THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

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# Portraits of Vietnamese Teachers of English: An Inquiry into Their Language Proficiency Development


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## Abstract

For non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers, the most important professional duty beyond teaching their students is to develop their own foreign language proficiency (Medgyes, 2001). However, most in-service professional development activities tend to take NNES teachers' English proficiency development for granted. The results of a nation-wide evaluation of the current teaching workforce in Vietnam during 2011-2012 identified in-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' low level of language proficiency as an inherent problem of English education in Vietnam.

This thesis explores the perceptions of Vietnamese primary and secondary EFL teachers regarding their English proficiency and the level they consider as necessary for their teaching in comparison with the standard mandated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The thesis also investigates teachers' attitudes towards English proficiency development, and the characteristics of their language practice.

This research employed a mixed-methods design using a combination of a self-rated English language proficiency survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry. The survey collected responses from 298 in-service EFL teachers participating in professional development courses in four provinces of Northern Vietnam. Forty-two teachers were then selected for the semi-structured interviews. Of these participants, five were chosen and then repeatedly interviewed using narrative-inquiry techniques over a ten-week period.

The findings indicate that participants' perceived English proficiency was significantly higher than both the level they perceived as required for their teaching practice and the English proficiency level mandated by MOET. Participants were found to have confidence to teach English mainly as a content-subject rather than as a means of communication, partly due to the powerful negative wash-back effects of high-stakes examinations. The study also documents how participants struggled to improve their English proficiency with limited and intermittent support. The research uncovers how participants' English proficiency developments were shaped by their language learning history, personal circumstances, and various other institutional and socio-cultural factors. These factors are categorised into a model with three overlapping categories namely personal, institutional and socio-cultural challenges. The close interdependence of the three groups of challenges demands a holistic solution to the daunting task of improving EFL teachers' English proficiency in Vietnam. Successful implementation of such an approach requires

effort and collaboration between different forces at different levels, including the government, MOET, teacher training institutions, school administrators, and teachers themselves. The thesis concludes with some practical recommendations to help MOET and the educational reforms move in the right direction.

**Declaration by author**

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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## Publications during candidature

### Peer-reviewed papers

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Khoi, N. M. (2014). Towards a holistic approach to developing the language proficiency of Vietnamese primary teachers of English. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *11*(2), 341-357

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vietnam, teacher training, non-native teacher, teacher language proficiency, assessment

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**List of Abbreviations used in the thesis**

BA: Bachelor of Arts

CEFR: Common European Framework of References

ETCF: English Teacher Competency Framework

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

DOET: Department of Education and Training

EFL: English as a foreign language

ELT: English language teaching

ESL: English as a second language

IELTS: The International English Language Testing System

ISLPR: International Second Language Proficiency Ratings

L1: First language

L2: Second language

MA: Master of Arts

MOET: Ministry of Education and Training

NFL Project 2020: National Foreign Language Project 2020

NNES: Non-native English speaking

NES: Native English speaking

PLP: Perceived language proficiency

PRLP: Perceived required language proficiency

RQ: Research question

RFLC: Regional foreign language centre

SAT: Scholastic Aptitude Test

TESOL: Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication

TPC: Teacher professional competence

UQ: The University of Queensland

VNIES: Vietnam National Institute for Educational Sciences

VNU: Vietnam National University

# Chapter 1: Introduction

I grew up in a Vietnamese family with a teaching tradition. Both of my parents were teachers of Vietnamese literature who knew their teaching subject like the back of their hands. They expected nothing less from me as a teacher of English, and therefore were confused whenever I embarrassingly refused their request to simultaneously interpret movies from English to Vietnamese. They were concerned about my English proficiency, and worried that I might someday lose my job.

This research project evolved out of my struggle to improve English language proficiency as a non-native English-speaking (NNES) teacher. I consider myself luckier than most colleagues in Vietnam due to my postgraduate education in Australia where I use English every day: the opportunity to converse with native English speakers (NES) is still a luxury most Vietnamese teachers cannot attain. Despite such an advantage and the knowledge that simultaneous interpretation of films is not a necessary competence, I feel under constant pressure to evaluate and improve my English proficiency. These pressures originate from both internal factors, the desire to do better, and external factors including job-related and cultural expectations of employers, parents and students. The truth is that after two decades of learning and using the language I am still barely satisfied with my English proficiency. At times, I feel disappointed with my competency, and experience self-doubt. My feelings can be explained as the symptoms of the so-called impostor syndrome (Langford & Clance, 1993) as I frequently question my qualifications to work as a language teacher and contemplate the mistakes I have made during everyday conversations in English. I believed to some extent my feelings were not unique, and many other English as a foreign language (EFL) colleagues were perhaps experiencing similar stresses and anxieties while fighting their own battles to better their English proficiency. I was particularly interested in focusing on individual teachers' experiences in order to know their worlds as language learners. Therefore, this study began with a personal enquiry into Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes towards their own English proficiency, and their experience of English learning and development.

The first chapter of this thesis presents the personal and contextual research background of the study, specifies the problem under investigation, briefly introduces the research questions and research design, describes the study's significance and provides definitions of key terms. The chapter ends with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1 Contextual background to the research

This research was conducted during an important period in the history of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam in terms of its official policy on a standard of English language proficiency for EFL teachers and the public awareness of this issue. Between 2010 and 2014, the quality of Vietnamese EFL teachers was seriously questioned as the media revealed the disappointing results of a nation-wide teachers' language proficiency assessment as part of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFL Project 2020). Various domestic and international newspapers drew the public's attention to the failure of most in-service teachers of English to attain the level of proficiency required by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). It was specified that Vietnamese EFL primary and lower secondary teachers needed to attain the B2 level of the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for language learning, teaching, and assessment. It shocked the nation that even in major cities including Hanoi, the capital, and Ho Chi Minh, the largest city in Vietnam, only a fifth of those teachers tested achieved the required level of English proficiency (Huong & Giang, 2012; Minh, 2012; Parks, 2011). In one province, Ben Tre, only one teacher out of the 700 that had been tested attained this threshold level. MOET and NFL Project 2020 also reported that 80 000 teachers needed further training as 97 per cent, 93 per cent, and 98 per cent of in-service teachers at primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools respectively were underqualified in terms of English language proficiency (N. H. Nguyen & Dudzik, 2013). Criticisms were made, and plans were drafted and carried out to improve these teachers' English proficiency. However, what is missing from all these discouraging statistics and nationwide support programs are accounts of teachers' own perceptions of their language proficiency and the kinds of training and support they perceive as needed. Do these EFL teachers perceive that they need to improve their English proficiency? How do they maintain and develop it? What are the challenges they face? What kind of training and support do they expect and desire? All these questions are left unanswered. As the teachers are at the centre of this educational reform, it is crucial that their voices be heard so their needs can be catered for.

## 1.2 Overview of research aims, research questions and research design

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese NNES in-service teachers of English concerning their English proficiency and the level of proficiency they regarded as necessary for their teaching, their attitudes towards English proficiency

development, and the characteristics of their language practice. In particular, the study seeks to answer the two following research questions:

- What are the Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their English language proficiency (PLP) and responses towards MOET's English policy?
- How do the participants describe their English proficiency development?

To achieve these aims, the study employed a mixed-methods design using a combination of a self-rated language proficiency survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry. The survey was distributed to 350 in-service EFL teachers who were participating in professional development courses in four provinces. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 42 teachers. Finally, five participants were chosen and repeatedly interviewed using narrative inquiry techniques over a ten-week period. The narratives generated from these interviews offer deeper insights into these participants' teaching and language learning experiences.

