



Project J-Hawk: Leadership in English Language Teacher Education

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Introduction

The University of Kansas (KU) Applied English Center (AEC) has twice been awarded a U.S. Department of State grant to host a program for Vietnamese high school teachers in 2014-15 (Cohort 1) and 2015-16 (Cohort 2). Each cohort had 13 teachers from gifted high schools, many in underserved provinces that have substantial ethnic minority populations. Officially titled the *English Language and Teacher Education Program for Vietnamese Teachers of Gifted Students (VNTP)*, the program is commonly referred to as *Project J-Hawk*. It is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the U.S. Department of State – Hanoi Bureau. The idea for the program grew out of a connection made by former KU AEC Language Specialist Kellie Smith Herrod with U.S. Embassy Public Affairs Officer Michael Turner while Smith Herrod was in Vietnam as a Fulbright Scholar (2013-2014). Thanks to Turner's vision and heroic efforts, this unique program was created.

Project J-Hawk provides one academic year (August-May) of English language study and teacher professional development. Its purpose, as stated in the proposal request, is to offer substantive English language enrichment courses and workshop-style programming to

- enhance the program participants' English language teaching capabilities,
- introduce participants to the use of instructional technology in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, and
- prepare participants to train other English language teachers and serve as resource contact points at the U.S. State Department's American Centers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

These program goals were set, in no small measure, because

in September 2008 the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued the ‘National Foreign Language 2020 Project’ which emphasised English language education as a key factor in national development. As part of this initiative, MOET aimed to ensure that all young people leaving secondary school by 2020 have a good command of English (Dang, Nguyen & Le, 2013, p. 53).

To achieve this, MOET understood the importance of improving the quality of primary and secondary English language instruction throughout the country. The Hanoi Bureau of the U.S. Department of State envisioned a program that intensively honed the teaching and teacher training skills of strong EFL high school teachers as a practical initiative with the possibility of providing long-term benefits to the National Foreign Languages (NFL) 2020 Project.

Keeping in mind the goals of the U.S. Department of State, MOET, and program participants, the author, who was the AEC VNTP program director, built a program with the following components (Figure 1), which are briefly discussed in the subsequent sections.

Program Components of Project J-Hawk

Project J-Hawk is comprised of six components. This section provides an overview of the program with brief glimpses into the different components for illustration purposes. For a more thorough characterization of Project J-Hawk contact the author at the Applied English Center.

