Teacher Attitudes Towards the English Language Curriculum Change: The Case of Vietnam

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Abstract
With the spread of English as a global lingua franca, many governments have developed and implemented new curricula and pedagogies, aiming to enhance English competence for personal and national participation in a globalised world. In Vietnam, the Government established Project 2020 (since relabelled Project 2025), a reform of the national English language curriculum in the schooling system to renovate the English education at the school level. However, little is known about how Vietnamese teachers actually regard the change and the practical challenges to the curriculum implementation at the local level. This paper explores the attitude of Vietnamese teachers towards the new curriculum for secondary classrooms. Drawn from an online survey and interviews with teachers, the research findings indicate positive attitudes among the teachers concerning the necessity of the curriculum reform, while showing their doubts and more negative evaluations of the overall feasibility of the new curriculum, both its goals and its pedagogic approach. A number of constraints hindering the success of the change are discussed and recommendations are made including the need to establish appropriate in-service teacher professional development as an essential aspect of the reform.

Key words: Teacher attitudes, Curriculum innovation, Communicative Language Teaching, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal, Vietnam

Introduction

One outcome of globalisation has been the uptake of English as a global lingua franca, with many governments becoming concerned about the lack of English competence across their populations for personal and national participation in the global economy. This pragmatic need has motivated numerous English Language Teaching (ELT) reform initiatives at a national level, with focused and determined efforts being dedicated to innovations and renovations in curricula, materials and pedagogies. Common to such reform efforts was the move towards various versions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Particularly in the Asia Pacific region, CLT has become a 'slogan', and communicative competence has been adopted as a central component of government rhetoric (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2011; Nunan, 2003).

As a developing country in Kachru's global framework, one positioned as part of the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1992, 1999), Vietnam has followed this trend towards communicative-based curriculum reform. The National Foreign Language Project 2020 (now rebadged as Project 2025) was launched in 2008, and this initiative provided the context and data for this study. Within the project, emphasis has been placed on enhancing student communicative competence, with new curricula and a new series of textbooks designed for the three levels of schooling from Year 3 to Year 12, all adhering to the principles of CLT to drive a learner-centred pedagogy. The adoption of CLT has intended to bring about a radical change in classroom practices and processes across the country, transforming the traditional, grammar-based, teacher-centred classroom into an interactive and learner-centred space.

Implementing a new curriculum and pedagogy at a national level is a complex process, one element of which is the deep-seated issue of teacher attitude and its interconnection with teaching practices in the shift to the new approach to teaching (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). This paper, located within a larger study aiming to inform the question of intention versus reality of the recent ELT curriculum reform in Vietnamese schools, presents an investigation of the Vietnamese teacher attitude towards the curriculum change in this South-Eastern Asian country.

Teacher attitude and educational reform

Studies of teacher attitudes in the context of educational reforms have reinforced the view that attitude should be understood as a vital and inevitable part of any pedagogic innovation (Datnow, 2012; Gregory & Noto, 2018; Macfarlane & Woolfson, 2013). As argued by Karavas-Doukas (1996), teacher attitude has a strong influence on classroom practice, and directly impacts what students learn in classrooms. If there are incompatibilities between teacher attitude and the philosophies and values underlying innovations, teachers are more likely to reject the change or

enact the change on the 'surface' – with little actual change at the level of classroom practice (Fullan, 2015; Humphries & Burns, 2015). Therefore, substantial efforts may be required to make sure that teachers "revise, refine, or change attitudes which may not be compatible with the principles of the approach" (Karavas-Doukas, 1996, p. 188).

In curriculum innovation, a positive teacher attitude is considered a key prerequisite for successful implementation of change (Saloviita & Schaffus, 2016). Thus, in the domain of language teaching, there has been a growing attention globally to the significance of investigating language teacher beliefs and attitudes in shaping classroom practices. Studies include those in South Korea (Li, 2001), in Thailand (de Segovia & Hardison, 2009), in Japan (Tsushima, 2012), in Turkey (Kırkgöz, 2008), in Libya (Orafi & Borg, 2009), in China (Fang & Garland, 2014; Hu, 2005; W. Wang, 2014; Zhang & Liu, 2014; H. Zheng, 2015), and in Hong Kong (Carless, 2007). Studies have uniformly reported that teacher attitudes have not always aligned with the communicative curriculum, and that this has contributed to the poor outcome of CLT reform (Ching-Ching & Kuo-Hung, 2018; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996). Li (1998) reported that the teachers on South Korea disregarded CLT as they believed that this pedagogy could not prepare their students for the written, grammar-based examinations. Hu (2002) reported that CLT failed to achieve the expected outcomes in China partly as a result of clashes between the interactive, learner-centred principles underpinning CLT and Chinese traditional classrooms, with the outcome that teachers resisted employing CLT. CLT also caused substantial confusion at the classroom level, so that teachers held different views with regards to 'how to teach' the communicative curriculum, resulting in its limited success (H. Wang, 2008; X. Zheng & Borg, 2014).

English Language Teaching in Vietnam

English language education in Vietnam has been inextricably linked to political, economic and social change. A history of conflict with different enemies created soured relations with the outer world for a long period. At the end of lengthy periods of conflict, the languages of Vietnam's enemies disappeared from the school curriculum (Wright, 2002). English has gained prominence since the Open Door policy of 1986 which saw the demand for English proficiency surge, leading to "English language fever" (Le, 2007, p. 172). In the late 1990s, the government proclaimed English a compulsory foreign language at school and tertiary levels. English has now become part of the high-stakes examination system, serving as an important gatekeeper in the educational system.

