



EFL HIGH-SCHOOL TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO ELT PEDAGOGICAL REFORMS IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

Le Thanh Thaoⁱ,

Le Xuan Mai

Cantho University,
School of Foreign Languages,
Vietnam

Abstract:

In the era of globalization and internationalization, educational change, specifically English language teaching (ELT) pedagogical reforms, has been paid more attention to by language researchers. In Vietnam, ELT pedagogical reforms or educational change has been considered as an essential area. How the teachers respond to the reforms is very important; therefore, this study was conducted to investigate this issue. Questionnaire and interviewing were used to collect data from 102 English foreign language (EFL) teachers working in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The study was aimed to investigate teachers' responses to 15 types of ELT pedagogical reforms, introduced by the Ministry of Education. The data, analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0, showed that the teachers accepted the ELT pedagogical reforms in their teaching. Specifically, adapting teaching materials from different sources was supported most. However, some types were resisted, especially designing tests based on the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) framework.

Keywords: educational change, ELT pedagogical reforms, EFL high-school teachers, Mekong Delta

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the government has been focusing on ELT pedagogical reforms to enhance Vietnamese students' English proficiency. The evidences are Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 2658/QĐ-BGDĐT, promulgated to change the ways of teaching and learning English in the high-school system. However, the results were still not satisfactory (Nguyen, 2018). Several reasons were pointed out but far-off and unrealistic goals of the change were agreed most (Le & Nguyen, 2017). Besides that, teachers'

ⁱ Correspondence: email thaom1618034@gstudent.ctu.edu.vn,

proficiency and willingness to change were not understood well. Without listening to teachers' voices, any educational changes cannot gain success because of no others than teachers who directly involved in the implementation of change. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate teachers' responses to each type of ELT pedagogical reforms in Vietnam. Moreover, it was aimed to give a better understanding of the reasons why the teachers accept or resist a specific type of reforms in their teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 ELT pedagogical reforms

Mike Sharples, the Emeritus Professor of Educational Technology at the Open University in the UK, said that to improve education, it is not about using technology but about developing pedagogy (OEB Global 2019). It can be inferred that "pedagogy" plays a crucial role in education. Hence, to make successful educational changes, pedagogical reforms should be set as the priority. To be able to understand the term of ELT pedagogical reforms, the word "pedagogy" needs to be defined.

The term "*pedagogy*" has been well-defined in the literature. Ozuah (2016) defined pedagogy literally as "*the art and science of teaching children*". In Cambridge dictionary, *pedagogy* means "*the study of the methods and activities of teaching*". According to a definition provided by Watkins and Mortimore (1999, p.3), the term "*pedagogy*" is "*any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another*". The characteristics of pedagogy are topic orientation, the uses of lecture and other cognitive techniques, the uses of reinforcement to encourage students' learning, and the important role of the teachers (Marshak, 1983). Peyser et al. (2006) stated that reforming education is based on the fundamental concepts of "integration" and "competence", the major trend in pedagogical reforms of the world.

While a variety of definitions of *pedagogy* have been suggested, it is used solely when referring to the art of teaching that includes teaching activities designed to develop students' learning in this study. As a result, the term "*ELT pedagogical reform*" means a process of transforming pedagogy related to ELT from the original form to a new form to enhance EFL students' learning. The ELT pedagogical reforms are characterized by the same elements with pedagogy, but they focus more on ELT. Peterson et al. (1994), cited in Knapp (1997), stated that reforming pedagogy is considered as a chance to learn. It means that pedagogical reforms aim to do a process of professional developing and continuing to learn new things.

2.2 Types of ELT pedagogical reforms in Vietnam

Characteristics of pedagogy are topic orientation, the uses of lecture and other cognitive techniques, the uses of reinforcement to encourage students' learning, and the important role of the teachers (Marshak, 1983). Hence, ELT pedagogical reforms are the works of reforming topic orientation, the uses of ELT approaches and techniques, the strategies to encourage EFL students' learning, and the role of EFL teachers.