### 1.3 Significance of the study

By investigating Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their English proficiency, attitudes towards English improvement, and the processes of language development, the current study can make several contributions to expanding the current state of knowledge in the two fields of teacher education and language assessment. It also directly and meaningfully contributes to the current EFL educational reforms in Vietnam.

Firstly, the study addresses the need to listen to teachers' voices, inquire into their perceptions and attitudes while drafting and implementing language policies. Although many studies have documented the low English proficiency of teachers in Vietnam and other Asian contexts, there is no study, to the best of my knowledge, looking at Vietnamese in-service teachers' perceptions of their English proficiency. Given the current attention paid to teachers' English language proficiency in Vietnam, it is highly valuable to provide detailed insights into the process of teacher language development from the teachers' perspective. These insights can contribute to finding appropriate strategies to improve teachers' English proficiency that meet their expectations and needs. It is more advantageous to work with teachers to find suitable solutions rather than imposing measures that may not be effective because they do not match what teachers feel they need. It is also a matter of justice to listen to the voices of those at the centre of the current

language policy. In addition, teachers can be involved more in the process of language testing and assessment as well as teacher professional development.

Secondly, the study successfully identifies factors influencing teachers' language learning and development. Some of these factors, as will be seen through the analysis of the data in chapters 7-8, are teachers' language-learning history, initial motivations to join and on-going motivations to stay in the profession, teaching schedule, test wash-back effects, and the limited opportunities for language practice. By generating a model illustrating the interactions between these factors, the study contributes useful knowledge needed for better reconceptualising in-service and pre-service teacher education programs.

Thirdly, the study is of significance in terms of its methodology with its combination of a quantitative survey approach with semi-structured interviews and narrative procedures. While the results of the survey and semi-structured interviews sketch an overall picture of the teachers' English proficiency issue, the narratives present the individual teachers' voices with greater insights and new perspectives on previous findings. The study illustrates that a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to the assessment of teachers' English proficiency can be advantageous because this combination allows a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Finally, the implications of the present study for teacher education and policymaking may not be limited to the Vietnamese context. As researchers have noted the similarities between Asian countries in terms of foreign language education policy and practices (e.g., Butler, 2004; Nunan, 2003), I contend that the interpretations of the findings and implications can be extended to a broader context, especially Asian EFL countries.

### 1.4 Definition of terms

Due to the distinctive aspects of the Vietnamese educational system, and to clarify presentation, the following key terms are defined.

*Teacher training college* and *teacher training university* refer to two different kinds of teacher training institutions. The former offers shorter training programs of between three and four years in length while the latter offers the typical four-year training programs. Students graduating from colleges are awarded an associate degree (*bằng cao đẳng*) in comparison with a bachelor degree (*bằng cử nhân*) offered by universities. Teacher training univerisities thus have a higher status than teacher training colleges in Vietnam. In

this study, both of these establishments are sometimes referred to as teacher training institutions.

*Form teacher* is used to refer to an in-service teacher who is responsible for a class. It is his/her responsibility to monitor the students' academic progress, behaviour and general well-being. In the Vietnamese culture, a form teacher is considered a third parent to the students. Some schools demand that the form teachers be present throughout the school day while others are less strict as long as the teachers can manage the class effectively.

*National Foreign Language Project 2020* is a nationwide project approved in 2008, currently under implementation with a high budget and expectations. It is the latest Vietnamese effort to improve the quality of foreign language teaching and learning.

*Primary, lower secondary* and *upper secondary* refer to the different levels in the Vietnamese educational system. Primary education is compulsory, starts at the age of six and lasts for five years. Lower secondary school comprises the sixth, seventh, eight, and ninth grades. Upper secondary school consists of grades ten through twelve (see chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation).

*Perceived English (language) proficiency* (PLP) is defined as participants' self-assessed English proficiency in four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). It is operationalised as individual scores on a scale from 1 to 6, corresponding to the six levels as specified by Vietnamese English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) and the CEFR for language learning, teaching, and assessment.

*Perceived required English (language) proficiency* (PRLP) refers to the level of English the participants perceived as necessary for their teaching practice.

*Practicum* or *teaching practicum* refers to the periods of time that pre-service teachers spend in actual schools and classrooms doing teaching practice, observing real life classrooms, and managing student affairs. Pre-service teachers undertake their teaching practicum either at the end of their pre-service training program or concurrently with their coursework. For most teacher training institutions in Vietnam, the practicum is offered during the last year of training.

*Pre-service teachers* indicates those studying in undergraduate programs to become teachers.

### 1.5 Overview structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised into ten chapters. After the introduction providing a brief overview of the study, chapter 2 provides the contextual information for the study. It outlines the educational system in Vietnam with a description of the current situation of English language teaching. The NFL Project 2020 is introduced together with Vietnamese ETCF. Chapter 3 reviews the literature relevant to the focus of the study. It discusses the theoretical nature of language proficiency and the frameworks outlining its different levels, NNES teachers' language proficiency, leading to the identification of a research gap that the study seeks to address. Chapter 4 reports the results of a pilot study, and then presents the research questions. Chapter 5 explains the overall research design, and describes the context of data collection. The next three chapters explain data collection instruments and procedures together with the findings: chapter 6 reports the quantitative findings based on participants' responses to a self-rated language proficiency survey; chapter 7 presents the themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews; chapter 8 comprises five narratives of teachers' language learning and teaching. Chapter 9 discusses the findings with reference to the literature and presents suggestions and implications relevant to the development of EFL teachers' English proficiency. Finally, Chapter 10 summarises the study as a whole, draws conclusions, acknowledges the study's limitations, and makes suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: The Vietnamese context

This chapter locates the study within the Vietnamese context of EFL teaching and learning. It begins with a brief introduction of Vietnam and its educational system, followed by an introduction to the history and current status of EFL in Vietnam. Next, the chapter focuses on the National Foreign Language (NFL) Project 2020, and the Vietnamese English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF), their goals, plans, and relevance to the current study, especially regarding EFL teacher training and development.

### 2.1 Vietnam and its educational system

Vietnam is a small country located in South-East Asia bordered by China to the north, Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and the East Sea to the east. Its population is estimated at 90 million as of 2014. Vietnam is a war-stricken country that was first colonised by the Chinese for over a millennium until 938 AD when Ngô Quyền overthrew them and established Âu Lạc as the first Vietnamese dynasty. The following centuries witnessed the Vietnamese people's struggle against Chinese influence and domination until 1858 when the French colonised the whole Indochina Peninsula. After a short occupation by the Japanese in the 1940s, the Vietnamese successfully expelled the French. However, the country was soon divided into two rival states, North and South Vietnam as a result of a political and ideological clash between Communism and Capitalism. Conflicts between the two sides intensified with heavy intervention from the United States until 1975 when North Vietnam unified the country under a Communist government. Due to the country's distinctive history, the Vietnamese culture bears significant influences from both Chinese and Western cultures. Yet, Vietnamese indigenous culture and language survive and prevail.

Since Vietnam's reunification in 1975, the country's educational system has consisted of 12 grades at five levels, namely pre-school, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary levels as summarised in figure 2.1 below.