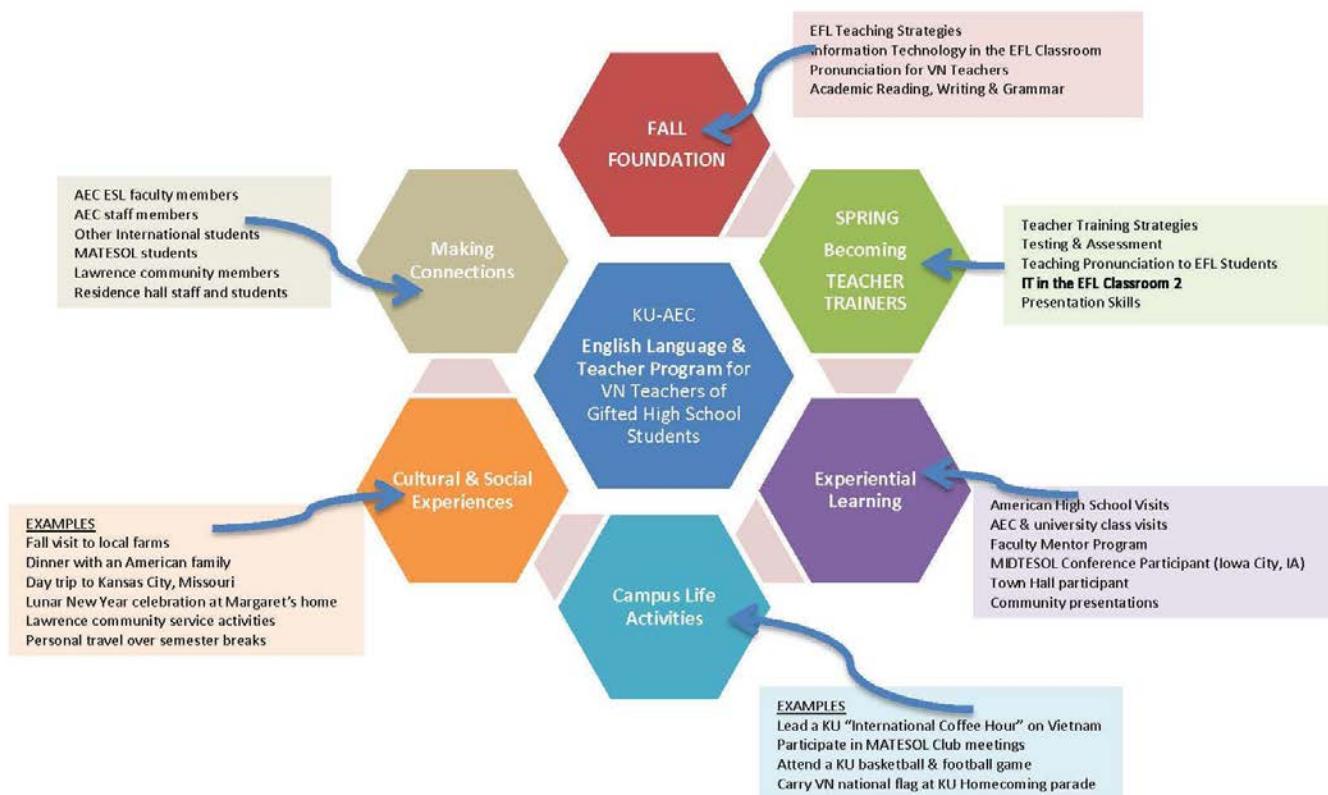


Figure 1. The Six Program Components of Project J-Hawk.

Fall-Foundation and Spring-Becoming Teacher Trainers

The Foundation and Teacher Trainer components of Project J-Hawk include (a) language enrichment, (b) teaching, and (c) teacher training. In language enrichment, the teachers took an advanced regular Intensive English Program English language class. They participated in 8 hours a week of intensive instruction in reading and writing for academic purposes, with the added benefit of observing a fellow English language instructor's teaching strategies over a semester. They took a specifically designed pronunciation enrichment course for native speakers of Vietnamese. They were also held accountable for English language accuracy and fluency in all activities across the program.

In the areas of teaching and teacher training, the group took several specialized professional development courses designed for the participants. In all lessons and activities, AEC faculty asked the VNTP teachers to reflect on how they were learning and on what could be used with their students or shared with colleagues at home. Also emphasized in the professional development courses was the benefit of moving from a teacher-centered to a student-centered classroom by exemplifying those qualities in their own teaching. Additionally,

there was emphasis placed on how to make use of teachable/golden moments during class sessions. The teaching and teacher training courses in these components were called:

- EFL Teaching Strategies,
- Teaching Strategies for Training Teachers,
- Instructional Technology in the EFL Classroom,
- Instructional Technology – Training Other Teachers,
- Pronunciation for Vietnamese EFL Teachers,
- Teaching Pronunciation to Vietnamese EFL High School Students,
- English Language Experiential Learning 1 & 2,
- Presentation Skills, and
- L2 Testing & Assessment.

Making Connections, Experiential Learning, and Campus Life Activities

The teachers participated in a wide variety of educational, cultural, and social campus activities outside of the core curriculum. These experiences gave teachers opportunities to use English in authentic contexts. In some instances they interacted with Americans who had had very little, if any, contact with non-native English speakers. Teachers also gave back to the community by participating in several service activities. Some AEC faculty generously invited teachers to join in on various community events, thus giving them a chance to get to know the people of the AEC outside of a purely academic setting. Making genuine connections with different parts of KU and Lawrence communities over time is mutual exchange and learning at its best. Learning became a two-way process for the Vietnamese teachers as well as the AEC, KU, and Lawrence community members. It is through meaningful, sustained connections that we have opportunities to share cultures and professional knowledge. Examples of a few activities that both groups participated in are:

- attendance at the fall 2015 MIDTESOL conference for ESL/EFL instructors,
- participation in KU's School of Education TESOL Club run by university MATESOL graduate students,

- participation in community service activities, including visiting a retirement home and wrapping Christmas gifts for families in need,
- participation in the University of Kansas Homecoming Day Parade where teachers carried the Vietnamese Flag in the international student delegation, and
- presentation at one session of the University of Kansas International Coffee Hour, where they shared information about Vietnam. The event was open to everyone on campus.