Based on the Official Letter No.2658/QĐ-BGDĐT and the Official Letter No.2540/SGDĐT-GDTrH, 15 specific tasks to reform English pedagogy, considered as the types of ELT pedagogical reforms in this study, are (1) establishing English communities, (2) doing ELT action research, (3) focusing on language use, (4) using open-ended questions or referential questions to enhance students' critical thinking, (5) teaching grammar in context, (6) integrating skills in a lesson, (7) using technology in teaching, (8) teaching vocabulary in phrases and collocations, (9) using mind-map, (10) conducting subject-based studies, (11) adapting teaching materials, (12) participating extra-curricular activities and English speaking clubs, (13) designing English proficiency tests based on the VSTEP framework, (14) implementing oral tests, and (15) doing on-going assessment.

2.3 EFL high-school teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms

Several studies have been conducted to explain the reasons why teachers resist change in education. To explain the reasons for teachers' resistance to change, understanding what resistance to change needs to be well-explained. Resistance to change is a kind of mentality that people resist unusual things (Gravenhorst, 2003, cited in Ali El Zaatar, 2011). Ali El Zaatar (2011) defined the term *resistance to change* as a lack of interest and collaboration to make a change, and people who resist change prefer to keep the status quo. Fullan and Ballew (2004) described a change as a double-edged sword because the change cannot occur in stagnant societies where people are not interested in changing.

According to De Jager (2001), resistance can be rational or not. Sometimes, teachers have reasons for resisting; but sometimes, they do it without any reasonable explanations. There are various representations of teachers' resistance. Gratez et al. (2002) shared that resistance to change might be represented as the refusal to participate in solving common problems, to look for a common opinion, to collaborate, and to be calm for the promoter for change. In Vietnamese context, Nguyen (1991), cited in Ellis (1994), said that the Vietnamese people rarely present their ideas directly, both in oral or written communication. Ellis (1994) added that the direct approach in communication is regarded as blunt and rude in Vietnamese culture. Therefore, in this study, "*resistance to change*" and are used as the same meaning with "*not supporting*".

According to Ali El Zaatar (2011), the differences in school culture create different responses to change. When change occurs, some teachers resist the change because of several causes. However, change can be accepted and supported. *Change acceptance* plays the opposite pole of change resistance (Coetsee, 1999). Mohamad, Hassan, and Hamid (2019) called resistance and acceptance as the two-polar opposite of change. Other than change resistance, there is little research on change acceptance. While the topic resistance to change has been studied through the years, acceptance to change cannot find a concrete definition (Mohamad, Hassan, & Hamid, 2019).

3. Methodology

This study was guided by two research questions.

- 1) What are teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms?
- 2) What causes the teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms?

To identify teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms in Vietnam, this study was conducted quantitatively, followed by qualitatively, i.e. a mixed-method approach. There are strengths in the mixed-methods approach because different methods can support each other to draw a complete research picture (Morrison, 2007). While quantitative data provides information on a large sample and yields results on frequency and magnitude of trends, qualitative data offers insightful perspectives on the research topic and provides details of the situation. The two methods when combined together allow the research to assess both outcomes and process of the social phenomenon.

The questionnaire in the format of Google Form was sent via email to collect data from 102 EFL high-school teachers, who are working at different high schools in seven provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Besides that, because of COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online by these platforms, namely Zalo, Zoom, and Skype. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participation of 6 EFL high-school teachers (Teachers A, B, C, D, E, and F), recruited based on their mean score in practice in response to ELT pedagogical reforms. They are divided into two groups: the lowest mean score group and the highest mean score group. Table 1 represents the information of these teachers.

Table 1: Information of participants for interviews (N = 6)

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female
Qualifications	Bachelor	Master	Bachelor	Bachelor	Master	Master
Teaching experience	Mid-career	Early-career	Early-career	Early-career	Early-career	Late-career
Teaching areas	City	Suburb	Suburb	City	City	City
Age	30-39	Under 30	30-39	30-39	30-39	Over 40
Workplaces	Gifted high-school	Regular high-school	Regular high-school	Gifted high-school	Regular high-school	Regular high-school
Mean score of practice	1.87	2.93	3.00	4.40	4.73	4.80

4. Results

First of all, the Descriptive Statistics Test was run to find out the average level of teachers' practice in response to ELT pedagogical reforms. Table 4.1 displays the results of this test.

