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"Why I Don't Teach as I was Trained": Vietnamese Early Career ESOL Teachers' Experience of Reality Shock

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Abstract: Trained intensively in teaching English for communication, beginning Vietnamese ESOL teachers still follow the traditional approach in their classroom, i.e., teaching for grammar-and-vocabulary exams. This contrast in pedagogical practices is caused by "reality shock", which happens for most teachers during the first few years into teaching. The current study aims to explore how reality shock influences and transforms early career ESOL teachers' teaching methodologies. It employs an interpretative case study research design to outline both external and internal factors that characterize reality shock. The results show that besides English education policy, students' cooperativeness and professional support, the participants were also affected by their own pedagogical competence, beliefs, and attitudes. Recommendations for assessment policies, professional development and further research have also been put forward.

Introduction

The English language has recently been viewed as a predictor of future success and a gateway to global participation in Vietnam. The teaching of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) has, therefore, received special attention and enormous investment from both the public and Government (Le, 2019a; Ngoc, 2018). An ESOL education reform, commonly known as the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (referred to as Project 2020 hereafter), was established with the goal that by 2020 all school-leavers and university graduates would be able to communicate effectively in English (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008).

Regarding teachers as the key to success, the Government approved an allocation of 80% of the total budget of US$446.43 million for teacher professional development (Le, 2019a). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has, accordingly, launched different training schemes, created a set of standards in teachers' language proficiency and pedagogical competence, established an association for English language teaching and research (VietTESOL), developed a national standardized test and organized numerous conferences, workshops and webinars (Le et al., 2017; Le, 2019a; Le & Barnard, 2019; Ngoc, 2018; Nguyen & Ngoc, 2018).

Research, however, has shown that ESOL teachers' teaching methodology remains unchanged as from the pre-Project 2020 period, i.e. primarily preparing students for the grammar-and-vocabulary examination (Nguyen, 2016), and neglecting the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Also, approximately 50% nationwide teachers have not reached the required standard of English proficiency (Le et al., 2017). This issue of professionalism has triggered extensive research to explore the reality and provide professional support. While the contrast of ESOL teachers' training content and classroom

practices paradoxically exist side by side, how and why such change or transformation happens in the first place remains unknown.

To explore this critical pedagogical shift, scholars such as Atay et al. (2010), Ferguson-Patrick (2011) and See (2014) have suggested a focus on beginning teachers' professional growth. Particularly, Veenman (1984) and Wubbels et al. (1982) consider the first few years in a teacher's career a highly critical phase during which the most severe theory-reality shocks happen. These shocks can cause novice teachers to make significant professional decisions whose impact is potentially career-long (Lynn, 2010; See, 2014). While under the pressure to thrive in the new school culture, beginning teachers tend to accommodate themselves with adjusted beliefs concerning retention, attrition, attitudes towards professional development and especially teaching behaviors (Buchanan et al., 2013; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020; Mihaela & Alina-Oana, 2015; See, 2014). Particularly in the context of Vietnamese public schools, this could mean teachers may choose to "surrender" and follow the norm: teaching English for written exams, not for communicative purposes – which has been confirmed as a grim reality (Le, 2019a).

Little effort, however, has been made to explore what beginning ESOL teachers experience in their first years of teaching, particularly in what challenges they have to deal with and how these occurrences shape their professional beliefs and teaching behavior (Farrell, 2016). In Vietnam, early career ESOL teachers receive very little professional support and attention. There exists no induction program and those teachers have to take the same responsibilities as more experienced colleagues do with little to no assistance. Besides, there is also a complexity of school culture and power relations that challenge them. Research that positions them as subjects of investigation primarily, however, leans towards depicting their performance rather than exploring their challenges or seeking support (Tran & Nham, 2014).

This lack of acknowledgement not only drives teachers away from their teaching career but also hinders attempts to understand and support them (Le & Barnard, 2019). Richardson and Maggioli (2018) believe that an understanding of teachers in their own contexts not only reveals the true reasons for their methodological choices, but it also reveals whether or not existing professional development programs are working. Such knowledge, therefore, can initiate changes at different scales, from the classroom to the wider school context.