Despite its increasingly prominent role in the national education system, the quality of

English teaching and learning in Vietnam has commonly been evaluated as "unsatisfactory for everyday communicative purposes as well as for specialised use" (Le, 2007, p. 175). English instruction in schools was sustained by old-fashioned textbooks and generations of teachers who focused on the mastery of grammar and lexis in order to prepare students for the entrenched high-stakes, discrete-point, written tests and examinations. Oral skills were largely neglected, leaving students unable to master any communicative functions in the target language. Classroom pedagogy reflected the examination structure, characterised as teacher-centred, textbook-based and exam-oriented (Le, 2015; Le & Barnard, 2009). Large class sizes, poorly motivated students, and a lack of appropriately qualified teachers remained as major challenges to English education (Le, 2007, 2015; Pham, 2007). This questionable standard of English language education in the formal schooling system was unable to respond to the country's ambitious social and economic development demands (Vu & Burns, 2018).

The National Foreign Language Project: Project 2025

Project 2025 is the most recent governmental response to the increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of English education in Vietnam. The economic benefits of globalisation are seen to be the major driving force for the launch of this language initiative as competent English users are in high demand. With a planned expenditure of approximately 426 million USD, the project was the most prominent and ambitious initiative in the Vietnam's educational history, reflecting a strong commitment by the government to ELT education (Le, 2015; Nguyen & Bui, 2016). As part of the project, English is made compulsory from Year 3 to Year 12, and after ten years of study, there is an expectation that school graduates will be independent, intermediate users of English. The goal of the project was that by 2025:

> *"Vietnamese young people graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily life, study and work in a multicultural and multilingual environment, making foreign languages a competitive advantage of Vietnamese people to serve the cause of industrialisation and modernisation of the country."*
>
> *(Government of Vietnam, Article 1.1, Decision 1400, 2008, p.1).*

Since its inception, Project 2025 has been the topic of vigorous public and scholarly debate. There has been scepticism from both international and domestic researchers (Hayes, 2008; Le, 2008, 2015; Le & Do, 2012; Vu, 2013) who have expressed concerns about the achievability of its goals. H. Nguyen (2011) explored the implementation in two primary schools, revealing discrepancies between what was intended at the policy level and what actually

happened in classrooms. Major concerns relating to the innovation were also discussed by Nguyen et al. (2018) who criticised the use of the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for setting learning outcomes as "over-ambitious and likely unachievable for students in the near future" (p. 222).

Teacher competency has remained as a major issue, particularly when test results indicated that among the 80,000 teachers of English, 83% of primary school teachers, 87% of lower secondary school teachers, and 92% of high school teachers failed to meet the mandated proficiency level to teach the new curriculum (Nguyen, 2013). Whilst some attention has been devoted to teacher in-service training and professional development, this has often been in the form of 'quick-fix' training workshops. Furthermore, more than 90% of English teachers are females who are expected to wear "too many different hats" at home and at work (Le, 2015, p. 186). Additionally, low salaries have forced many to tutor extra classes to boost income, which has caused them to forego the opportunities to develop themselves professionally.

Although the Vietnamese Government has put substantial emphasis on teaching communicative English, implementing a new curriculum and pedagogy nationally brings enormous challenges involving numerous factors and impediments of various sorts. There are potentially more deep-seated issues, including the attitude of the teaching force to the curriculum change. In fact, little is known about how Vietnamese teachers actually regard the change besides the practical challenges to the curriculum implementation at the local level. The paper attempts to inform this gap regarding how the key agents of the change, that is the English language teachers, evaluate the curriculum reform.

The study

The study explored how the reform was evaluated by investigating the attitudinal responses of Vietnamese teachers in lower secondary schools in Vietnam through two research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of lower secondary school EFL teachers to the new curriculum?
2. What are the constraints perceived by these teachers to the implementation of the new curriculum?

The data collection was based in one northern province of Vietnam. A mixed methods research design was used, which enabled concurrent use of both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The potential for triangulation within this research design offered the construction of meaningful and coherent explanations from both numeral and verbal data, therefore, enhancing the reliability and validity of the research findings. The data were drawn from an online survey (n=112) and

interviews (n=11).

The survey

The study employed purposive sampling strategies (Creswell, 2012). The local Department of Education and Training provided the information that 88 schools had been trialling the new curriculum, and 178 teachers in these schools were invited to participate in an online survey[3]. The online survey was used for the reasons that it saved time in distribution to teachers of different locations, and in gathering and processing the data (Bryman, 2012). The aim of the survey was to elicit teacher perspectives on a number of issues relating to curriculum reform. In total, 172 emails were successfully delivered, and after a one-month period, 112 responses to had been received, a response rate of approximately 65%. Descriptive statistics (Bryman, 2012) were employed as the tool for the univariate analysis in which patterns and frequencies in the responses were calculated. Verbal data deriving from the open-ended item were treated qualitatively.

Table 1 presents demographic information of the 112 teachers participating in the survey, and provides biographic details relating to their gender, qualification, teaching experience and current levels of English language proficiency.