Table 2: EFL high-school teachers' practice in response (N = 102)

Variable	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Practice	1.87	4.80	3.68	.50

Table 2 shows that the mean score of EFL high school teachers' practice in response to ELT pedagogical reforms (M = 3.68) is high. It can be inferred that the teachers mostly supported ELT pedagogical reforms.

Next, the One-Sample T-Test was run to evaluate whether the mean score of EFL high-school teachers' practice in response to ELT pedagogical reforms was significantly different from the test value of 3.5, the accepted mean for the medium level (Oxford, 1990). The results show that there was a significant difference between the mean score of EFL high-school teachers' practice in response to ELT pedagogical reforms ($M = 3.68$; $SD = .50$) and the test value 3.5 ($t = 3.661$, $df = 101$, $p = .00$). The result supports the conclusion that EFL high-school teachers highly accepted ELT pedagogical reforms.

Then, the Frequency Descriptive Statistics Test was used to evaluate the mean scores of EFL high-school teachers' practice in response to each type. Table 3 shows the results of this test.

Table 3: EFL high-school teachers' practice in response to each type of ELT pedagogical reforms (N = 102)

Types	Mean score	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
Establishing English communities	2.96	9.8	21.6	35.3	29.4	3.9
Doing ELT action research	3.54	3.9	5.9	35.3	42.2	12.7
Focusing on language use	3.85	2.0	2.0	25.5	50.0	20.6
Using open-ended questions or referential questions to enhance students' critical thinking	3.94	0	3.9	21.6	51.0	23.5
Teaching grammar in context	4.10	1.0	0	16.7	52.9	29.4
Integrating skills in a lesson	4.14	1.0	1.0	10.8	57.8	29.4
Using technology in teaching	3.94	0	2.0	27.5	45.1	25.5
Teaching vocabulary in phrases and collocations	3.79	1.0	3.9	30.4	44.1	20.6
Using mind-map	3.10	2.9	17.6	51.0	23.5	4.9
Conducting subject-based studies	3.52	2.9	7.8	35.3	42.2	11.8
Adapting teaching material	4.24	0	0	12.7	51.0	36.3
Participating in extra-curricular activities and English-speaking club	3.50	2.9	14.7	29.4	35.3	17.6
Designing English proficiency tests based on the VSTEP framework	2.75	13.7	24.5	39.2	18.6	3.9
Implementing oral tests	3.79	0	7.8	23.5	50.0	18.6
Doing on-going assessment	4.08	2.0	1.0	11.8	57.8	27.5
Total Mean = 3.68 (M = 3.68)						

As observed in Table 3, among fifteen types of ELT pedagogical reforms, the mean score of *adapting teaching material* was the highest score ($M = 4.24$), with 0 (%) "never", 0 (%) rarely, 12.7 (%) "sometimes", 51.0 (%) "often" and 36.3 (%) "always" responses from the participants. Then, the mean score of *designing English proficiency test based on VSTEP framework* was the lowest score ($M = 2.75$), with 3.9 (%) "always", 18.6 (%) "often", 39.2 (%) "sometimes", 24.2 (%) "rarely", and 12.9 (%) "never" responses from the participants.

The results of other types are *integrating skills in a lesson* (M = 4.14), *teaching grammar in context* (M = 4.10), *doing on-going assessment* (M = 4.08), *using technology in teaching* (M = 3.94), *using open-ended questions or referential questions to enhance students' critical thinking* (M = 3.94), *focusing on language use* (M = 3.85), *teaching vocabulary in phrases and collocations* (M = 3.79), *implementing oral tests* (M = 3.79), *doing ELT action research* (M = 3.54), *conducting subject-based studies* (M = 3.52), *participating in extra-curricular activities and English speaking club* (M = 3.50), *using mind-map* (M = 3.10), and *establishing English communities* (M = 2.96). According to the results, it can be inferred that adapting teaching material was supported most and designing English proficiency tests based on the VSTEP framework was supported least in this study.