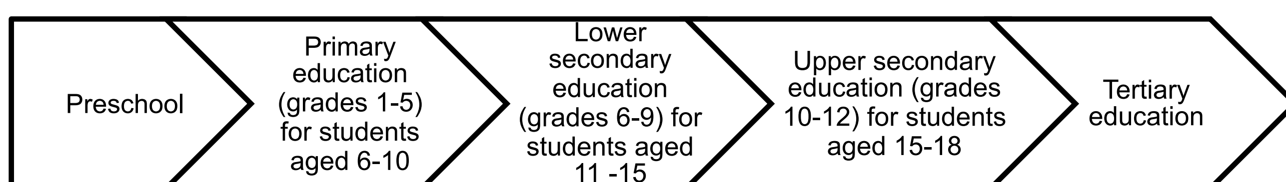



***Figure 2.1*** **The Vietnamese educational system**

In Vietnam, primary education is compulsory and starts at the age of six. Students can advance to lower secondary education without any formal examinations. However, in order to enrol in upper secondary school and tertiary education, they are required to pass graduation and university entrance examinations respectively. The latter is a high-stakes examination because annually only 10 per cent of the age group cohort is admitted to college or university (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2005). As education continues to be considered a 'ticket to ride' or a mechanism for upward social mobility, such gate-keeping assessments impose stressful pressure both on the students and their teachers whose performances are evaluated in terms of students' examination pass rate (Le, 2011, p.16).

## 2.2 English language learning in Vietnam

Throughout her history, Vietnam has witnessed the rise and fall of different foreign languages, including Chinese, French, Russian, and English (Denham, 1992). Under the centuries-long Chinese domination, Chinese with its Han script, was used as the official language, and then during the French colonialism, French was made the official language (M. H. Pham, 1994). After 1975, due to the alliance with the Soviet Union, Russian was required to be the main foreign language at all educational levels throughout the country. Denham (1992) reported that targets were set for foreign language education at the upper secondary level as follows: 60 per cent studying Russian, 25 per cent studying English and 15 per cent studying French. Though English gained second place as a by-product of the American involvement in South Vietnam, it only became widespread and gained important status throughout the country after 1986 when the government adopted the Economic Renovation policy, or *đổi mới*. The adoption of a free-market-oriented economy, and the call for cooperation between Vietnam and every nation regardless of political differences helped attract an increasing number of foreign investors. The massive influx of foreign investment brought with it the need for Vietnamese to be competent in English in order to establish and develop business and commercial contacts, as well as to access information on technological developments. The 1990s marked the fall of Russian, the language of an old ally, the Soviet Union, and witnessed the rise of English as the most popular foreign language in Vietnam. As Denham (1992) comments, the Vietnamese considered English as the key that would open many doors permitting access to scientific and technological knowledge, and a better living standard.

The English learning movement underwent explosive growth with unprecedented speed during the early 1990s (Do, 2006). This growth was the result of Vietnam's active integration into the international community: Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1995, implemented the Vietnam-US Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2001, became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and currently is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership with other Asia-Pacific nations and the United States. As English is considered the necessary means for Vietnam's development, the rising popularity of English was reflected in MOET's 1994 project named *A national strategy for foreign language teaching and learning through all levels of education*. From the school year September 1996-June 1997 onward, a foreign language test, mainly English, was included in the university entrance exam for students of all majors. Also in 1994, the government issued a Prime Minister's decree that required all personnel working in government agencies to have some foreign languages skills, mainly and preferably English. During the 1990s, English was introduced as an optional foreign language at some primary schools mainly in economically advantaged areas such as major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh (H. T. A. Nguyen, 2007). A decade later, in 2003, the language was officially included as an optional subject in primary education across the country (MOET, 2003). Realising the importance of English learning, the National Assembly (2000, 2005) issued resolutions 40/2000/QH10 and 14/2005/NQ-CP on reforming the secondary and tertiary education. In 2001, the Vietnamese government (2001) issued Decision 1400 to renew foreign language teaching and learning throughout the national education system. Decision 1400 specifies the official beginning of English instruction in grade 3, with the projection that by 2018, 100 per cent of students should be taught English. It also sets proficiency benchmarks for teachers and students, drafts the English teacher competency framework, and appoints regional foreign language centres (RFLCs) throughout the country. Decision 1400 approves the national project *Teaching and learning foreign language in national education system, period 2008-2020*, or NFL Project 2020 (see section 2.4). Thus the decision reflects the government's determination to further promote the study of English.

At the present time, English is taught at all levels of education across the country, and is indisputably the most preferred foreign language. Data from a 2005 survey show that 99.1 per cent of all lower secondary schools in Vietnam taught English, while only 0.6 per cent taught French, 0.2 per cent taught Russian, and 0.1 per cent taught Chinese (L. Nguyen, 2005). At tertiary level, it was reported that around 90 per cent of all students chose to

study English (Do, 2006). In addition, non-major English students are required to complete 200 hours of English language learning in their four years of study. Those majoring in English must finish at least 1200 hours before they study content courses taught entirely in English.

The following sections provide more details on the current EFL curricula, the preferred EFL teaching methodology, and the typical Vietnamese EFL classroom settings.

### 2.2.1 Curricula and textbooks

The Vietnamese educational system follows a rigid top-down approach: MOET prescribes the content of teaching, learning, and assessment, commissioning and mandating textbooks for the primary and secondary levels of education. As Le (2011) put it, the textbook is the also the curriculum. Teachers are expected to “follow rules established by the ministry and organise their behaviour accordingly” (Saito, Tsukui, & Tanaka, 2008, p.98) and to finish the lesson plan for each day within the prescribed time. A familiar phrase with many Vietnamese teachers, *cháy giáo án* (translated literally as ‘burnt lesson plan’) humorously evokes the fear of running out of time before finishing the prescribed syllabus.

From 1982 to 2002, there were two sets of EFL textbooks used concurrently in schools, namely the 3-year set (315 periods of 45 minutes each) and the 7-year set (700 periods) at both lower and upper secondary schools (MOET, 2008). Both sets of textbooks were mainly grammar-based. In the early 1990s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT, see section 2.3.2) gained approval and support both from the Vietnamese government and teachers as evidenced by a number of studies (Lewis & McCook, 2002; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; H. H. Pham, 2007). Due to CLT’s emphasis on the communication of meaning rather than the practice of grammatical forms in isolation, the former textbooks were considered obsolete and inadequate. The government’s Decision 1400 required MOET to design a new curriculum and write new textbooks (Vietnamese Government, 2001). By 2008, there were two new sets of EFL textbooks for upper secondary schools nation-wide, namely the standard set and the advanced set. At this time EFL became a compulsory subject at both the lower and upper secondary levels and an elective subject at the primary level. Table 2.1, adapted from Hoang (2009) summarises the weekly class time at each level.

**Table 2.1** ***Weekly English class time at different levels of education***

| Level of Education | No. of periods per week | Total |
|---|---|---|
| Primary (Grades 3-5) | 2/week/35 weeks | 210 |
| Lower secondary (Grades 6-8) | 3/week/35 weeks | 210 |
| Lower secondary (Grade 9) | 2/week/35 weeks | 70 |
| Upper secondary (Grade 10-12) | 2/week/35 weeks | 315 |
| Total | | 805 |

### 2.2.2 Communicative language teaching in Vietnam

The spread of EFL brought with it popular western methodologies, especially CLT. In particular, CLT is a teaching approach that emphasises the communication of meaning in interaction rather than the practice of grammatical forms in isolation. It is based on the premise that successful language learning involves not only knowledge of the structures and forms of a language but also the functions and purposes that the language serves in different communicative settings (Brown, 2007).

From the early 1990s, CLT quickly gained popularity in Vietnam (T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; Sullivan, 1996). Le (1999) identified two factors supporting the implementation of CLT in this context. The first is the government policy to develop proficiency in communicative EFL . The second factor is Vietnamese teachers' favourable view of this approach, as evidenced by a number of studies such as those by Lewis and McCook (2002), T. H. A. Nguyen (2002), and H. H. Pham (2007). In addition, traditional pedagogy that emphasises acquisition of grammar and vocabulary rather than fluency was criticised as incapable of increasing the Vietnamese students' EFL competency (Wright, 2002). Therefore, EFL teachers are encouraged to attend workshops and seminars on CLT or to go overseas to pursue higher degrees in education in order to improve the quality of English language teaching (ELT) and learning in Vietnam.