Cultural and Social Experiences: “The Human Touch”

A delegation from the Vietnam Ministry of Education and NFL 2020 did a campus site visit near the end of the 2014-2015 program. During their visit, the delegation shared with us that the teachers called Lawrence “their sweet second home.” Dr. Vu Thi Tu Anh, the Executive Director of National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, Dr. Tran Xuan Thao, Senior Advisor to NFL 2020, Kellie Smith Herrod, and the author discussed the importance of “the human touch” in this kind of program. Dr. Vu and Dr. Thao noted that our emphasis on the human touch set us apart from many other English language training programs. This recognition from Vietnam’s Ministry of Education was affirming because a signature component of AEC self-contained short-term programming is to attend to the whole person.

Our underlying philosophy is that high quality program content and delivery are essential. At the same time, professional implementation of excellent content alone will not guarantee program success. In the context of the VNTP, we understand that helping talented teachers become leaders in teacher education means bringing them into our professional and, to a certain extent, our personal lives. The AEC faculty and staff involved in this program were highly devoted to it and to the teachers. From the beginning, we were acutely conscious of the fact that these women and men were jumping into a wildly different living and learning environment. They were making many personal sacrifices. On top of that, they would become students again. These accomplished, successful adults allowed themselves to be placed in a setting where they very well might feel vulnerable, afraid, confused, lost, and homesick. Before they even arrived, we admired them! We wanted them to succeed from day one.

The decision to foster the human touch in this program has been deliberate and manifested in several ways. Here are a few examples:

- Everyone involved worked to provide a safe and warm community. We did our best to interact with the teachers in ways that showed we care about them. We did our best to make them feel special, as evidenced by our many interactions and connections with them. From the outset we let them know that they were people first and program participants second. As a result, they opened up and shared with us just as we reached out and shared with them.
- We overtly demonstrated our belief in them and their ability to do what we were asking of them. If something did not go right the first time, we just figured out how to fix it.
- The first time teachers worked on an activity or lesson, faculty often made observations or provided feedback without evaluation to emphasize that our primary goal was to help them become better teachers, not to give them a grade.
- Almost always, positive reinforcement and encouragement are better motivators in learning than the opposite (Wei 2015, p. 621). In Project J-Hawk, we focused on what teachers learned, succeeded in and improved on throughout the program. With this approach, we saw teachers' confidence grow over time. As an example of success, one cohort's blogs about each other's work was in general highly critical at the beginning of their stay. By the end of the program, comments were supportive and about shared experiences.

In sum, the six components of Project J-Hawk created an environment for the program to prosper academically, professionally, and on a personal level.

Conclusion but Not the End

The conclusion of the ten-month program is not the end of Project J-Hawk, but rather a point of pivot. For the endeavor to be successful, the next step is for the two (and hopefully additional) cohorts to form a cohesive and growing network of professionals that will work strategically in the next few years to help improve English language instruction in Vietnam. There is anecdotal evidence that this is already happening with Cohort

1. Back in Vietnam for nearly one year, teachers have shared with us teaching strategies and resources that their students really like. One instructor sent us a video on climate change produced by a group of her students all in English. Some instructors from Cohort 1 were selected by MOET to give teacher training workshops in Hanoi.

These are positive steps, but what is needed is a framework that provides a space moving forward for Project J-Hawk teachers to meet, share ideas, create teacher training workshops, and participate in VietTESOL. Making this work is no small matter. The competing demands of family, jobs, and daily life, even local restrictions can create enormous push-back. In fact, Diane Millar, the Hanoi-based U.S. Department of State Regional English Language Officer has a sense that some of the Cohort 1 teachers “are struggling a bit to get things going in their own communities” (Millar 2016, personal communication). At the same time, Millar has made it one of her priorities to focus on how to best continue working with the Project J-Hawk teachers. She and her colleague, Duong Le, have already traveled to the northwest region of Vietnam to meet some of the Cohort 1 teachers. In August, Millar plans to bring together the first two cohorts for some additional follow-up training. Millar has already reached out to the author for the AEC to be involved in Millar’s follow-up work; we are eager to do that. Informally, we have made it clear to both cohorts that we are resources for the Project J-Hawk teachers. Near the end of the second program, when Project J-Hawk participant, Quyet Nguyen, asked the author if the teachers could be in touch with the AEC when they had questions, she replied, “You bet! We are with you for the long haul!”

References

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