Next, the One-Sample T-Test was used to classify the types accepted at a high level and the other types lower accepted. All of the mean scores of these types were compared to the test value 3.5, the accepted highest score at medium level in Oxford framework. The results show that there was no significant difference in teachers' practice in response to *focusing on language use* (M = 3.54, SD = .93, t = .43, df = 101, p = .67), *conducting subject-based studies* (M = 3.52, SD = .91, t = .22, df = 101, p = .83), and *participating in extra-curricular activities and English speaking club* (M = 3.50, SD = 1.04, t = .00, df = 61, p = 1) and the test value 3.5. Among these three types, the mean score of focusing on language use was highest. It can be inferred that focusing on language use is the most supported type in the group of types responded at medium level of practice in response.

Therefore, the least supported types include *focusing on language use* (M = 3.54), *conducting subject-based studies* (M = 3.52), *participating in extra-curricular activities and English speaking club* (M = 3.50), *using mind-map* (M = 3.10), *establishing English communities* (M = 2.96), and *designing English proficiency test based on VSTEP framework* (M = 2.75). On the other hand, *adapting teaching material* (M = 4.24), *integrating skills in a lesson* (M = 4.14), *teaching grammar in context* (M = 4.10), *doing on-going assessment* (M = 4.08), *using technology in teaching* (M = 3.94), *using open-ended questions or referential questions to enhance students' critical thinking* (M = 3.94), *focusing on language use* (M = 3.85), *teaching vocabulary in phrases and collocations* (M = 3.79), and *implementing oral tests* (M = 3.79) are the most supported types.

Besides that, the "others" item was responded. Three participants added "the new English textbook", which they thought that it is a type of ELT pedagogical reforms. Following the quantitative data about the most supported types of reforms, the qualitative data from the interviews also contributed more insights on the reasons why the teachers adopt these reforms more easily than the others.

First, confirming the results found from the questionnaire, *doing on-going assessment* was mentioned by teachers A, B, D, and E. The interviews showed that the teachers had a good understanding of this type; as a result, the teachers will accept this type of reforms more easily. Teacher E said,

"Secondly, it is reforming in the assessment. In the past, the assessment was mainly through tests, such as oral tests, 15-minute tests, 1-period tests, or semester exams. And

now, the assessment turned to another direction. In the letter I received, this form is called the form of regular assessment or on-going assessment. Assessment is based on the learning process, not through the tests anymore. For example, if you are teaching speaking, I let my students practice a small conversation to evaluate immediately."

Regarding *using technology in teaching*, teachers A, C, E, and F supported this type of reforms because they thought that it brings a better teaching atmosphere and enhances students' interests in learning English. The quote of teacher F below represents their ideas.

"I am very interested in using technology in teaching. The reason why I am interested in that I love applying technology in teaching. If you want to make your students interested in learning more, it is necessary to use technology to develop their skills. I feel that incorporating technology into teaching is great and I love it too."

For *integrating skills in a lesson*, teacher B provided a brief description of the reasons why he accepts this type of reforms. He remarked,

"Regarding learning methods, instead of memorizing passively, learners will become more active. I encourage them to speak to develop listening and speaking skills. Besides that, I also integrate skills into a lesson to develop comprehensively four language skills, named as listening, speaking, reading, and writing."

Besides that, teacher C said that integrating skills in a lesson is the most effective type. Based on her sharing, this type of ELT pedagogical reforms can lighten up students' future. She said,

"To me, the type of integrating skills in a lesson is the most effective type of ELT pedagogical reforms. As you know, the most important goal is to teach students how to be able to graduate. Therefore, teachers spend time teaching or find the teaching direction based on the format of the National exam so that students can achieve that goal. The National exam focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, so teachers often discard listening and speaking skills. Since then, I feel that after graduation, it will be difficult for them to find good jobs due to their weak listening and speaking skills. Therefore, I feel that it is very good to be able to integrate skills in one lesson, to help students develop the knowledge to graduate, and somehow improve their communication skills at a higher level."