The spread of CLT as the newest and preferred method of teaching was by no means unique to Vietnam but also took place throughout the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The literature provides ample evidence of the dominance of the communicative approach in many EFL contexts such as Vietnam (Lewis & McCook, 2002; H. H. Pham, 2004; Phan, 2004; Sullivan, 1996), Korea (Finch, 2000; Li, 1998, 2001), Japan (Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001), Thailand (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Saengboon, 2002), and China (Rao, 1996, 2002; Yu, 2001). However, many of the above-mentioned studies also point out several mismatches between CLT, a teaching approach originating in the West, and

the distinctive cultural and contextual factors of the Asian countries. In Vietnam, while many teachers claim to support the latter methods, most of them do not teach what they preach (Lewis & McCook, 2002). In fact, Grammar-Translation Method and the Presentation-Practice-Production model are still more popular than CLT and Task-based learning (Le, 2015)

H. H. Pham (2004) named two major factors militating against the implementation of CLT, namely temporary, practical constraints and the issues of traditional values and ideology. The first and also the most challenging among the practical factors are the academic curriculum and grammar-based examinations that are designed to test only linguistic competence rather than communicative competence. Most examinations, including the high-stakes university entrance and graduation exams, lack listening and speaking components. As long as this situation remains, EFL learning and teaching continue to suffer from negative wash-back effects (Le, 1999). The second constraint is that English is a foreign language that is not used in everyday conversation outside the classroom. Despite the rise of trade with English speaking nations, and the increasing importance of English for commerce and acquisition of technological and scientific knowledge, students, especially those in rural areas, have very limited opportunities to communicate using English. As teachers and textbooks serve as the major input for EFL learning, learners have no immediate need for using English to communicate, which can result in a lack of motivation to study the language. Indeed, their learning motivation actually depends largely on the teachers' initiative and the learners' will to succeed (Ellis, 1996). It is students' lack of motivation to communicate in English and the examination pressure that partly explains why Vietnamese teachers remain focused on language knowledge over language use. This leads to the fact that Vietnamese education is still heavily influenced by the traditional, grammar-translation method. Further obstacles to the implementation of the communicative approach are class size and teaching schedule. Secondary schools have an average class size of between 42 and 52 students (Le, 1999) while the average number is 65 at tertiary level (Bock, 2000). Due to such large numbers of students, and the limited time allocated to each lesson, it is extremely hard for teachers to carry out supplementary communicative activities, especially when they are strictly required to cover all the items in the curricula. In addition, typical classrooms are teacher fronted with little space for communicative activities. Several other temporary and practical constraints identified by other researchers include the low English proficiency of teachers, lack of teaching staff and facilities, low teachers' salary, teachers' lack of time for preparation and

professional development, and low levels of support in terms of materials and libraries (Bock, 2000; Le, 1999).

Clashes between Western and Vietnamese culture and values also give rise to serious challenges to the implementation of CLT. EFL and CLT textbooks written in the West can marginalise Asian cultural values while promoting Western ideologies (Fitzgibbon, 2014). Ellis (1994) argued that CLT in its original form is unsuitable in Vietnamese conditions. CLT techniques transferred from the West are seen as not culturally attuned to Vietnamese conditions due to cultural differences such as individualism versus collectivism, small power distance versus large power distance and low context culture versus high context culture (Ellis, 1994, 1996; Sullivan, 1996).

These cultural differences are from Hofstede's (1997) influential model of cultural dimensions. Hofstede's enormous research effort commenced in 1980 and comprised 116,000 questionnaires from over 50 countries. From the data, he identified four bipolar dimensions (power distance; individualism/ collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; masculinity/ femininity) and used them to generate cultural profiles for each country. Hofstede's work has faced several criticisms as discussed by Jones (2007) and Shaiq, Khalid, Akram and Ali (2011). One criticism, for example, is that the dimensions are static concepts of culture and biased as they are chosen from a Western point of view (e.g., Baskerville, 2003; Osland & Bird, 2000; Slawomir, 2004). Despite the level of controversy surrounding Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions, its theoretical and practical value is undeniable (M. L. Jones, 2007). Regarding the topic of implementing CLT, a Western methodology in the Vietnamese context, studies that have adopted Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions can provide valuable insights. The following section discusses the influences of Confucianism on the Vietnamese language classroom and how these influences may encumber foreign language teaching and learning.

### 2.2.3 English language classrooms in Vietnam

Confucianism leaves its stamp on the Vietnamese classroom culture, creating several cultural obstacles to the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam in general, and in the implementation of CLT in particular (Le, 1999; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; Phan, 2004). Firstly, Confucianism views learning, including language learning, as a process of knowledge accumulation (T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002) while CLT principles advocate the practice of knowledge constructing and using it for immediate purposes. Chuong (1994) described classroom instruction in Vietnamese schools as a process of teachers imparting their

knowledge to students who would internalise this information regardless of its usefulness. Jones (1995) claimed that the culture of traditional Vietnamese education insisted on quiet and subservient students. Similarly, H. T. Nguyen (2002, p.4) portrayed Vietnamese students as quiet and attentive, good at memorising. Likewise, Duong and Nguyen (2006) reported that:

> The most common type of Vietnamese classroom is one in which the students sit in a fixed row in class, try to understand what the teacher and textbook say, and then repeat this information as correctly as possible in the examination…. The teacher or the book gives out knowledge to the students, like pouring water from a so-called full pitcher (the teacher full of knowledge) into a so-called empty glass (the student's mind). (p.35).

In recent years, despite the current educational reforms, it seems that these descriptions remain accurate as Le (2011) observes that Vietnamese classroom culture is still characterised by students' repetition, recitation, memorisation of factual information provided by their teachers or textbooks. One explanation of the prevalence of this "teacher-centred rote learning culture" (Le, 2011, p.18), or as Chick (1996, p.27) puts it "teacher volubility and student taciturnity," is the student's cultural perceptions of their teachers as the source of knowledge. Traditionally, teachers had the second most important rank in the Vietnamese society, just below the king, and in modern Vietnamese society, teaching is still considered a noble occupation. In the Vietnamese teacher-student relationship, teachers function as the provider of knowledge, wisdom and behaviour, and thus are highly respected as in the following proverb: *Sang sông phải bắc cầu kiều. Muốn con hay chữ phải yêu lấy thầy* (literally translated as follows: For crossing a river, build a bridge. For your children to be well educated, respect teachers).

Phan (2004) observed that while trying to implement CLT, Vietnamese teachers struggle with the conflict between their two identities: the traditional and the CLT driven 'modern'. As a teacher of English, they are facilitators and students' friends. At the same time, they must perform their traditional role as mentors and sources of knowledge in the classroom, which lies at the heart of the pedagogical practices in Vietnam (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996). Due to the respect they have towards their teachers, students feel rude if they interrupt, question, or argue a position with their teacher. Meanwhile, the main tenets of CLT encourage students to be negotiators, and contributors of knowledge and information.

The traditional Vietnamese teacher-student relationship, therefore, gives rise to a difficulty in implementing communicative activities as school should be a place where students keep silent while listening to teachers and copying from the board. Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) therefore argued that adopting CLT principles such as those Nunan (1989, p.20) described as "calling for learner involvement, allowing learners choice, changing teachers' and students' roles, and breaking down hierarchic barriers in the classroom" would challenge the basic Vietnamese cultural and educational values. This possible cultural clash is a challenge to MOET's efforts to improve the quality of EFL learning and teaching. Although the rapidly changing global environments, globalisation and internalisation may contribute to mitigate the cultural conflicts, in order to promote "a learner centred, communicative task-based" pedagogy (MOET, 2006, p.14) in Vietnam, MOET needs to acknowledge these conflicts while culturally attuning and adapting CLT to the Vietnamese context.