With regard to the Vietnamese ESOL context where most high school teachers are considered substandard in terms of both English language proficiency and teaching competence (Le, 2019a), this study employed a case study design to investigate novice ESOL teachers' reasons for not teaching as they were trained in university. Yin (2018) believes that the case study design best suits research that aims to explain how and why a phenomenon happens. By its very nature, this research follows an interpretative approach which deems to explore the way the teacher-participants experienced their first years of teaching and constructed their own knowledge of this career stage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

This study expects to address the following questions:
1. What are the differences between the professional learning and teaching practices of Vietnamese early career ESOL teachers?
2. Why are there the differences between the professional learning and teaching practices of Vietnamese early career ESOL teachers?

In particular, the study aims to explore how reality shock was happening for the teacher-participants as well as what internal and external factors drove them to changing their teaching methods.

The semi-structured interview was employed as the primary data collection tool. Teacher professional development in Project 2020 policy and the literature on reality shock

are discussed to highlight the gap and necessity in supporting beginning ESOL teachers in Vietnam. The participants' experiences of reality shock as well as the challenges imposed by both contextual and personal factors are reported before recommendations for further research are presented.

Literature Review
Project 2020: Vietnamese ESOL Teachers' Competence and Professional Development

Although Vietnamese ESOL teachers are trained intensively in subject matter knowledge, language proficiency and pedagogical content knowledge, their teaching methodology and language proficiency still receive considerable criticism (Le, 2019a; Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Ngoc, 2018).

At the start of Project 2020, a screening test was performed and 87% of all English teachers in state schools were ranked below expectation in terms of English proficiency even though the Vietnamese ESOL teacher training program has a strong focus on language competence and subject matter knowledge (Nguyen, 2013). Le and Barnard (2019) reported that intensive training was then required, and teachers had to attend supplementary English classes for a duration of four years (without summer breaks). A domestic version of some international standardized tests (i.e. FCE, IELTS, TOEFL) - VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) - was adopted when teachers had to retake the tests multiple times without recognizable progress (Nguyen, 2013). Le and Barnard (2019) maintain that VSTEP is somehow political in nature and is also less demanding than other tests. However, as reported by Le et al. (2017), the number of teachers who reached the standard was yet to meet the expected target and frustration was found as those teachers were categorized as "unqualified" or "substandard".

As far as teaching behavior is concerned, Vietnamese ESOL teachers have long been blamed for not adopting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), whose goal is to teach English for real-life communication. Rather, they intensively focus on teaching vocabulary, grammar rules, reading skills and preparing students for examinations – which characterizes Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) (Le & Barnard, 2019; Nguyen, 2016; Phan, 2017). Scholars such as Nguyen (2020) and Thu (2020) believe that such classroom practice results from the compulsory grammar-and-vocabulary written exam in Vietnam. Such washback has been mentioned enormously in the literature but remains an unsolvable issue (Le, 2019a). While testing certainly has certain directional impacts on teaching methods, for a context where academic achievement is heavily emphasized like in Vietnam, such influence is profound (Nguyen, 2020).

As Project 2020 was implemented, numerous compulsory in-service training courses in teaching methodology were widely adopted by local departments of education and training, yet they ended up facing criticism rather than achieving any significant goal (Nguyen & Ngoc, 2018). Le (2019b) reported that such training programs created noticeably negative attitudes from teachers who had to take on additional burden while still shouldering the same responsibilities and workload even during summertime. Besides, Nguyen and Ngoc (2018) believe that the fragmented and limited structure, the top-down mode of delivery and the oversimplified perspective of teacher learning in these courses were responsible for such failure. As a result, ESOL teachers continue to utilize GTM as their main teaching method and tend to regard professional learning as a burden rather than an opportunity (Nguyen et al., 2019). Interestingly, this same attitude has also been found in other traditional professional development initiatives, such as summer school, class observation or in-school training (Nguyen & Ngoc, 2018).