In terms of *teaching grammar in context*, teacher B adopted this type of ELT pedagogical reforms to make the lesson lighter. He stated,

“Well ... It could be reforming the content of teaching, the learning methods, the teaching methods, and the ways for evaluating. For example, in terms of the teaching content, it is no longer too heavy. It creates content that is lively, realistic, and close to life. It likes I teach grammar in a specific situation to help students relax and gain more grammatical structure knowledge.”

Regarding *focusing on teaching language use rather than teaching grammar*, teacher E shared that with the arrival of the new English textbooks, he focused on teaching language skills, as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. He said,

“Through the official letters, I learned some types of ELT pedagogical reforms. For example, in the past, teachers taught by using the traditional teaching methods, i.e. grammar-translation. But now, education is heading to another goal, especially with the appearance of a new English textbook, called “English Pilot Textbook”. As far as I know, some provinces or localities have already used it publicly. For this book, English teaching is for communication. It means that we focus on teaching skills rather than teaching grammar. It is a methodological reform.”

For *adapting teaching materials from different resources*, teacher E considered this type as a solution for making students less bored.

“Besides that, I taught two programs, ten-years and seven-year, in parallel. For the ten-year program, I did not often adapt outside textbook teaching materials because it was relatively good. However, for the seven-year program, I often look for more teaching resources to make students less bored because according to my evaluation, the content of the book is outdated.”

Moreover, teachers A and B adapted teaching materials from different resources to make the lesson easier and more appropriate for the students' level. Teacher B remarked,

“Because the new English textbook has a goal that is a common goal for all students. Each teacher has different levels of students. Therefore, I have to change the content, find more materials to teach accordingly to be suitable for my students. Regarding using external resources, I think that every teacher has to do it. Firstly, teachers must assess the goals of the lesson, the content of the program, the student's testing objectives, and the student's abilities as well. And then, teachers can adapt other teaching materials in their teaching. Not all of the students' level is high. It will be bad if teachers use the same teaching materials for all students whose levels are different. For the 10-year textbook, there are many unsuitable activities for my students because of, simply, low level in English of my students. I personally find that applying this book in my teaching is too much for my

students. That is why I find other resources outside the book, the same linguistic content to better suit the students' strengths and to help students develop as well as they can."

Similarly, teacher C shared an interesting example of adapting teaching materials. She used a metaphor to explain her idea. She said that her students are like the feet and the teaching materials are like the shoes. If the feet and the shoes did not fit, no one could walk. She said,

"I have to find other teaching materials out of the textbook because the Ministry of Education requires us to use a common set of books for the whole country. The students in the city are at a good level so they can handle it. However, for my students, their abilities are not that good so it is very difficult for them to follow the course of the book. Therefore, I have to find more suitable teaching materials for my students. You can imagine like this, the students are our feet and the learning materials are our shoes. If the shoes are too big, how are we able to walk? As a teacher, I have to find a way to find the best and most suitable shoes for my students."

The change in textbooks affects teacher D in adapting teaching materials. She stated,

"Yes. For the seven-year textbook program, I often found new teaching materials. However, for the new ten-year textbook program, I did not do it that much."

Teacher F affirmed that the content of English textbooks is not enough. It is the reason why she adapts teaching material from other resources, especially on the Internet. She said,

"Yes. Just focusing on textbook content is never enough. This forces us to find additional resources outside the book to apply appropriately to our teaching. I usually do this. Every year, I have to review the old teaching materials and find new ones. When I review the teaching materials of the last year, I feel it is outdated immediately. The sources are from the newspaper, reference books, or on the Internet. Most of the teaching materials I found is on the Internet. Besides that, the exercises that are too difficult in textbooks, I also changed them to be more suitable for my students."

Based on the answers, all six participants agreed that they usually adapt teaching materials from different sources.

In addition to sharing the reasons why the teachers accept a certain type of reforms, they also provided explanations for their resistance to some other types of reforms. For *designing proficiency tests based on the VSTEP framework*, teachers A, C, and D said that they never design tests in that way because the test format is decided by the

administrators in their school, which is more relevant to their context of teaching and learning. The quote of teacher C below represents their ideas.