### 2.3 National Foreign Language Project 2020

Research has revealed that the English competence of the Vietnamese workforce has not met the requirements of the foreign employers (Hoang, 2008). In recent years, there have been numerous calls from teacher educators, researchers and the public for comprehensive educational reforms to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam. In response, a project entitled *Teaching and learning foreign language in national education system, period 2008-2020* was drafted by MOET. The project, often known as NFL Project 2020, was approved in 2008 with an estimated budget of 9.738 million dongs (approximately 5 billion USD). It consists of three stages: 2008-2010, 2011-2015, and 2016-2020, and aims to significantly promote and improve the teaching and learning of EFL to meet the trends of globalisation and international interdependency. Of its various objectives, the project's plans include revising the curricula and textbooks, improving teachers' abilities, and reforming the testing and assessment procedures.

The general goal of the project is to improve teaching and learning foreign languages, mainly EFL so that English competency becomes an advantage for Vietnamese people. The project aims to enable most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities to be able to use a foreign language independently and confidently by 2020 (MOET, 2008).

As part of this project, MOET has developed and issued a detailed and unified language proficiency framework consisting of six levels, of which level 1 is lowest and level 6 is

highest. This framework, compatible with the CEFR, is used to ensure interconnection and consistent progression in language training across different school levels. Based on the framework, MOET sets different standards for students at different levels of English. The outcome of the project is to have students graduating from primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools to qualify at CEFR's A1, A2, and B1 respectively. For undergraduate education, the target was set at level B1, B2, and C1 for graduates from, respectively, institutions not specialising in foreign languages, college (3 year) and university (4 year) programs with a specialisation in foreign languages. Table 2.2 below summarises the required outcome levels of language proficiency for different levels of education (see appendix F for a gloss of the CEFR's levels).

**Table 2.2** ***Required levels of foreign language proficiency for different levels of education***

| Required level of proficiency | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 | C1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Level of education | Primary education | Lower secondary education | Upper secondary education | | |
| | | | Undergraduate education (not specialised in foreign language) | Undergraduate education with specialisation in foreign language (College: 3 year program) | Undergraduate education with specialisation in foreign language (University: 4 year program) |

Note: Adapted from (MOET, 2008)

To achieve this outcome, the NFL Project 2020 (MOET, 2008) proposes the six following solutions:

- Establish a Management Board to oversee the implementation of the project;
- Organise the examination and evaluation of the state of the teaching workforce in order to construct training and re-training plans, set up training and recruitment plans;
- Re-examine, amend and supplement policies related to teaching and learning languages;
- Invest more into facilities and equipment for teaching and learning languages;
- Promote international partnerships;

- Facilitate an optimal environment that assists language teaching and learning and create motivation to learn languages.

It is clear that MOET realises the need to improve the current teaching workforce, and a concrete achievement of NFL Project 2020 is the construction and publication of Vietnam's ETCF, discussed below.

### 2.4 Vietnamese English Teacher Competency Framework

The ETCF is the first subject-specific set of teacher standards in Vietnam and aims to address the question of what Vietnamese English teachers need to know to equip their learners with skills and competencies needed for the 21st century (MOET, Vietnam National Institute for Educational Sciences [VNIES], & NFL Project 2020, 2012). The ETCF intends to help bring consistency to content and process of teacher development as teacher-training providers can map their curriculum to the ETCF, and a system of on-going professional development can be designed with ETCF-based needs assessment findings.

The ETCF was commissioned by the NFL Project 2020 in 2010 and was approved by MOET in late 2012. It complements the general teacher standards issued by MOET. There are two versions of the ETCF: one for in-service teacher development and self-assessment and another for pre-service EFL teacher education programs. MOET et al. (2012) described the ETCF as having five domains:

- Knowledge of subject matter and curriculum;
- Knowledge of teaching;
- Knowledge of learners;
- Professional attitudes and values embedded across knowledge domains;
- Learning in and from practice and informed by context.

Of these five domains, teacher language proficiency belongs to the first, knowledge of language and curriculum. The ETCF requires that:

> Teachers demonstrate proficiency in the target language at an appropriate level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF) – Upper secondary teachers, C1; Lower Secondary teachers, B2; Primary teachers, B2 (MOET et al., 2012, p.23).

Despite these clear specifications, there is a lack of transparency regarding how MOET and the authors of ETCF arrived at these standards for teachers. Limited explanation was provided regarding the adoption of the CEFR in the Vietnamese context, and it seems that its adaption was pushed through with little consultation with ELT experts and researchers. A neighbouring country, Japan, also adapted the CEFR, but their three-stages procedure was explained much more clearly (Negishi, Takana, & Tono, 2012; Tono & Negishi, 2012) (see section 3.2.3). Meanwhile, results of the evaluation of the state of the current teaching workforce in Vietnam reveal that much needs to be done before teachers can meet these requirements. This is discussed in the following section.

### 2.5 An underqualified teaching workforce

The demand for a skilled labour force having good command of English and relentless efforts from the government in general, and MOET in specific, to promote EFL learning have contributed to make English an important language for the Vietnamese people to learn. Yet, the blooming of EFL learning over a short period of time has brought with it several inherent problems. One of these problems is a severe shortage of qualified EFL teachers (Le, 2011) in contrast to a surplus of Russian language teachers all over the country. As reported by Sullivan (1996), in 1994, at one university language department, there was only one commencing student who wanted to major in Russian language while there were 40 Russian language teachers; meanwhile about 20 French and EFL teachers were overworked, with full classes. Throughout the country, the surplus Russian teachers were given two choices, either to leave the profession with a semi-retired status or to take classes to "upgrade" their English proficiency to become employable as EFL teachers. Those teachers that chose the second option were given 18 months of free classes in English. Some teachers did brilliantly but for many, their English proficiency is questionable. To make the situation worse, many graduates from EFL teacher training universities preferred seeking more lucrative employment in joint venture or foreign-owned companies. Since the demand for EFL teachers outstripped supply, those who were not proficient in English and had no official training could easily become teachers (Do, 2006). Language training colleges started to offer off-campus and part-time, *tại chức*, courses to train whoever wanted to become EFL teachers. Due to the discrepancy between training programs, the quality of teaching and learning declined. This led to the low quality of both EFL teachers' English proficiency and pedagogical skills.

As part of NFL Project 2020, examination and evaluation of the English proficiency of EFL in-service teachers were implemented. By early 2012, MOET had administered an English proficiency test in 24 out of 64 provinces to assess if Vietnamese EFL teachers at public schools were proficient enough in English to teach. The required level of English proficiency for these teachers was CEFR's B2. The test results were disappointing as reported in the national and international media (Huong & Giang, 2012; Minh, 2012; Parks, 2011; Thinh, 2011). The following chart, figure 2.2, provides a glimpse of the gloomy situation.

The test results agree with MOET officials' statement that approximately 80,000 EFL teachers needed further English training as 97 per cent, 93 per cent, and 98 per cent of in-service EFL teachers at primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools respectively were not fluent in English enough to teach EFL (N. H. Nguyen & Dudzik, 2013). Thus, the results confirmed that the weakness of most Vietnamese EFL teachers was their low English proficiency. Deputy Minister of Education Nguyen Vinh Hien admitted that the biggest problem in EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam was the lack of teachers proficient in English (Minh, 2012).