As Project 2020 drew closer to its closing date, the Minister of Education and Training, Phung Xuan Nha, admitted that they had failed to achieve its goals (Nguyen, 2017), and an extension to 2025 was made (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2017). However, no explanation was made and what is presented in the *Decision for Extension* largely resembles the original goals, principles and plans. Le and Nguyen (2017) criticized this lack of professionalism and believe that foundational improvements must be carried out. Most importantly, enormous efforts should be made to support teachers both professionally and personally (Le & Nguyen, 2017).

While most studies in this context have primarily concentrated on addressing this reality, very few have attempted to understand why and how Vietnamese ESOL teachers come to employ or change to GTM from CLT, which they were trained to use, in the first place. Nguyen (2013) reported that more than 30% of the Vietnamese ESOL teacher training curriculum focuses on teaching methodology, more particularly the implementation of CLT. Furthermore, research has shown that Vietnamese pre-service ESOL teachers demonstrate a very positive attitude towards language teaching, particularly in terms of how they plan to improve the reality of English education by teaching English for communication (Dinh, 2020). The fact that Vietnamese ESOL teachers turn their back on the trained teaching skills is critical yet has not received adequate attention. An emphasis on the early phase of their career has been recommended as the wide range of both professional and personal challenges during the initial years into teaching has tremendous impact on the rest of their career (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; McCormack et al., 2006). An investigation of the contradiction between university training content and teaching realities is, therefore, required to highlight this gap.

Reality Shock

Research that investigates early career ESOL teachers' professional life, particularly their problems, is limited. Besides a wide range of other different issues, every early career teacher is most challenged by the gap between their training program and classroom reality (Farrell, 2016). Nevertheless, those issues are frequently combined with other personal factors such as job satisfaction, payment, or promotion opportunities under the term 'attrition reasons' rather than being examined as standalone issues.

Farrell (2003, 2006, 2012, 2016) primarily refers to the struggle ESOL teachers have in their first years of teaching as 'reality shock' or 'transition shock', which can simply be understood as the differences between theoretical training and teaching practice. Being the first to coin the term 'reality shock', Veenman (1984) suggests that those who experience such difficulty are more vulnerable to workplace problems and pressure and tend to leave the teaching job more easily.

Farrell (2016) believes that reality shock happens as beginning teachers have to shoulder the same tasks as experienced ones without any further support from teacher educators. Other scholars, such as Richards et al. (2013) and Kim and Cho (2014), also agree that novice teachers are frequently overwhelmed by the various roles and responsibilities assigned to them. Still, the aspect that challenges beginning teachers the most is the difficulties in implementing pedagogical practices from pre-service training, which include both the planning and delivery of lessons and classroom management (Correa et al., 2015; Dicke et al., 2015; Farrell, 2012; Gan, 2013).

Recently, research addressing this experience has included the importance of contextual factors as well. In the most general sense, Richards et al. (2013) believe that reality shock can also be typified by the inability to function within the micropolitical school

context. Taking a post-modernist perspective, Correa et al. (2015) maintain that it is the under-recognition from colleagues and stakeholders as well as the failure in coordinating between their own practices that those of the school that cause the changes in novice teachers' identity, attitudes, and teaching behavior. Stokking et al. (2003), Kim and Cho (2014) and Delamarter (2015) have all found that student-teachers hold certain idealistic beliefs about the teaching career, especially in how they will be treated by colleagues and school leaders, as well as how the school and the education system function. Friedman (2004) refers to those illusions as "organizational expectations" and concludes that rarely are these assumptions aligned with realities. When early career teachers step into the real world, they immediately experience severe reality shocks as these illusions collapse (Kim & Cho, 2014).

The limited amount of ESOL research in reality shock, however, either focuses on modifying the pre-service training programs or constructing and evaluating existing induction initiatives without sufficient emphasis on teachers who are currently experiencing the shock. While researchers such as Gan (2013) and Le (2014) believe that a teaching practicum component incorporated into the training program can lessen the effect of reality shock, Faez and Valeo (2012), Akcan (2016), and Alhamad (2018) expect that addressing reality shock as an important concept in pre-service education programs can better prepare teachers for teaching realities. However, teaching practicum is not always effective, especially when the student-teachers are frequently treated as guests rather than insiders in schools (H. P. C. Nguyen, 2015; Vo et al., 2018). As for most teacher education programs, reality shock still remains an underrepresented concept (Farrell, 2016). Other efforts that actually center practicing teachers are either too simple (Farrell, 2016) or too short (Fenton-Smith & Torpey, 2013), out of which generalization and individualized care cannot be generated.