Table 1
Teacher demographic information

Demographics	***Summary of Participants (n = 112)***
Gender	Males: 7% (n = 8) Females: **93% (n = 104)**
Formal Education	BA Degree (four-year undergraduate): **93% (n = 104**) BA Degree (three-year undergraduate): 7% (n = 8)
Teaching Experiences	2 - 5 years: 5% (n = 5) 6 - 10 years: 10% (n = 11) 10 - 15 years: 17% (n = 19) 15 - 20 years: **60% (n = 67)** > 20 years: 9% (n = 10)
English Language Proficiency	B1: 6% (n = 7) B2: **84% (n = 94)** C1: 10% (n = 11)

More than 93% of the teacher participants were female, pointing to the fact that English language education, at least at the lower secondary level, in Vietnam is overwhelmingly a female

[3] It is noted that the old curriculum is still being used in parallel with the new curriculum. The teachers who did not teach the new curriculum were not invited to this survey.

profession. All of the teachers had a relevant qualification in English language teaching with 93% having a four-year undergraduate degree. These teachers had a great deal of experience in teaching English at the lower-secondary level, with 85% having more than 10 years' experience. Regarding English language proficiency, 94% had achieved a Proficiency Level B2 or above, which met the mandated level required by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). A clear picture emerged that the typical participant was a well-qualified female teacher with many years' experience in teaching English at the lower-secondary level.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 11 teachers from four schools, two urban and two rural (Table 2). The selection of schools in different locations provided responses from different teaching and learning contexts. The interview protocol included questions about their evaluation of the new curriculum as well as their concerns about the implementation process.

Table 2
Details of the interview teachers

#	Name	School	School type	Experience (years)		Location
				of teaching English	of the new curriculum	
1	Teacher A	School 1	Selective	32	2	Rural area
2	Teacher B	School 1		21	4	
3	Teacher C	School 1		13	3	
4	Teacher D	School 1		12	3	
5	Teacher E	School 2	Normal	18	3	
6	Teacher F	School 2		30	4	
7	Teacher G	School 3	Selective	12	3	Urban area
8	Teacher H	School 4	Normal	20	3	
9	Teacher I	School 4		30	4	
10	Teacher J	School 4		14	3	
11	Teacher K	School 4		15	2	

Appraisal: An analytical framework for understanding attitude

The study used the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005) for analysing the evaluations expressed in the interviews and survey open-ended questions. The framework outlines the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) system of the language of evaluation, that is the meaning-making resources by which speaker/writers express their emotions, judgements and appreciations of different entities, both human and non-human (White, 2015).

The Appraisal system separates evaluative resources in language into three semantic categories, namely Attitude, Engagement and Graduation (Figure 1). Attitude concerns the resources for expressing emotions and attitudes and is the focus in the study. The sub-system of

Attitude, consists of three types, namely Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. While Affect deals with language recourses for expressing emotions and feelings, Judgement refers to resources for evaluating human behaviour and character by reference to ethics/morality and other systems of conventionalised and/or institutionalised norms. Appreciation relates to the evaluation of objects, artefacts, states of affairs and processes with regards to how their values are assigned socially.

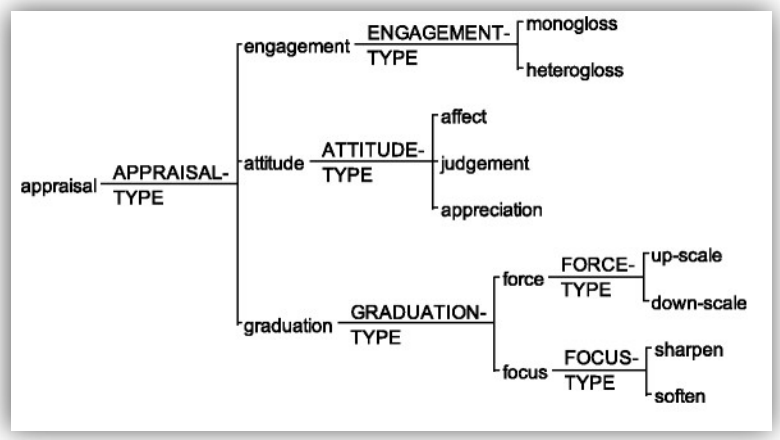

Figure 1. *Basic system for Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005)*

The Appraisal system was used to analyse how the teachers expressed their attitude, specifically their language choices of Judgement, Appreciation and Affect, either positive or negative in relation to the curriculum reform. The analysis included inscriptions of evaluation where it was explicitly stated, as well as the implicit invoking of evaluation where meaning was less clearly obvious or could not be simply tied to the choice of lexical item, and where the evaluation was necessarily understood in relation to the context. As attitudinal meanings can be expressed by combinations of words beyond the level of the clause in particular textual settings (White, 2015), the analysis looked at both individual clauses, and also strings of clauses expressing the attitudinal meaning of the speaker/writer. The process involved identifying the Source of the Attitude, that is the appraiser and also the Target of the Attitude, that is the appraised entity or human participant. As interpretation of the attitude of the teachers participating in the survey and in interview was based on the evidence provided by the analysis.

Findings

The necessity and feasibility of the new curriculum

As seen in Table 3, 93% of the survey respondents advocated the need for the curriculum change, indicating overwhelming support for the innovation. Of these approximately 60% viewed the change as necessary and 34% as very necessary.