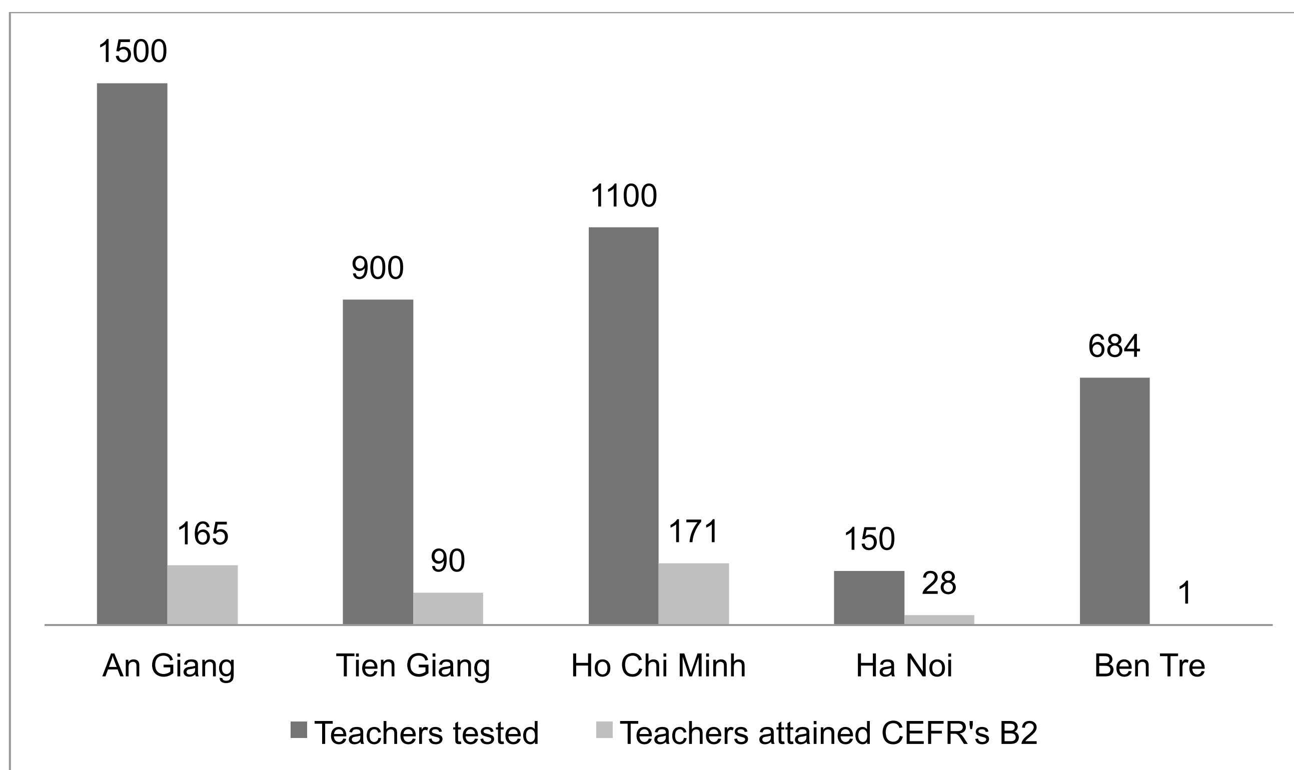



***Figure 2.2*** **Teachers attaining CEFR's B2 as reported in the media**

Meanwhile, it is necessary to take into consideration the various factors affecting the test results. First of all, the problem might come from the assessment instruments and procedures rather than the teachers themselves. For instance, those teachers tested claimed that they were not provided with much time to prepare or familiarise themselves with the format of the assessment. The teachers' background of education and teaching experience also affected the test results. For teachers working at the primary and lower secondary levels over a long period of time or those who were trained to be teachers of Russian and only converted to teaching English in the early 1990s, it might be unrealistic to expect them to attain CEFR's B2 without offering further training and continuing professional development courses. In addition, questions arose concerning the adoption of CEFR and the development of the Vietnamese ETCF. Without transparent explanations of such policies, teachers might be confused and thus only participated in the assessment with an ambivalent or even resisting attitude.

In the literature pertaining to EFL teaching in Vietnam, there are very limited studies reporting the voices of Vietnamese teachers amid educational reforms. Some studies have expressed reservations regarding teachers' readiness to adopt a communicative approach and their difficulties in transferring their positive attitudes towards CLT into actual classroom practice (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Lewis & McCook, 2002). Some other studies explored teachers' identity struggle, and how their beliefs affected their teaching practice (e.g., Le, 2011; Phan, 2004, 2007). To the best of my knowledge, there have been only two studies that investigate EFL teachers' attitudes towards NFL Project 2020. Vu (2013) conducted an online survey with 88 EFL teachers in Southern Vietnam and found that the teachers suggested the mandated standard proficiency levels should be set with reference to the contextual differences. They believed that the current targeted proficiency levels were likely to be unattainable. Vu's (2013) findings are in line with Le's (2015) study. Le conducted an online questionnaire with 33 EFL secondary teachers about the future of NFL Project 2020. The results show that only nine teachers believed that the Project might bring about some positive changes in the quality of ELT. Most of the surveyed teachers believed that they would be unable to preserve their proficiency after testing and additional training.

Due to the limited research regarding NFL Project 2020 and the current educational reforms, there is a need for studies looking at teachers' voices regarding their own language proficiency and language development. These studies can further our understanding of Vietnamese EFL teachers' struggle to develop English proficiency. Only

when these teachers' difficulties and needs are identified, can appropriate and meaningful support programs be created. The current study aims to contribute to the investigation of this important issue.

### 2.6 Teacher training and development in Vietnam

In Vietnam, during training, pre-service EFL teachers have to complete approximately 200 credits (one credit for 15 hours of instruction). As of 2008, the structure of a foreign language teacher-training program consists of 233 credits with three main strands of knowledge as summarised in table 2.3 below (MOET, 2008).

**Table 2.3** ***Structure of Vietnamese foreign language teacher training programs***

| Strands of knowledge | Number of credits |
|---|---|
| Foundation knowledge | 70 |
| Professional knowledge (including subject matter knowledge) | 140 (77-90 credits of subject matter knowledge) |
| Foreign language teaching knowledge | 23 |
| Total | 233 |

Note: Adapted from MOET (2008)

The foundation knowledge consists of subjects such as educational psychology, Ho Chi Minh Ideology and Marxism. The second strand is made up of courses related to the theory of teaching and subject matter knowledge. The latter comprises courses directly related to the linguistic knowledge of the foreign language and the development of the four macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Despite its importance, this component only accounts for less than one third (77/ 233) of the whole training program. The last strand of knowledge is made up of courses related to foreign language teaching methodology and a teaching practicum. This component makes up less than a tenth of the training program.

During the practicum, pre-service EFL teachers are welcomed into real life classrooms to observe in-service teachers' teaching practice. They also are required to teach a small number of hours under the supervision and mentorship of in-service teachers in addition to becoming familiar with classroom management. The in-service EFL teachers act as supervisors and evaluators of the pre-service teachers. However, there are many inherent problems with the teaching practicum. One problem is that the mentors are rarely chosen

on the basis of their mentoring abilities or teaching effectiveness but rather on the basis of convenience (T. M. H. Nguyen, 2010). Thus, it is a paradox that teacher mentors may not be as well qualified as their mentees both in term of EFL proficiency and teaching methodology (Mai, 2007). Another challenge is the limited mentoring training available for teacher mentors, and the meagre amount paid for teacher mentoring duties (T. M. H. Nguyen, 2010). As the mentors lack incentives for mentoring activities and consider the responsibility an extra burden on their already heavy workload, it is unsurprising that they can offer only limited help to the pre-service teachers. The teaching practicum, therefore, poses several weaknesses that need to be addressed.

