietnam] becomes *trong trường học* [in schools]. This is more than a change in wording. It bounds the projected transformation institutionally, relocating it from Vietnam’s linguistic environment broadly conceived to the educational domain. The formulation therefore does not designate English as Vietnam’s second national or societal language; it projects a second-language role within schools.

The immediate textual context further complicates a categorical reading of this shift as a replacement of foreign-language status. Conclusion 91 combines the second-language objective with a call to improve students’ foreign-language competence. The foreign-language frame thus remains present within the same formulation that introduces the second-language objective. The emerging relationship is not straightforwardly foreign language = > second language, but an expansion of the envisioned role of English within an established foreign-language education framework. The policy trajectory subsequently moves through stages of political authorisation, governmental implementation and educational specification, leading to Decision 2371 in 2025 and its dedicated project, “Making English a Second Language in Schools”. Across these formulations, the procedural wording becomes progressively more direct:

conduct research and develop a roadmap… make…

=> step by step make…

=> make…

This progression indicates increasing policy commitment, not a transition from prospective to descriptive meaning. Decision 2371 remains a project covering 2025–2035, with a vision extending to 2045. What changes is not the future orientation of SL but the degree to which the projected condition is institutionally defined. Decision 2371 is therefore not an isolated policy innovation but a further elaboration of an objective developed through successive stages of policy formulation.

4.3. Specifying SL: From language learning to institutional use

Within the analytical corpus, Decision 2371 represents the point at which the policy concept receives its most extensive institutional specification. Whereas earlier texts primarily articulate the objective, Decision 2371

specifies the functions, domains, institutional settings and measures through which the projected condition is intended to develop. Its general objective envisages English being used widely, regularly and effectively in teaching and learning, communication, management and other educational activities, with the aim of creating an English-use ecosystem within educational institutions.

Three properties are particularly salient: the breadth, regularity and effectiveness of English use. The associated functional domains extend beyond English as a subject to include teaching and learning, interpersonal communication, institutional management and wider educational activities. The concept is thus specified through an expanded institutional role for English, with a shift in policy emphasis rather than a change of linguistic label. The envisaged English-use ecosystem reinforces this functional orientation. Although language competence remains important, the projected transformation extends beyond proficiency development to the creation of environments in which English can be used recurrently for educational purposes. Learning and use are presented as mutually reinforcing: competence supports expanded use, while opportunities for use form part of the environment in which competence can develop.

This specification is differentiated across educational sectors. Decision 2371 assigns distinct objectives to preschool, general education, higher education, vocational education and continuing education. Expectations range from early exposure and familiarity to communication, learning through English, academic and professional use, research and international participation. SL is therefore not defined through a single threshold applied uniformly across the education system. Staged targets and supporting measures further frame second-language development as a gradual institutional process. Curriculum development, English-medium teaching, teacher capacity, digital resources, technology and artificial intelligence, international cooperation and wider participation are identified as means of developing the projected environments of English use. The policy envisages differentiated degrees and domains of institutional engagement rather than a categorical transition from foreign-language to second-language status.

Decision 2371 thus gives increasingly specific content to what earlier discourse left comparatively open. SL emerges as a prospective institutional condition characterised by expanded and recurrent English use. Features that might elsewhere describe an existing second-language environment are instead formulated as conditions that educational institutions are expected to develop.

4.4. The conceptual network: development, internationalisation and Vietnamese

The policy meaning of SL is constructed not only through the specified uses of English but also through its relationships with wider educational and developmental objectives. Decision 2371 connects the project with educational quality, international integration, global citizenship, high-quality human resources, science and technology, innovation, digital transformation and international cooperation. These concepts situate expanded English use within a broader vision of educational and national development.

International integration occupies a prominent position in this network. English is associated with learners' capacity to participate in international study, professional activity, research, knowledge exchange and wider global engagement. The second-language objective is therefore not presented as linguistic transformation for its own sake, but as a resource for participation beyond the immediate educational institution. Its connections with human-resource development, science, technology and innovation further associate English with access to

knowledge, research, professional capacity and technology transfer. Digital transformation similarly links the project to digital resources, online environments, technology and artificial intelligence. These relationships position SL within a broader agenda of institutional and educational modernisation, rather than exclusively within language pedagogy.

Vietnamese occupies a different position within this conceptual network. Decision 2371 couples the expansion of English with the maintenance of Vietnamese and the preservation of Vietnamese cultural identity. The two languages are therefore not presented as alternatives competing for the same policy position. English is associated primarily with expanded educational, international, scientific and professional functions, while Vietnamese retains its national and cultural anchoring. This configuration can be characterised as functional differentiation without status displacement. The projected functions of English expand substantially, but the policy neither designates it as a national or official language nor assigns it the symbolic position occupied by Vietnamese. The institutional bounding discussed in Section 4.2 is important here: developing ESL in schools allows its institutional functions to expand without requiring a corresponding reordering of national language status.