Table 3
Teacher responses to the need for a curriculum change

	Not necessary	Somewhat necessary	N/A	Necessary	Very necessary
Percentage of responses	1%	4%	2%	58%	34%

A Pearson chi-square test[4] showed no statistically significant relationship between teachers' perceived necessity of the curriculum change and their gender (p=.272), their education (p=.636), their teaching experience (p=.206) or their level of English proficiency (p=.965). This suggests that teacher attitude about the need for a curriculum renewal was not shaped by their background or prior training and experience.

In relation to the achievability of the two specified curriculum goals (Table 4), the first covered a broad sweep and may have been viewed as overly ambitious, and on that basis, the teachers may have been reluctant to fully endorse its achievability. About 76% of the respondents believed it could be partially achieved, whilst nearly 20% regarded this first goal as unachievable. The second goal was much more concrete, as it was related to a specific English language proficiency level. Two thirds of the teachers (66%) viewed this goal as partly achievable. Only 13% of respondents expressed real confidence that students could reach the Proficiency Level A2 with a larger number (21%) taking the view that this goal was not at all achievable. More teachers took the view that their students would not reach the target proficiency than those who believed they would reach the required level.

Table 4
Teacher responses to the achievability of the curriculum goals

#	***Overall goals of the new curriculum***	*Percentage of mentions*		
		Achievable	*Partially achievable*	*Unachievable*
1	English language education at lower-secondary schools aims to help students practise and develop their communicative competence in English, which becomes a foundation for the use of English as a tool for study in school and life, helps to create the habit of life-long learning, and develops themselves to become responsible citizens in the context of globalisation.	5%	76%	19%
2	After finishing lower secondary school, students achieve level A2 of proficiency on the CEFR.	13%	66%	21%

[4] p-Value is based on a Pearson Chi-square test, confidence level at 95%.

Again, a Pearson chi-square test showed no statistically significant correlation between teacher attitude about the achievability of the curriculum goals and their background, including gender, education, experience and English proficiency levels (p>.005). In fact, the teacher attitude was grounded in their perceived understandings of the constraints hindering the achievement of the specified goals which were made evident through the Appraisal analysis of teacher attitude towards the new curriculum.

Teacher attitude towards the new curriculum

Table 5 provides a summary of the evaluations expressed by the teachers as evident in the Appraisal analysis of the interviews, along with the data generated from the open-ended survey questions. The table presents details of the specific type of positive or negative Attitude identified in the analysis. Positive evaluations accounted for 20% of the total, while negative evaluations were four-fold higher at 80%. Negative Appreciation was the most frequently expressed Attitude type, at 58% of the total of negative evaluations. Instances of emotional Affect were rare and only positive, accounting for only 4%, while Judgement in relation to accepted norms accounted for 22% of the total of negative Attitude.

Table 5
Appraisal instances in teacher responses, based on types of Attitudes

Attitudes	Instances	As %
Positive	**39**	**20%**
Affect	6	4%
Judgement	1	-
Appreciation	32	16%
Negative	**158**	**80%**
Affect	-	-
Judgement	44	22%
Appreciation	114	58%
Total	**197**	**100%**

Table 6 details the inscribed/explicit versus invoked/implicit expressions of Attitude. Whilst there was a clear distinction between negative and positive Attitude, the ways in which both were expressed were very similar. Very close to 50% of the positive Attitude tokens were inscribed and the same percentage invoked. The same was evident in relation to the negative

Attitude expressed.

Table 6
Appraisal instances in teacher responses, based on inscribed and invoked Attitudes

Attitudes	Instances	As %
Positive	**39**	**20%**
inscribed	22	11%
invoked	17	9%
Negative	**158**	**80%**
inscribed	79	40%
invoked	79	40%
Total	**197**	**100%**

Positive Attitude

Thirty-nine instances of positive attitude were found, constituting 20% of the total. In this category, Appreciation was the prevalent choice (16%), while instances of Affect were rare (4%), and only one instance of positive Judgement was evident.

Positive Appreciation was the most common means by which the teachers made positive evaluations of the new curriculum. Typically, these positive comments were about the value of the new curriculum and were expressed explicitly rather than implicitly, as in the following example:

> "I really like the new curriculum because it's rich in terms of knowledge and can help students develop their skills… Generally I think the new curriculum is good" (Teacher D)

Instances of positive Affect were far fewer and showed explicit expression of positive feelings by the teachers about the new curriculum, for example about the new curriculum and also about the new textbooks.

Sometimes positive Appreciation was conveyed implicitly, as when a teacher expressed appreciation because the new curriculum could foster critical thinking rather than memorising grammar and lexis. Furthermore, the new curriculum placed communicative ability at the centre of learning, which was implicitly evaluated in a positive manner, as evident in the following comment.