What current research has not sufficiently examined is a contextual understanding of what actually governs the aspects of reality shock. Longhurst (2015), who employed the framework of activity theory to understand teachers' appropriation of professional learning, found that only "purposeful, conceptual, practical, and individualized" (p. 103) knowledge can make its way to a teacher's classroom. In other words, pedagogical decision-making is a rather individualized process in which teachers have to critically consider, besides conceptual and practical inputs, the specific nature of their classroom and school culture. Assisting novice teachers without a proper understanding of their distinct struggles and consideration of their school context is rather meaningless. Such lack of knowledge in examining this unique relationship may hinder us from truly understanding the various reasons which cause Vietnamese beginning ESOL teachers not to teach as they were trained.

Methodology
Context and Participants

This qualitative case study was conducted with four beginning high school English teachers from one district in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. All participants were currently employed as full-time teachers at four different public schools in the same area. None of them had more than five years of experience at the time of the interview. The teachers were selected through the purposive sampling technique, mostly to ensure that all participants were in the same group, that is to say their years of experience, teaching context (see Table 1). The fact that they were no longer fully teaching for communicative purposes was also considered as this study aimed to explore how their change in pedagogical practices was informed by reality shock. Currently teaching using a different method from the trained one indicates such methodological shift. Besides, they shared the same geopolitical features as their schools

were all administrated by one Department of Education and Training. Their involvement in this study was entirely voluntary.

Participant	Gender	Age	Level of English proficiency	Qualification	Years of experience	Communicative teaching
Participant 1 (P1)	Female	26	Advanced	B.A. in TESOL	4	No
Participant 2 (P2)	Male	27	Advanced	B.A. in TESOL	3	Yes (language school)
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	26	Advanced	B.A. in TESOL	3	No
Participant 4 (P4)	Male	26	Advanced	B.A. in TESOL	4	No

Table 1. Participants' Primary Variables

Aiming to unveil the obstacles in the most typical context of Vietnamese English education, this study placed emphasis on those who worked at public high schools. Le (2019a) believes that this public sector well represents the way English is widely taught in Vietnam: compulsory, examination-oriented, and GTM-emphasized.

Procedures

A list of potential participants was initially created. An invitation, which contained all detailed objectives of the study, was sent to all six early career teachers in the district through email, and eventually four of them agreed to join. It should be clarified here that the number of newly recruited high school teachers for any subject per district is small. Therefore, the number of beginning teachers available is also limited (Department of Education and Training of Ho Chi Minh City, 2020).

The author's personal and educational background, which includes level of education, research interests, professional experience, and publication, was concealed from the participants to minimize any influence on their responses. Although there were no research ethics requirements in Vietnam at the time of the study, consent from all teachers was granted as long as their identity not be revealed in any form or by any means.

The research questions were used to develop a list of interview questions which heavily emphasized the 'openness' of the responses and unexpected directions that could lead to deeper exploration were anticipated. The questions were divided into five sections:

1. Professional background and teaching context (undergraduate training, level of teaching, learners, school culture): to understand the participants' acquaintance with ESOL teaching methodology and possible influence from previous training, students, stakeholders, colleagues, workplace climate and even parents.
2. Professional practice and pedagogical competence: to understand their current teaching practice as well as to assess their methodological knowledge.
3. Description of reality shock: to depict an overall picture of what happened, specifically the internal and external factors that existed.
4. Sources of professional support: to explore the sources of assistance and professional growth available for the teachers and their autonomy to seek for such opportunities.
5. Attitudes towards professional development: to examine their perception of the value of professional learning and its possibility to improve their current teaching practice.