The relationship between foreign-language and second-language policy reflects a similar pattern. The second-language objective emerges from an established foreign-language education framework, while the foreign-language designation continues to appear alongside it. The two categories therefore do not function as mutually exclusive alternatives in the policy discourse. Rather, the foreign-language framework provides an institutional and historical basis from which an expanded role for English is envisaged. The trajectory involves not the straightforward replacement of foreign-language education, but its reconfiguration around more extensive and recurrent uses of English within educational institutions.

Collectively, the findings show that the policy meaning of SL develops through three interconnected processes. First, an initially open aspiration becomes progressively institutionalised. Second, the projected condition is bounded to schools, shifting its scope from Vietnam broadly to the educational domain. Third, the concept acquires increasingly explicit functional, institutional and developmental content through successive policy documents. These processes provide the basis for examining how recontextualisation and conceptual specification interact in the Vietnamese case, and where the resulting semantic plurality may give rise to conceptual tension or slippage.

5. Discussion

The findings show that SL in Vietnamese policy develops from an open aspiration into a prospective, institutionally bounded educational objective. Its meaning is neither transferred unchanged from sociolinguistic theory nor detached from established linguistic understandings. Instead, it is progressively reconstructed through changing policy relationships and institutional arrangements. This section discusses the implications for policy conceptualisation, language status and the limits of conceptual flexibility.

5.1. Recontextualising SL: From designation to prospective specification

The first implication concerns how a linguistic category acquires meaning as a policy concept. SL encompasses meanings associated with acquisition, exposure, communicative use, societal environment and institutional

function (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Holmes & Wilson, 2022). These established meanings remain relevant to Vietnamese policy but do not determine its policy-specific meaning in advance. Rather, features commonly associated with second-language environments are selectively recontextualised as elements of a projected institutional arrangement. Their significance shifts from describing existing linguistic conditions to informing the objectives of policy intervention.

This prospective orientation is evident in the successive formulations of developing a roadmap, making EASL step by step, and establishing a project extending to 2035 with a vision to 2045. SL is presented as a condition to be developed, not one already achieved. This is consistent with Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat's (2019) observation that language-in-education policy projects future linguistic arrangements. The Vietnamese case extends this insight by showing how a linguistic category itself can designate such a projected condition. It also contrasts with what Tupas (2026) describes as an "ideology of rush" in English and English-medium instruction policies: the repeated expression "step by step" frames change as gradual institutional development rather than accelerated transformation.

This prospective interpretation also qualifies the conventional EFL-ESL comparison (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). Under a descriptive interpretation, societal exposure, communicative opportunities and institutional use would help determine whether Vietnam constitutes an ESL environment. Under a prospective interpretation, their limited availability instead identifies conditions that policy seeks to develop. Decision 2371 gives this objective more specific content by associating it with recurrent English use, multiple functional domains and differentiated institutional pathways. Features commonly used to describe existing second-language environments thus become objectives for institutional planning. The pattern reflects the selective recontextualisation described by Savski (2020), in which policy concepts and frameworks are adapted through the foregrounding of selected meanings and the establishment of new conceptual relationships. It also resonates with Krzyżanowski and Wodak's (2011) account of how concepts acquire new significance through changing semantic relationships. In Vietnam, the expression *second language* remains recognisable, but its policy meaning develops through associations with educational development, institutional use and international integration.

However, recontextualisation alone does not fully capture this development. The Vietnamese trajectory also involves the progressive determination of an initially open institutional meaning. The movement from a broad national aspiration to a school-based objective, followed by the specification of functions, educational environments and institutional measures in Decision 2371, illustrates what this study terms conceptual specification. Whereas recontextualisation explains how a concept acquires significance through changing relationships, conceptual specification highlights how its policy-specific meaning becomes increasingly determinate through successive formulations.

This distinction constitutes the study's principal conceptual contribution. Recontextualisation need not result only in semantic expansion, ambiguity or dilution; under particular policy conditions, it may also involve increasing specification of a concept's domain, functions and institutional arrangements. This is a possible trajectory, not a universal sequence. Nor does greater specification demonstrate implementation or uniform interpretation across institutions. It indicates, more narrowly, that policy documents make the intended educational meaning of SL increasingly explicit.

5.2. Policy meaning, functional differentiation and the limits of conceptual slippage

The second implication concerns the relationship between language status and institutional function. As discussed in Section 2.3, labels such as *second language* and *bilingual* acquire meaning in relation to language status, educational policy, institutional functions and relationships among languages. Research on Taiwan illustrates this complexity: *bilingual* has been associated with official-language status, bilingual nationhood and educational development, while also intersecting with multilingualism, national identity and competing linguistic ideologies (Ferrer & Lin, 2024; Yeh, 2023; Chang, 2025).

The Vietnamese case presents a different configuration. Following the non-incorporation of the proposal for national-level recognition into the revised Education Law, authoritative policy developed the SL objective within the educational domain. This distinction can be understood through the established separation between status planning and acquisition planning (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2004, 2009): educational policy can expand a language's functions within particular institutions without changing its formal national status. Ferrer and Lin's (2024) analysis of Taiwan similarly illustrates how English-oriented transformation can become increasingly centred on educational intervention as proposals concerning official-language status recede. This comparison identifies a shared distinction between formal status and educational function, while recognising the different political and linguistic contexts.