> "For the old curriculum, hard work is the determinant of achieving good results. But this new one asks the students to be more critical. One thing about this curriculum is that it requires the use of English as the final aim". (Teacher D)

It is of note that a number of positive evaluations were made when the teachers made a comparison between the new and old curricula. Some teachers explicitly acknowledged the advantages of the new over the old. These teachers' positive comparisons linked to the fact that the new curriculum promoted the development of language skills among the students. In the previous iteration, the study of grammatical structures and vocabulary was understood as the main focus, whereas the new program was perceived as more advanced because it was designed to develop students' ability to use the language:

> "When working with the new curriculum, I found that obviously it has more advantages over the old one in that it can help to develop students' language skills" (Teacher A)

The textbook series developed alongside the new curriculum was a frequent target for appraisal. Positive appreciations of the new textbooks included the appealing appearance of the books and their rich visual resources as in the following comment:

> "Generally, the appearance of the books is eye catching and motivating to the students with a lot of visual images. It is not boring at all" (Teacher C)

This teacher appreciated the design of the new textbooks because they sparked interest and motivation. The diversity of learning tasks in the textbooks were also positively evaluated because they were varied in terms of difficulty levels, and, therefore, allowed for flexible use with different levels of students, as in the following comment:

> "I think the level of difficulty of tasks in the textbooks is varied. The books can be used for different levels of students. There are tasks for good students, and other easier ones for weaker students". (Teacher K)

Despite these positive evaluations, the analysis revealed a far greater number of negative comments, including the achievability of curriculum goals and the teachers' perceived constraints of contextual realities.

Negative Attitude

Negative Attitude was by the predominant evaluation of the reform. A total of 158 instance were recorded, 80% of the total of expressed Attitude. Negative Appreciation was the most frequently expressed (58%), followed by negative Judgement (22%). There were no instances of negative Affect. The number and target of these negative evaluations revealed the extent of the teacher

concerns, including the challenges faced in curriculum implementation in local contexts.

(i) Partial achievement of the curriculum goal

All the teachers shared the view that it was difficult for their students, especially those at the mid-range of achievement in non-selective schools, to attain the level A2 of proficiency. The estimated proportion of students who could gain the desired level varied for different teachers, as evident in the following comments.

> "They [students] can't achieve A2 level of proficiency. No… I think about 40 to 45% of students in top classes can achieve. In other classes, there may be about 30 to 35%, and only 10 to 15 percent of students in the lowest ranked classes" (Teacher C)

> "I think my students can't reach A2 level. Even for selective classes, I'm not sure whether 20% of the students can achieve A2 level" (Teacher E)

This supports the finding from the survey data where the majority of the participants responded that only a partial achievement of this goal could be possible, as only some but not all of the students could achieve the desired level.

(ii) High level of difficulty

A primary concern among the teachers was about the level of difficulty of the new curriculum for mainstream students. From the teacher perspective, the new program was "difficult" in terms of the skills and knowledge required, and "heavy" in terms of the workload allocated for classroom teaching and learning. Many teachers were concerned that the new curriculum was too challenging and demanding for mid or lower range students. By contrast, it was understood to be suitable and beneficial for high achievers, especially those in top classes or in selective schools. Negative appreciations were used to describe the new program, as illustrated in the following comments.

> "I think the new program is more difficult in terms of both linguistic knowledge, the number of new words and level of difficulty. I think the new program is more suitable for good students who will develop their language skills, especially speaking skills. However the students who are not very good will achieve nothing" (Teacher E)

> "The specific objectives set out in the curriculum are only suitable for selective classes

and schools. For students in rural and mountainous areas, it is difficult to achieve because the program is too heavy" (Teacher S4)

Several negative appreciations about the textbooks were also found in the teacher interviews, mostly regarding the ineffective design of some sections, and the choice of topics unfamiliar to both teachers and students, which made it even more challenging, exemplified in:

"However, some topics or contents for learning in the books are not familiar to the students, even for the teachers. If the teachers have almost no ideas about the topics, how can they explain to the students? Sometimes I feel that some of the contents are "up to the clouds", and have almost no relation to the students' everyday life" (Teacher K)

(iii) Mixed ability students with different levels of motivation

Commonly, the teachers associated their students' ability levels with the success of the curriculum reform. The teachers classified their students on their performance as "the top" and "the other", "the good" and "the not-very-good", or "the good" and "the weak". If the students were good and worked hard, they would benefit greatly from the new curriculum. On the contrary, the students who were not good would achieve little. An example of this kind of judgement follows, made more interesting by the positive appreciation of the curriculum:

"But it [the new curriculum] is difficult for weak students. For top classes, I can achieve most of the objectives of the lesson. But for other classes, I can only cover half of the target. Generally I think the curriculum is good, but only for good students from selective classes" (Teacher D)

Other instances were found where a teacher expressed her discontent about her students' laziness and lack of motivation to learn, as in:

"I have to say that students are lazy. They are not keen to learn English. Students in rural areas have little motivation for learning English" (Teacher E)

Another teacher expressed her concerns that her students did not have a good foundation of English in their earlier years of their schooling, making it more challenging to assure success in English study at the secondary level. This teacher also complained that the students were too quiet during communicative lessons. The teachers also noted the challenge of English instruction in economically disadvantaged areas where the students were often under-motivated to learn

foreign languages. These students normally achieved very limited success as a result of insufficient support coupled with a lack of incentive to learn:

> "Students do not gain much from their primary English studies, so it is difficult for them to go on with English 6. Sometimes the class is too quiet for communication lessons. What can I do if the students don't talk" (Teacher G)

The parents were also one of the targets of judgement. In commenting on the role of parents in the success of a student at school, one teacher explicitly named the parents as a significant factor contributing to the attitude and achievement of their children. Another teacher in a rural area stated her concern that when the parents did not pay attention and give encouragement to their children, there was little motivation for learning, resulting in poor school performance:

> "Students in rural areas have little motivation for learning English. If the students have little motivation and passion for learning, they don't spend time studying… Their parents do not really care much about their studies because they think that if their children do not perform well at school, then it is not necessary for them to invest resources on learning. These students do not take any further tutorials besides formal classroom instruction" (Teacher E)

(iv) Heavy workload

The heavy workload was also linked to the finding that teachers lacked time to cover the content. Teachers complained that they had to 'race' to finish lessons in the 45 minutes of allocated instructional time.