The semi-structured interview sessions were conducted in-person and were audio-recorded. An inductive coding process, which allows freer exploration and richer description

of data, was adopted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Specifically, after the first interview was performed, transcribed, and analyzed, essential adaptations to the questions were made and the later interviews were respectively carried out. All recordings were transcribed and checked several times before the transcripts were analyzed. Initially, open-coding was employed for the first interview and categories were then constructed. This same process was used for the three remaining interview transcripts. Modifications were made to rename, upgrade or downgrade categories as the analysis happened. Categories and data were then sorted before emerging themes were named. Discussions were held between the two researchers, one of whom was invited to ensure analysis objectivity. Inter-rater reliability was not calculated for some particular reasons. As Armstrong et al. (1997) and Eriksson (2012) have suggested, mathematical singularity does not necessarily ensure subjectivity and other methods such as in-depth discussions can be used instead. Besides, relying heavily on a quantitative tradition to ensure "reliability" can potentially violate the epistemological foundation of a qualitative study (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Any bias and oversimplified assumptions regarding the deficits of public high school ESOL education were well aware of during the data collection and analysis process.

Findings and Discussion
Reality Shock Leading to Abandonment of Trained Methods

Returning to the high school context in a new role, those beginning teachers, who had already undergone a perceptional shift in professional beliefs, thought that English should be taught for communication, not examination. All four of them attempted to implement the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, experienced certain levels of reality shock, and eventually chose to "*surrender*" (in the words of P1 and P3).

Particularly, P2 and P3 gave up after one year while P1 could not make it beyond the first. The situation was even more peculiar for P4 as he changed to GTM only after his first lesson, claiming teaching that way was "*ineffective and costly*". At the beginning, they were all able to feel the resistance from students, most of whom "*did not understand*" what the teachers were doing (P1). While P4 believed that he could no longer spend so much effort for every single lesson during his whole career (both in preparing and gaining students' collaboration), P1, P2 and P3 started to "*panic*" when there was too little time left for exam preparation. Those three teachers visualized a prospect when the students claimed that their teachers did not teach a useful thing (for tests), which could critically influence their reputation. Although no particularly visible pressure from the senior colleagues or stakeholders was observed, the participants described an "*invisible influence*" (P1 and P3) from the system itself that forced them to change. More specifically,

> *Following the sequence of a communicative lesson was time-consuming. Therefore, I had to push the students through the remaining knowledge points, and as a result, they didn't understand the lessons properly. This caused them to perform poorly in the tests.* (P3)
> *The point is that teachers are assessed through students' performance in tests. We had no other choice.* (P1)

Although none of them had difficulty transitioning to the traditional approach (or GTM), P1 and P3 described certain reluctance and felt uncomfortable as "*what I did was completely wrong*" (P1). For P1, P2 and P4, the change happened gradually when they began to incorporate grammar practice into the regular lessons until it took up all the class time. Interestingly, no noticeable change in beliefs had happened, meaning those teachers still

believed that they should not be teaching that way at the time of the interview. As P1 remarked,

> *We all know that teaching grammar and vocabulary the whole time is useless, and students can't learn anything. But we all have to do that. Teaching for communication is only for display when there is a class observation. Everyone knows that.*

All four mentioned their constant intention of attrition and attributed it to the conflict between their beliefs and reality. This contrast appeared under the names of "*unethical teaching*" (P1), "*ineffectiveness*" (P2), and "*disappointment*" (P1, P3 and P4). Both Veenman (1984) and Correa et al. (2015) believe that the disagreement between idealistic and contextual teaching practices is a crucial indicator of reality shock. It seemed for the four participants that professional obstacles played the major role in driving them to the thought of leaving the career. Sociocultural features such as school culture, administrators, or colleagues, were not strongly emphasized, which is significantly different from what Farrell (2016) and (Whalen et al., 2019) described.