In Vietnam, Decision 2371 associates English with educational development, international integration, science and technology, professional participation and global engagement, while affirming the maintenance of Vietnamese and the preservation of Vietnamese cultural identity. This relationship can be characterised as functional differentiation without status displacement. English receives expanded educational and outward-facing functions, whereas Vietnamese retains its national and cultural anchoring. This interpretation is consistent with the constitutional designation of Vietnamese as the national language (National Assembly, 2013) and accounts of Vietnam's broader language-policy framework (Nguyen, 2014). However, the policy documents establish how this relationship is represented and what functions are envisaged; they do not demonstrate how language use is distributed in practice or whether potential tensions have been resolved.

This analysis complements research on Vietnam's emerging second-language policy that examines the institutional conditions and implementation challenges associated with developing second-language functions across the education system (Nguyen-Viet, 2026). Whereas that work addresses institutional conditions, the present study examines how SL acquires policy-specific meaning through recontextualisation and conceptual specification. It also clarifies the meaning of *second*: the policy trajectory provides little support for interpreting it simply as a numerical ranking that places English after Vietnamese. Its significance instead derives from the functions, environments and institutional practices that policy seeks to develop.

The distinction between conceptual tension and conceptual slippage is equally important. Research on Taiwan questions whether *bilingual* adequately represents the country's multilingual ecology and highlights how policy labels may carry meanings beyond their explicitly stated intentions (Yeh, 2023; Chang, 2025). In Vietnam, SL similarly connects educational planning, proposals for legal recognition, institutional development and established disciplinary understandings. These meanings coexist, but their coexistence does not necessarily indicate conceptual incoherence.

Slippage becomes a concern when distinguishable meanings are treated as interchangeable without acknowledgement. Three potential interpretive risks arise: treating the prospective educational objective as a description of Vietnam's current sociolinguistic conditions; extending the school-based objective to English

throughout Vietnamese society; or equating expanded educational functions with the broader societal conditions conventionally associated with second-language environments. These are possible consequences of ambiguous interpretation, not demonstrated characteristics of the policy documents.

Overall, the Vietnamese trajectory provides stronger evidence of recontextualisation and conceptual specification than of conceptual slippage. Decision 2371 makes the educational meaning of the objective more explicit, although it does not eliminate the wider semantic associations of SL or guarantee uniform interpretation. The concept is better understood as a reconfiguration within the existing language-policy framework than as a straightforward departure from earlier priorities. More broadly, conceptual flexibility in language policy should be neither automatically treated as error nor assumed to be without limits. Policy analysis needs to distinguish the coexistence of different conceptual orientations from unacknowledged shifts between meanings, and to identify when such shifts may have consequences for policy interpretation and implementation.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how second language (SL) has been recontextualised and progressively specified in Vietnamese English language policy. It traced the concept's emergence, formalisation and evolving policy meaning, without evaluating Vietnam against a predetermined model of an ESL context. The findings show that SL has evolved from a relatively open aspiration into a prospective, institutionally bounded policy concept.

The policy trajectory does not primarily present SL as a description of an existing sociolinguistic condition, but as a condition that policy seeks to create. The shift towards making EASL in schools bounds the objective institutionally, while Decision 2371 gives it more specific content through expanded English use across educational functions and environments. The concept is also linked to educational development, international integration and human-resource capacity, while Vietnamese retains its national and cultural anchoring. This represents functional differentiation without status displacement.

The analysis provides clear evidence of recontextualisation and conceptual specification, while identifying potential tensions and interpretive risks that cannot be established as realised from the available policy evidence. The findings therefore suggest that the development of a policy concept need not entail either semantic dilution or complete conceptual stabilisation. Its meaning may become more institutionally determinate while retaining associations with established linguistic understandings and wider policy expectations.

These findings highlight the importance of examining how language-policy concepts are situated, connected to wider policy objectives and translated into institutional arrangements. For Vietnam, the prospective nature of SL makes conceptual precision dependent less on correspondence with an existing sociolinguistic category than on the clarity of the conditions intended to realise it. Decision 2371 advances this specification, although the institutional scope of SL in schools and the criteria for assessing progress will need to remain clear as implementation proceeds.

This study has focused on policy discourse and cannot establish whether the envisaged conditions will be realised or how SL will be interpreted across educational settings. Future research could examine how implementation further specifies the concept and whether it generates new conceptual tensions.

Vietnam's policy shift is therefore better understood not as the replacement of one fixed linguistic category by another, but as the construction of a policy-specific meaning around a semantically flexible concept. The central

question is not simply whether English is a second language in Vietnam, but how second language has been transformed into a policy concept and what making English one has come to mean within Vietnam's evolving language policy.

Declarations

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study comprise publicly accessible policy documents and related public discourse, including government decisions, decrees, resolutions, legal instruments, and contemporaneous media reports concerning the development of ESL in Vietnam. No original dataset was generated for this research. The source documents are available through official government websites, legal databases, and media outlets, and are cited in the References section.

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