> "… the learning contents in the textbooks are too much with a lot of exercises and tasks. Teachers had to quickly move on to new exercises and tasks, which made both teacher and students demotivated and tired" (Teacher S3)

> "Most of the sections are long, so we have to race to meet the time. Sometimes I want to skip some parts, but there are new words or new knowledge in those parts which may be included in the tests. For example, if I skip one part, but other teachers don't. Therefore I always try to cover all sections in the mandated textbooks" (Teacher H)

(v) Large class sizes

Large class sizes made it overly challenging to implement and monitor effective communicative activities as well as to give individual feedbacks and keep track of the progress of individual students. This became even more difficult when the one teacher was responsible for teaching multiple classes in an academic term:

> "There are 41 or 43 students in one class. I think the class needs to be divided into 2 or 3 smaller classes in order to teach and learn effectively. How to run communicative tasks in a class of 43 students?" (Teacher C)

(vi) The washback effect of written examinations

The washback effect of high-stake examinations was evident in the teacher interviews. While the curriculum goal was to develop communication skills, the high-stakes examinations remained unchanged, focused on written and grammar skills. A shared concern among the teachers was that an intensive focus on communicative ability would be at the expense of grammar practice, resulting in poor achievement in tests and examinations:

> "One student may understand the lesson and use more English, but he or she may not perform well in the tests where there are grammar items included. Students who are good at communicative English may not be good at grammar" (Teacher D)

> "However the entrance exam to Year 10, there are only reading, writing and grammar. Therefore, students are not encouraged to develop their communicative skills and they still study for the exam to Year 10" (Teacher S12)

The washback of the entrenched written examinations has led to an increase in private tutoring alongside formal schooling. Private tutoring is an issue in the Vietnamese education system where a strong desire for good marks has created a context in which many students and parents are reliant on private tuition. Many teachers admitted that they participated in private tutoring regardless of the government's restrictions because of the strong demand from students and parents:

> "It's not allowed to teach extra lessons to according to the regulations. I do teach but you know I can't really say it in public. It's kind of confidential information shared by the teacher, students and their parents. Administrative officers said extra teaching should be banned. They said that it should be stopped, but their children all go to our extra classes". (Teacher C)

Teacher C further commented that the students who could achieve the targeted level of proficiency were those subscribed to more private tutorials:

> "So I suggest that you should note further information here is that the students take more lessons outside school. They can achieve A2 level as result from their family investment, rather than from the school and me" (Teacher C)

(vii) Unconfident teachers

Some of the judgements were about the teachers themselves, related to that fact that the English proficiency level of the teachers was still low. Furthermore, it appeared that there was a lack of, or ineffective teacher support, with the outcome that the teachers were confused or did not know what they should do. Teacher H claimed that there might not be any teachers who could say that they were confident teaching the new curriculum:

> "Honestly when I taught the new curriculum for the first time, I was not confident at all. There was only me working on my own. I complained all the time. I always lacked of class time to cover the syllabus, and I had to teach during the break time. I was too tired, and there was no one out there to ask" (Teacher B)

> "To be honest, I'm not very confident [teaching the curriculum] because there are a lot of things that I haven't been very clear, like the teaching methodology… If being asked whether I am confident about teaching the new curriculum, I may say that no one can say they are confident" (Teacher H)

(viii) Limited facilities

The lack of facilities to aid teaching and learning was another constraint frequently mentioned by the teachers. In the following instances, the teachers expressed discontent about the ill-equipped classrooms:

> "I just say simply about Vietnam's education is that there is a lack of facilities, lack of teaching aids, audio-visual equipment. We are not provided with teaching aids like disc players, speakers, so we have to buy. We are not supplied with necessary facilities for teaching and learning foreign languages, but are required to achieve this objective or that objective. This sounds silly" (Teacher C)

Discussion

> Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and as complex as that (Fullan, 2007, p. 129)

In the Project 2025 curriculum reform, significant emphasis appeared to be placed on product development (i.e. the curriculum and textbooks), on the legislation and on other formally expressed changes (i.e. the decisions and guidelines) in a way that seemed to minimise the variable ways that the teachers at the local level would respond to the task of enacting the change. This was informed in the research findings that whilst the teachers accepted the need for curriculum renewal, they voiced negative attitudes and concerns about the feasibility of the curriculum goals, which they considered to be overly ambitious. The common view was that the desired Proficiency Level A2 was achievable by high-performing students but was too challenging for those in the mid-range and below. For example, one teacher in a rural school estimated that only 20% of her students could reach the required level after the four years of the new curriculum. Whilst this teacher was at the lower end of estimating overall outcomes, the general sense was that the achievement standard was generally neither feasible nor realistic for the great majority of mainstream students. This view was corroborated by research at the upper secondary level where Le (2015) described the overall goal of the reform as "ambitious and unrealistic" (p. 196). The establishment of a rigid 'one-size-fits-all' proficiency goal also failed to override the influences, the social determinants that students brought to school – their socio-economic backgrounds, their ethnicity, their motivations for schooling, and their different interests and capabilities. On this basis, H. Nguyen et al. (2018) described Project 2020 as "a biased access policy" (p. 224), and concluded that the reform might only work to increase the gap among individuals, communities and regions, as well as among high and low performing schools and students.