Although major traits of reality shock exhibited by those teachers were also reported by other researchers (see Correa et al., 2015; Farrell, 2016), the Vietnamese teachers in this study displayed contextually unique behaviors. While novice teachers are commonly found to adapt to the new environment with changes in attitudes and beliefs, the teacher-participants had a "switch" in action, not in mind, still finding themselves somewhat a paradox. They knew that their students would not "*learn a useful thing*" (P1), yet it was a "change or die" decision. To deal with the gap between theory and practice that happened, the novice teachers chose to stand on one side or the other. This interestingly contrasts with what Farrell (2012) and Kim and Cho (2014) mentioned about most novice teachers attempting to coordinate between their own teaching practices and those required by their schools. Correa et al. (2015) believe that a teacher's sense of identity and efficacy urges them to "bridge the gap" (Farrell, 2012, p. 435) rather than just crossing it.

Multilevel Contextual Challenges: Contrasting Policies, Lack of Cooperativeness and Shortage of Support

Perceived at various degrees, a lack of essential professional assistance and understanding from learners as well as a conflict in the national English education approach all externally influenced the pedagogical practice of the participant-teachers.

Taking a top-down perspective, all four teachers agreed that the English education policy has a huge impact on their teaching behavior, specifically the conflict that exists within it. P1, P3 and P4 mentioned a serious inconsistency between the expectations of the MOET and the policy it implements in the system; as in P4's words,

> *The problem is that we are assessed in one way and teach in the opposite way. When there is a class observation, we have to teach the skills because the MOET wants us to teach that way. But everyone knows it's fake – just to deal with the regulations.*

Publicly, teachers are supposed to closely follow the textbook, teach the skills, and be evaluated on how well they utilize pedagogical practice (Vu & Ha, 2020). Despite this, language skills are not compulsorily tested either in formative or summative assessment, which leaves teachers to freely choose their favorite mode of testing. Besides, the English paper of the National Examination that all high school students have to take at the end of their general education comprises no communication component (Le, 2019a; Ministry of Education and Training, 2020). Expecting teachers to teach communicatively and conduct

skill-based assessment in their classroom is therefore nearly impossible given that Vietnamese society places heavy emphasis on academic achievement (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). They were only allotted four and a half hours a week, and a considerable proportion of which had to be spent for exam preparation. P1 and P3 spent most their class time "*explaining and correcting grammatical exercises*" while P2 and P4 attempted to "*cover the book content*". They understood their students' scores would critically influence how they are evaluated, not only by the school leaders but also by parents and the public, as P1 and P4 clearly pointed out,

> *Who would bother teaching all the skills while there is not a single exam that tests them? Do it with no understanding from people and you'll be considered an incompetent teacher. We Vietnamese people all crave for high scores.* (P1)
> *First, students may report to the principal that this teacher made things impossible to understand. Next, it is the matter of their scores – there should be no complaints. The percentage of the low achievers should not be too high.* (P4)

Such washback has been repeatedly mentioned in the literature of ESOL education in Vietnam, yet it remains a deep-rooted issue that requires foundational and systematic effort to address (Thu, 2020).

Additionally, there were certain aspects of the learners that partly discouraged those beginning teachers. All four participants stated that their students' goal was to achieve high scores, not to speak English, therefore, they exhibited no motivation for skills learning. Besides, P1 and P3 remarked that they witnessed "*no understanding*" from students, adding "*The students didn't understand why I was trying to make them speak*" (P1) and "*I think their* [students'] *attitudes did have some influence*" (P3). Reported manifestations of students' non-cooperativeness include "*passiveness*" (P1, P3, P4), "*reluctant participation*" in games and skill-based activities (P2) and "*refusal to use English*" (P1, P3, P4). In the context of Vietnamese English education this is rather common and has acted as a primary challenge for ESOL teachers for many years (Phan, 2017; Tran & Baldauf Jr., 2007). Le (2019a) attributed this low engagement to students' inability to relate their immediate and future needs of English.