After graduation from teacher training institutions, there are different types of in-service training programs (e.g., summer training, qualification-improvement training, demonstration-lesson training, and in-school training) often organised by MOET, provincial or district Department of Education and Training (DOET), teacher-training institutions, or international donors and individual experts. As these development programs often take the "cascade approach" in which only a few key teachers from each province are invited to the training and then are responsible for passing on the knowledge to their colleagues (Le, 2011, p.28), teachers are often reported to lack access to professional development activities (e.g., Le, 2002; H. H. Pham, 2007). In addition, in-service teacher training programs often are conducted in a lecture format and are strongly theory-oriented (Hamano, 2008). The trainers are often from teacher training universities with little or no teaching experience at the local context (Le, 2015). This type of training downplays the importance of helping teachers to adapt this knowledge to their everyday working context.

Another problem with in-service teacher training programs is that they neglect suggestions by Richards and Farrell (2005) to engage teachers in self-initiated professional development activities such as self-monitoring their teaching and initiating action research. In other words, ordinary teachers seem not aware of their own capabilities in functioning as agents of change and architects of their own professional development. There is, to the best of my knowledge, very limited research investigating in-service EFL teachers' English proficiency development. Thus, the current study hopes to shed light on the mystery around how Vietnamese EFL teachers take charge of their language proficiency development after graduation from their teacher-training program.

## 2.7 Overall summary

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the contextual landscape of Vietnamese EFL education. It is evident that the Vietnamese government in general and MOET in particular are determined to improve the quality of English teaching and learning. Their determination has resulted in the approval and implementation of NFL Project 2020 and the design and publication of the Vietnamese ETCF. The teachers are at the centre of the current educational reforms as their low level of EFL proficiency is considered one inherent problem militating against the improvement of English learning and teaching. Thus an investigation of their language proficiency development can meaningfully contribute to the current English teaching reform movement. The next chapter will review the literature on language proficiency in general and teacher language proficiency in particular in order to highlight the research gap in which the current study is situated.

# Chapter 3: Literature review

The current study aims to investigate Vietnamese teachers' English proficiency development. Chapter 3 reviews the literature relevant to the study, starting with a clarification of the theoretical nature of language proficiency followed by popular frameworks outlining its different levels. Next, the chapter discusses the literature concerning NNES teachers' language proficiency, a critical component of the language teacher professional competence. After reporting the various standards of language proficiency set for NNES teachers in different contexts, the chapter reviews the results of empirical studies documenting NNES teachers' language proficiency. It then turns to discuss the approaches to, stages of, and motivations underlying teacher professional development. The chapter concludes by emphasising the need to support NNES teachers' English proficiency development.

## 3.1 What is language proficiency?

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) defines proficiency as a good standard of ability and skill. Hence, in layman's terms, language proficiency refers to the ability of an individual to perform in a language. The term proficiency, however, has been used in the academic literature to convey different meanings. Bialystok (1998) has commented that different theoretical approaches could lead to different definitions of language proficiency. Similarly, Cummins (2000) has described proficiency as a pie that could be legitimately sliced in several ways as the concept could be differently interpreted to suit researchers' purposes.

Stern (1983) has viewed proficiency both as the learning outcome and an empirical fact, the actual performance of the learner. Objectives and standards are used to define proficiency as a goal and assess it as a fact. He proposed that as a goal, knowing a language proficiency involves the mastery of: firstly the forms; secondly the linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural meanings of those forms; thirdly the capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form; and finally the creativity of language use. As Taylor (1988) and Llurda (2000) have commented, Stern's definition of language proficiency incorporates both the Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence as static knowledge of the language and Hymes' sociolinguistic view of ability to use the language appropriately in a given context for meaningful communication. It also incorporates the realm of performance as reflected in the use of the notion language use. As an empirical fact, proficiency has different levels

that Stern (1983) has defined as the different degrees of the actual or required mastery of the second language. These levels range from zero to complete competence. Neither zero nor complete competence is absolute since learners have at least known about language and how it functions via their first language, and native-like competence is an ideal goal hardly ever reached by second language learners.

Stern (1983) has further noted that proficiency could be approached from two perspectives. The first perspective, more complex and controversial, focuses on the definition of the components of proficiency. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) defined language proficiency as communicative competence with linguistic competence as an intrinsic part of the concept. The second perspective refers to language proficiency as a scale construct, a continuum. This proficiency is postulated by various rating scales, measured by different language proficiency tests, and investigated by inter-language studies. For example, Hadley (2001) identified proficiency as a way to describe and measure language competence and performance. She listed four levels of proficiency, namely novice, intermediate, advanced and superior. The American Council on Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL- see section 3.1.2) has defined language proficiency as the "ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language. Proficiency demonstrates what a language user is able to do" (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 2012, p.4). ACTFL has then described proficiency as a continuum with five proficiency levels.

The following part will discuss these two perspectives on the concept of language proficiency, starting with the theoretical nature of the term and then moving on to the frameworks presenting its different levels.

### 3.1.1 The nature of language proficiency

When defining the construct of proficiency, researchers often link to other related concepts, namely language fluency, performance and competence. The term fluency can be used in a narrow sense to denote fluid language use, as opposed to slow and halting use. However, it is more often a reference to a high level of oral proficiency (Baker, 2012). The other two terms, performance and competence, are more difficult to distinguish from proficiency. Stern (1983) even used proficiency, competence, and knowledge of the language interchangeably. Further evidence supporting this can be seen in Bachman's

(1990) review of the common notions of language proficiency according to researchers in the field:

> …the term 'language proficiency' has been traditionally used in the context of language testing to refer in general to knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired. (p.16)

This one quote indicates the confusing combination of knowledge, competence and ability when defining proficiency. Indeed, in the literature, proficiency and competence are imprecisely defined and used almost interchangeably (Norris, 1999). Therefore it is helpful to clarify the notion of competence introduced by Chomsky and later reinterpreted by Hymes.

**Chomsky's competence and Hymes' communicative competence**

The two terms competence and performance can be traced back to Chomsky's (1965) work on transformational generative grammar. It is in the context of first language (L1) acquisition and with the purpose of developing a linguistic theory that Chomsky (1965) distinguished between an idealised native speaker's underlying competence and the individual's performance. For him, language competence is the underlying unobservable knowledge of the system of the language while language performance is observable as the empirical realisation of competence. In other words, language performance is the actual production and comprehension of language in specific situations of language use. Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance should be viewed with regard to his purpose of developing a linguistic theory. This purpose explains why his notion of competence does not include language use, or ability to use the language knowledge (Taylor, 1988). Chomsky's competence only refers to knowledge of grammar, a static concept with an absolute quality. He set out to describe linguistic knowledge as a state and was not concerned with the process through which one achieves that competence.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Hymes (1971, 1972) criticised Chomsky's competence-performance distinction as lacking recognition of aspects of appropriate language use in social-cultural contexts. Hymes contended that there are rules of use, for example rules of speech acts, without which the rules of grammar would be useless. He therefore argued for a broader notion, communicative competence, that comprises both the underlying

knowledge of language and the ability to use that grammatical competence appropriately in a variety of communicative situations. This notion blurred the clear distinction between Chomsky's view of competence as linguistic knowledge and performance as the realisation of that knowledge.

It is important to recognise the duality between the static and permanent notion of Chomskyan linguistic competence and Hymesian communicative competence that is dynamic and constantly developing (Llurda, 2000; Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007). Of the two, Hymes' notion of communicative competence is more attractive to the applied linguists and language teachers whose aim is to explain communication and help learners develop the ability to use the language appropriately in different social contexts.