The negative attitude of the teachers about the curriculum reform was largely concerned with various potential barriers in implementing this communicative-based curriculum in the local context. The constraints raised ranged from macro level to classroom level factors, including the heavy workload, the washback effect of the written examination systems, large class sizes with limited facilities, the mixed-level students with different levels of motivation and the unconfident teacher. It is not difficult to realise that some of these constraints were not new, e.g. in Le (2007, 2015); Pham (2007). Many of these constraints documented here were first documented more than 20 years ago, e.g. in Carless (1998); Li (1998), and have been echoed in accounts from other contexts, e.g. in Butler (2011); Coskun (2011); Humphries and Burns (2015); Nunan

(2003). It is disappointing to realise that Project 2025 was developed in the context of an extensive literature on reforms in the domain of English language teaching and learning in a range of similar contexts. There has been no lack of cases, experiences and lessons to be drawn from the various attempts to adopt CLT in curriculum innovation. It might be expected that Vietnam would learn from both the successful and unsuccessful attempts of the past to plan and initiate curriculum change which would be more contextually sensitive (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). However, the reported constraints reveal an obvious misalignment between what policymakers believed as the achievable goals and what the teachers perceived as practical and feasible for the students in their local contexts. This misalignment was a result of the top-down approach to curriculum reform.

The top-down curriculum reform

A major problem within the curriculum reform in Vietnam was the lack of collaboration amongst the various stakeholders in the process of planning, shaping and implementing the reform. This was in line with Fullan's (2007) observation of the two 'divergent worlds' involved in the complex process of curriculum change:

> We have a classic case of two entirely different worlds: the policymakers on the one side, and the local practitioner on the other. To the extent that each side is ignorant of the subjective world of the other, reform will fail - and the extent is great (p. 99)

The way MOET shaped its curriculum, although sponsored by the best intentions of the educational authorities, failed to accommodate the voice of the teachers – the ultimate end-users of the curriculum and the decisive agents in the success of change who ultimately held the power to transform the intentions of the curriculum policy into practical reality within each and every Vietnamese classroom. Essentially, there was an absence of teacher voice in relation to the reform package, importantly in setting the proficiency goal and the time frame for its achievement, in the pedagogy to be used and in the type and extent of professional development which was required for the English teachers. This lack of collaboration resulted in a loss of shared understanding between policymakers and policy implementers in relation to the why, what and how of change. At the macro level, policymakers and politicians have often been decried for their "desperate craving for a magical solution" (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996, p. 294), resulting in ambitious overarching goals and high accountability standards. In the case of Vietnam, this 'magical solution' was the ambitious proficiency target which was judged by teachers to be impossible to achieve in mainstream classrooms. The lack of interaction and collaboration

amongst the various stakeholders in the hierarchical system resulted in a mismatch between policy intent and teacher belief and enactment of the curriculum.

Preparation for the communicative curriculum

The research findings reveal a lack of preparation for the communicative curriculum to be implemented successfully in the classroom. Nothing has changed in regard to large class sizes and the ongoing washback effect of high-stakes written examinations, both of which are counter-productive to the intended communicative curriculum.

Communicative lessons could not flourish in overcrowded classrooms and in traditional classroom set-ups which are more likely to inhibit than support authentic communicative interaction. The literature of curriculum reform suggested it was unrealistic to expect teachers to conduct communicative lessons in over-crowded classrooms (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). In large classes, it was "very difficult, if not entirely impossible", as Li (1998, p. 681) concluded, to introduce and manage performance-based activities which tended to be more difficult to organise and time-consuming in overcrowded classrooms. The strong washback effects of written examinations were evident in the study. The need for students to develop accuracy as a priority over fluency in order to pass the highly competitive examinations would remain the paramount teaching and learning target. The 'victim' is communicative teaching and learning in that "only lip-service is paid to communication" even though the communicative approach is the official pedagogy (Le & Barnard, 2009, p. 28).

Insufficient professional support for the teachers has been one of the major hurdles to its success. This lack of professional training resulted in a feeling of isolation among many teachers in the study, expressed in ongoing pedagogic confusion and even frustration with the process of implementing the innovation. "Too tired" and "no one out there to ask", as one senior teacher put it, probably best describes the lack of professional support and the feeling of isolation amongst the teachers. Furthermore, the language competence of English teachers remains a major concern in Vietnam and other countries in Kachru's Expanding Circle (Crystal, 1997, 2003; Kachru, 1992). Many teachers reported that they remained unconfident and uncomfortable in using English to teach, despite their appropriate level of proficiency. This finding is linked with the potential for shared anxiety among non-native-speaker teachers because their language proficiency is believed to influence their professional self-esteem and confidence (Medgyes, 1994, 2001). They may be anxious about making errors when speaking in English, so losing the respect of their students. Previous research had noted that these anxieties and questions of self-confidence in language proficiency had created feelings of inferiority and had also impacted

adversely on teaching (Braine, 2005; Medgyes, 2001; Moussu, 2006). This was an important factor in the lack of uptake of the communicative approach prescribed in the intention of the reform.