Finally, there was very little pre-existing professional support for those early-career teachers. The Vietnamese education system offers a low level of support for beginning teachers, with the only source being a senior colleague assigned to supervise a novice teacher during the first year of teaching; and there exists no structured induction program (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). For P1, P3 and P4, their supervisors were as supportive as any other colleague: "*help was only available when asked*". Besides, when required to describe this kind of assistance in more detail, no participants consulted other teachers about skill-related teaching. Particularly, P1 and P4 both received advice in classroom management skills while P3 mostly sought to develop her ability to deliver clearer explanation ("*Some senior colleagues also gave advice on how to have clearer delivery of lessons*"). The actual situation was, as P3 remarked there was no other ESOL teacher in the school using CLT, so it would be relatively useless to ask for advice concerning that method ("*Sure, everyone was using the traditional method! It's useless to ask for advice on teaching the skills*"). In addition, she (P3) was also afraid of being looked down on as a "newbie" who had not yet experienced the teaching reality. This situation did apply to the circumstances of P1, P2 and P4 as well, which eventually drove them to be comparatively self-directed in deciding what and how to teach.

> *[…] and people weren't caring enough to offer help without being asked […] my friends who are teaching in other schools have students at a totally different level, so they couldn't help much. I learned how to handle everything in the end.* (P1)

I finally learned to design the lessons based on my interests and the students'
level. (P4)
Investigator: *So, do you receive any support from your school or colleagues?*
P2: *No, all on my own.*
Investigator: *All on your own?*
P2: *Yes, nothing.*

Research has confirmed the importance of collegially professional support not only in directing job attitudes but also in shaping the personal and professional identity of beginning teachers (Nias, 2005; Thomas et al., 2019). Having to deal with multiple challenges without any proper source of support, therefore, may have had a certain influence in the switch of teaching method.

Internal Challenges: Pedagogical Competence, Professional Misbeliefs and Indifference to Professional Development

While all four teachers were advanced users of English (holders of an IELTS of 6.5 or above) and displayed a relatively good knowledge of English subject matter, further elaborating interview questions into the theoretical aspects of English language teaching methodology reveals only rudimentary knowledge. Specifically, none of them were capable of describing the underlying framework of the teaching methods they were employing, either GTM or CLT. They all admitted having "*forgotten almost everything*" from the university courses. The questions related to motivation, or the teaching-learning process obtained the same result. Specifically, P2 claimed that he randomly incorporated a speaking or writing activity at the end of some (high school) lessons. Nevertheless, he only did that at a very low frequency and failed to precisely describe how his activities were effective for skill-development purposes.

Besides the level of knowledge, the participants' pedagogical beliefs also affected the change of teaching behavior. All teachers repeatedly mentioned the "*small class size*" as a prerequisite for teaching communicatively ("*A number of 15 or 16 students is perfect*" – P2) though this is no longer a serious obstacle in language teaching (see Hayes, 1997). Liao (2004) has suggested that teaching large classes can be an obstacle for novice teachers, yet classroom techniques or adaptation of teaching contents can significantly help to solve this problem. Also, P1, P3 and P4 believed that the use of Microsoft PowerPoint presentations would automatically result in effective teaching, complaining that there were not projector-equipped classrooms in their schools.

Registering for a room equipped with a projector is time-consuming, but without
which I cannot teach a communicative lesson. You know, a good vocabulary
presentation requires a projector to show pictures, examples, and situations.
(P1)

Moreover, all of them expected that students should be "*already motivated*" and
"*good enough*" for a communicative lesson to take place. Lastly, designing a
communicative lesson was believed to be a time-consuming yet ineffective task,
as P4 stated,
Investigator: *Why don't you continue to design communicative lessons?*
P4: *Very much time-consuming.*

Extensive research in TESOL has confirmed that teachers' professional beliefs about the teaching-learning process critically affects their classroom practices (Farrell & Ives, 2014; Kaymakamoglu, 2018; Kuzborska, 2011). Particularly, Breen et al. (2001) described that these beliefs impact "how the teacher orchestrates the interaction between learner, teacher,

and subject matter in a particular classroom context with particular resources" (p. 473). This is especially applicable to these Vietnamese teachers, considering their English educational background as learners of GTM, as Breen et al. (2001) suggested that teachers' classroom practices are significantly influenced by the perceptions they gained as learners, trainees, and teachers. In the case where generations of Vietnamese ESOL teachers have had similar teaching practices and conceptions (Le, 2019a), their teacher learning is not simply a linear transition from training to teaching.