I know the VSTEP framework but to be honest, I did not base on it to design tests. The format and content of tests will be convened and decided by the English professional team. For example, the team leader and members will discuss coming up with a format of the test. Then, teachers will design based on that format, fitting the context of the school. It will be designed that way, not based on any capacity framework, even VSTEP. Teacher F shared that the format of tests in her school was decided by the Department of Education, so she did not have to design the tests based on VSTEP framework. She said:

“Assessment is different for each school. I will share sincerely it. My school must design the test in the form of a test given by the Department of Education. Besides that, my school also organizes meetings to discuss what we have already taught to design the test.”

Finally, when being asked whether the *ten-year English textbook* is a type of ELT pedagogical reforms. It can be seen that all six participants agreed the ten-year English textbook or ten-year program as a type of ELT pedagogical reforms. The quote of teacher B below speaks for their ideas.

“Uh ... Regarding the ten-year English program, I feel that it is very good for students to improve their English learning skills. Besides that, it also facilitates teachers to develop their teaching abilities as well as teaching methods. It is a very interesting type of ELT pedagogical reforms.”

To sum up, first, these findings confirmed the results of the questionnaire. EFL high-school teachers highly accepted the change or ELT pedagogical reforms in this study. There are some specific types which the teachers highly supported. They consist of *adapting teaching material, integrating skills in a lessons, and teaching grammar in context* were supported most. However, not all of the types were accepted. *Using mind-map, establishing English communities, and designing English proficiency tests based on the VSTEP framework* seem to be relatively resisted. Besides that, *the ten-year textbook* was accepted as a type of ELT pedagogical reforms in Vietnam. Second, the findings from the interviews showed teachers' in-depth thoughts of the reasons why they responded to each type differently. Several reasons were found out to explain the teachers' acceptance of change, including making their students less bored, reducing the difficulties of lessons to be more appropriate to their students' levels, bringing a breath of fresh air to their teaching, and showing many benefits to both their students and themselves.

5. Discussions and implications

The results from the questionnaire revealed that the teachers with master degrees supported ELT pedagogical reforms more than the teachers with bachelor degrees did.

In the other words, teachers' qualification is one of the reasons that created the difference in teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms in Vietnam. It is contrary to the findings by Islam et al. (2010), which found that teachers with master degrees have tendency to resist the change rather than those with bachelor degrees. Besides that, this finding also different from Gaylor's (2001) results, which showed that teachers' educational level does not cause the difference in their responses to change.

Furthermore, the teachers' resistance to change is also explained in this study. Particularly, it is because of unsuitability and no requirements from their superiors. These findings are consistent with the findings of many previous studies (Nisbet & Collins, 1978; Emo, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2013).

Finally, this study suggests that before implementing any type of ELT pedagogical reforms, it should be carefully evaluated to see if it works effectively at the teaching contexts. This will greatly reduce the loss of money, effort, and time. Besides that, the government should pay more attention to teachers with bachelor degrees while implementing reforms. Finally, regarding the unsupported types of reforms, the change agents should clearly explain their effectiveness in teaching. It might enhance teachers' willingness to change or to adopt these types in their teaching

5.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

In terms of limitations, firstly, regarding the sample population, the study was conducted on a small sample population of EFL high school teachers in six provinces in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all EFL high-school teachers in Vietnam. Secondly, in terms of time, the time constraints prevented the researcher from contacting all teachers from different high schools in the Mekong Delta to participate in the study. In addition, due to a short period of time, few interviews were organized to get more insights relating to EFL high-school teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms.

Based on the limitations, there are some suggestions for further research. Firstly, further research in the field should be conducted with all EFL high-school teachers in all provinces in the Mekong Delta or around Vietnam. Also, EFL teachers of other contexts including primary, secondary, and higher education should become the subjects for upcoming research to give a full picture of EFL teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms and what causes their acceptance or resistance to change. Secondly, future research should be conducted over a longer period of time. The more participants for interviews are, the more significant results can be.

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