The question of ideology

A broader and more deep-seated issue in the context of Vietnam is the potential clash between the student-centred, interactive principles of CLT and the traditional Vietnamese classroom where the legacies of Confucian ideology are clearly in evidence. Of particular relevance are the philosophical assumptions about teaching and learning, and the perceived roles and responsibilities of teachers and students in the classroom.

There is no question that CLT is essentially a contemporary Western industrialised creation, inherently displaying the ideologies and cultural values of its origins in Europe and the USA. When exported to non-Western locations such as Vietnam, there is a potential conflict between its Western-based premises and the beliefs and understandings about education in non-Western locations. In Vietnam, Confucian beliefs and values are implicit across many areas of culture, no more so than in education. Learning is conceptualised as an acquisition of information and knowledge which resides principally in books. The teacher is regarded as the possessor and transmitter of valued knowledge, and the learner is the recipient of the teacher's wisdom. In this way, a relationship of power difference pertains between the teacher and the student, and the student pays due deference to the teacher in this asymmetric relationship. Students in traditional Vietnamese classrooms are expected to speak only when being addressed, and spontaneous interactions are traditionally not evident or welcomed in classrooms. In this transmission-oriented pedagogy, there is strong teacher authority and minimal student individuality, resulting in a teacher-centred classroom.

CLT inherently promotes an individualistic approach to learning. It rewards independence and individuality, and encourages authentic interactions in the target language as one of its core principles. CLT is constructivist-based and aims to place the learner at the centre of teaching and learning. The prescribed pedagogy in Project 2025 embodies an educational philosophy alien to Vietnamese culture, and has made assumptions about teacher and student roles at odds with those which have been ingrained within the local culture. It was bound to meet with resistance, likely to find only limited success, even failure as was the experience in China (Hu, 2002, 2004).

In Vietnam, there is no doubt that a clash of educational values has been an important impediment to the success of Project 2025. Relevant to this outcome is the following comment

by Elmore (2004) which gets to the importance of the major professional development focus which will be required for success in the curriculum change:

> Cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modelling the new values and behaviour that you expect to displace the existing ones (p. 11)

The cultural change implicated here relates essentially to the roles and relationships of the teachers and learners in the English language classrooms. The intended shift to a CLT approach marks a monumental shift for Vietnamese teachers and students. The modelling of the changes required for success must be addressed in the professional development programs and materials which are now crucial for teachers. Without them, Project 2025 and any other reform in the future can only result in limited changes, well short the magnitude targeted by the policymakers and needed by the country.

Conclusion

This study reports the results of an investigation into teacher attitudes about the new curriculum reform at the secondary school level. Although the findings showed a proportion of positive teacher attitude about the reform, negative attitude was far more in evidence. The negative attitudes highlighted potential barriers to the success of the curriculum implementation, including macro-level and classroom-level constraints. Perhaps more importantly there was a potential clash of ideologies between the conventional transmission-style classroom and the interactive, individualistic ideology of CLT classrooms. These constraints made clear that, from the teacher perspective, it was too challenging for this communicative-based curriculum to be enacted in their classrooms.

Project 2025 is the product of a top-down approach where the need for change was decided at the central bureaucracy within the Communist Party. Past experiences in education reform indicate that real change is difficult to achieve in spite of significant top-down effort, so the question arises what should be done to make the curriculum change actually work in the Vietnamese classrooms? There is perhaps no single answer to this question. Systematic changes are necessary to make communicative classrooms more possible, including smaller and better-equipped classrooms, together with equivalent changes in the testing and assessment system. Of equal importance is the need to have strong guidance from the centre alongside participation and

collaboration of the teachers in the process of planning, shaping and implementing the reform.

Change will need time and effort from the multiple stakeholders, especially the teachers. It cannot be assumed that teachers will automatically implement the intentions of the policymakers and curriculum designers (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996; H. Wang, 2008). They need to be well-served and well-supported to be able to enact the intended change. They need to have input into the proposed change. Teacher training and support should be given as a top priority. The present and future focus of professional learning for Vietnamese NNS teachers should be on two key matters: (i) enhancing teacher competence in English, and (ii) strengthening teacher understanding of CLT and how to apply CLT flexibly within their local classrooms. By doing so, teachers can develop greater autonomy, flexibility and power to make contextual adaptations in their daily practices, so as to respond to changing teaching/learning demands and the diverse needs of learners. This is of critical importance particularly in the "post-method era" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) when there is "no single golden method that works well for everybody regardless of context" (Butler, 2011, p. 51). In Vietnam, as access to professional development often varies considerably among teachers in different locations, teacher support must be also be provided on the basis of teachers' actual needs, and more importantly, their local teaching contexts. As Le (2015) argues, there is a need to develop a 'community of practice' within each school and small geographical area in order to "[celebrate] local knowledge" and "to localise pedagogies" (p. 195).

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethics approval (H-2017-027, 09 Mar 2017) granted by the Human Research Ethics Review Group (Faculty of Arts and Faculty of the Professions, The University of Adelaide). This study was considered to be low risk with minimal risks for the research participants.

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