As for professional development, the early career teachers did not consider it their priority although they adopted a relatively positive attitude towards it. None of them had ever mentioned seeking support in balancing between exam preparation and skills teaching. Their primary form of professional development was exchanging teaching materials and exam tips with fellow teachers from other schools.

> *I primarily asked for exam preparation materials from my friends teaching in other schools and modified them myself.* (P1)
> *I very frequently exchanged teaching materials with friends teaching at other schools.* (P3)

P2, P3 and P4 intended to pursue a master's degree in the long run, but they regarded it as an upgrade in career, not in teaching competence. Their firm belief is that, as P1 consistently expressed, "*nothing could be done to change or improve the situation*", which demotivated them from learning more about pedagogical practices. All participants believed that existing workshops, conferences, or seminars out there were not related to their concerns. However, when asked whether they would participate in professional development programs that could help to solve their problem, particularly teaching communicatively while effectively preparing students for exams, the teachers displayed certain levels of reluctance. Specifically, P1 and P2 would "*consider attending*" only if they could arrange time and were financially supported, while P3 and P4 would not travel a long distance to attend any PD program.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As newly trained teachers, the teacher-participants held a firm professional belief about English language teaching: teaching for communication – together with that, however, they also had certain stereotypical perceptions, possibly due to their level of pedagogical content knowledge or lack of effective continuing professional learning. Bringing those beliefs back to the high school context, they encountered severe reality shocks that were caused by the complex interplay among internal and external factors.

Contextually, they were all heavily influenced by the ESOL education policy with its own conflicts. While Vietnamese ESOL teachers are supposed to teach communicatively, the testing system does not reflect such expectation. Those teachers, as a result, felt that preparing students for the grammar-and-vocabulary exams would be a priority, not just for students' achievements but for their own reputation as well. Besides, their students' attitudes towards learning English as a means of communication also played a critical role. Lastly, the level of professional support did have certain impact on the teachers' experience of reality shock. While no induction problem existed at the time of the study, all four participants received very low collegial and institutional assistance and had to seek support on their own.

From the inside, insufficient knowledge in some pedagogical respects not only prevented the participants from properly conducting effective lessons during their reality shock but also resulted in a number of false beliefs about English language teaching. They exhibited several unrealistic expectations about the ideal class size, students' motivation and

language proficiency, and school facilities as prerequisites for effective communicative teaching. Heavily influenced by the belief that it was impossible to change the reality, the teachers adopted a somewhat reluctant attitude towards pursuing professional learning. Particularly, they expected to participate only in practical professional development initiatives, i.e., those that address classroom management issues and student motivation enhancement, provided that they were professionally and financially supported.

There are certain limitations in this study. Firstly, it would be difficult to make any generalization to a wider population due to the interpretative nature and small sample size. Secondly, the limited research on early career ESOL teachers, especially in the Vietnamese context, prevents this study from fully exploring all theoretical aspects that would have more effectively contributed to the literature and analysis. Thirdly, a teacher talking about their own professional struggles is rather sensitive in the Vietnamese culture as teachers are usually depicted as a "know-it-all" figure (T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2015). Therefore, there could have been times when the participants attempted to conceal their supposed incompetence. Although this was carefully taken into consideration during the analysis phase, readers are advised to be aware of such factor. Fourthly, all teachers gave up their attempt to teach communicatively right in the first year of their teaching. Their description at the time of this study therefore may not fully depict a complete picture.

To address the aforementioned limitations and make early-career teachers' voices more hearable, the following recommendations should be considered. Firstly, teachers' beliefs should receive more attention. This notion is central to forming reality shock but has not been well-studied nor addressed in current research (Blömeke et al., 2015). Secondly, efforts should be made to understand beginning teachers' needs in professional development and support. Current professional development programs such as seminars, conferences, and workshops are primarily expert-driven, one-off, and exclusive while induction programs are totally absent in the context of Vietnam. Policies that are both top-down and bottom-up should be introduced. Finally, quantitative and mixed designs should be employed to yield deeper and more generalized conclusions. Once a more complete understanding of reality shock has been gained, more effective teacher education and induction programs can be initiated and modifications to curriculum and assessment policies can be introduced.

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