Hymes' contributions are influential as proficiency is no longer viewed just as linguistic competence but is interpreted as communicative competence including semantic, discourse, and sociolinguistic features. Evidence supporting this can be found in the importance attached to sociolinguistic/pragmatic competence in the many different models of communicative competence briefly discussed below.

**Models and characteristics of communicative competence**

Different models of communicative competence have been developed for second language (L2) teaching and assessment including those of Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996), and Celce-Murcia (2007). Working with Hymes' notion of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed their influential model of the construct that was further modified by Canale (1983). They understood communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skills needed for communication. The skills mean the extent to which an individual can perform with the knowledge base in actual communication situations. Their framework consists of four major components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic knowledge of the target language. Sociolinguistic competence deals with the social rules of language use, which involve an understanding of the various social contexts where communication takes place. Discourse competence is the ability to understand an individual message and how the meaning is represented in relation to the entire text and discourse. Strategic competence refers to the ability to employ various verbal and non-verbal strategies effectively, such as

repetition and clarification, to communicate successfully. One limitation of the Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) model is the lack of a description of a relationship between the four components. Later models and interpretations of communicative competence by Bachman and Palmer (1996), Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995), Celce-Murcia and Dörnyei (1995), Savignon (1983) all specify and describe how the construct's components are interrelated.

Unlike Hymes, Canale and Swain, Savignon (1972, 1983) gave greater emphasis to the aspect of ability, and described communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" (1972, p.8). Savignon (1997) identifies five characteristics of communicative competence. Firstly, she emphasises the dynamic and interpersonal nature of communicative competence as it involves two or more persons negotiating meaning together. Secondly, she points out that communicative competence applies to both written and spoken language. Next, she underlines that communicative competence is context specific and success in communication may vary from situation to situation. Success requires understanding of the context and familiarity with it in addition to appropriate choices of register and style. Then, like Chomsky, she (1997) distinguishes between competence, "the presumed underlying ability", and performance as "the overt manifestation of that ability" (p.14). Finally, Savignon sees communicative competence as relative rather than an absolute and static trait as it depends on the cooperation of all the participants in a particular interaction. She suggests that one should speak in terms of "degrees of communicative competence" (1997, p.15). These characteristics concord with what Kramsch (1986) and Young (2013) proposed when they called for more attention to interactional competence to better reflect the co-constructive, and local and practice-specific nature of communication.

These characteristics show that like Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman and Palmer (1996), Savignon embraces Hymes' communicative competence as a dynamic, interpersonal, context-specific, and relative notion. Meanwhile, following a Chomskian perspective, Savignon also distinguishes competence, what one knows, from performance, what one does. She further emphasises that "only performance is observable and it is only through performance that competence can be developed, maintained and evaluated" (p.14).

Bachman (1990) proposed a model of communicative language ability that was later modified by Bachman and Palmer (1996). This model clearly acknowledges a pragmatic

component referring to the abilities for creating and interpreting discourse. It also demonstrates the processes by which the various components interact with each other and with the context of language use. Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model comprises three main components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. The first component, language competence, was defined as knowledge of language and subdivided into organisational competence and pragmatic competence. The first of these, organisational competence was further divided into grammatical competence and textual competence, comparable to Canale and Swain's (1980) and Canale's (1983) grammatical competence and discourse competence respectively. The second component, pragmatic competence was split into illocutionary competence, or the control of functional features of language, and sociolinguistic competence that is similar to the notion of the same name proposed by Canale (1983). Strategic competence was conceived of as a set of metacognitive components enabling language user involvement in goal setting, assessment of communicative sources, and planning.

One problem with Bachman's model is that it does not establish any relationship between the different components as Savignon (1983) had already done. Thus, other models were proposed as an improvement, including those of Celce-Murcia and Dörnyei (1995), and Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006). The similarity between these models is the importance attached to discourse competence. All these researchers considered the core of communicative competence to be discourse competence relating to the ability to select and combine sentences to achieve a unified text. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2001) explained, it is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competences are realised. Other components serve to build discourse competence as it, in turn, shapes each of the other competences.

From a cognitive and billingual approach, Hulstijn (2015) proposed a model of language ability with two dimensions. The first is the dimension of basic and higher language cognition (respectively, BLC and HLC). BLC is the language cognition that all native speakers have in common while HLC is the domain where individual differences can be observed. The second dimension is that of core and peripheral components. The core component consists of linguistic knowledge including pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and discourse-organisational knowledge while the peripheral components comprise interactional ability, strategic competences, metalinguistic knowledge, and knowledge of the characteristics of oral and written discourse. Hulstijn's model restores an emphasis on

the linguistic core of language proficiency, which may take the construct back to a structuralist focus on lexis and grammar (McNamara, 2014). Meanwhile, the model, to some extent, may allow integrative-skill assessment.

The last model to be discussed is the description of communicative language competence in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). This model distinguishes the general competences from communicative language competences. The former includes the competences less closely related to language while the latter consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic components. Each component is explicitly defined as “the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9). Language competence refers to knowledge and ability to form well structured messages. It comprises lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, and orthoepic competences. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge and ability needed for appropriate language use in a social context. Pragmatic competence consists of discourse competence and functional competence. Strategic competence is not described as a component of communicative language competence but is conceived as all types of communication strategies including those to overcome the lack of a particular language knowledge and ability.

In summary, communicative competence is a complicated concept that comprises different interrelated components. As the field of language teaching and assessment advances, there might be further developments to the construct of communicative competence. One example is the need to further modify the construct to represent the increasing recognition of intercultural aspects. For example, Byram (1997) proposed a model of intercultural communicative competence to integrate the teaching of intercultural communicative skills into classroom instruction. Still, it is generally agreed that communicative competence comprises knowledge and abilities/skills for use, and it has the characteristics as identified by Kramsch (1986), Savignon (1997), and Young (2013).

**Language proficiency in relation to competence and performance**

While proficiency was first viewed as synonymous with competence, as the notion of competence was reinterpreted and then developed as communicative competence, there was a need to clarify the terminology. With the competence-performance distinction originally proposed by Chomsky (1965) and reemphasised by Savignon (1997), it made sense to use proficiency as a middle term between competence and performance as

proposed by various researchers. Taylor (1988) suggested using proficiency to refer to the ability to make use of competence that is viewed in the original restricted sense by Chomsky as state of knowledge. Performance is the outcome of proficiency in action. Llurda (2000), in agreement with Taylor, emphasised that:

> The line that separates competence from proficiency is precisely that of measuring the particular skills or abilities of each individual in a particular language, where competence would be pure knowledge and proficiency would refer to the skills needed to put that knowledge into practice that is to transform knowledge into language use. (p.91)

Llurda also supported Bachman's (1990) renaming of communicative competence as communicative language ability which then would be further divided into two components including language proficiency (capacity to use language) and communicative proficiency (knowledge of the world and strategies necessary to apply language proficiency to contextualised situation). This renaming would help avoid the confusion and vagueness associated with the term communicative competence.

This section provides a theoretical discussion of the concepts of language proficiency and communicative competence, the central concepts of this thesis. The current study adheres to the view of language proficiency as the capacity to make use of knowledge about the language in communication. The following section will discuss the different levels describing such a capacity and introduce the CEFR scales of language proficiency that MOET adopted and adapted for the Vietnamese context.

### 3.1.2 Levels of language proficiency

As previously mentioned, another perspective on language proficiency apart from the construct and its components concerns users' and learners' levels of proficiency (Stern, 1983). Indeed, when proficiency is viewed as the capacity to make use of knowledge about the language in practice, the term suggests variability and relates to measurement and testing. There are well-known proficiency scales developed for tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). This section does not discuss these test-focused scales but introduces the scales developed in different parts of the world to measure communication and have implications for both language teaching and learning, and assessment.

In Australia, one government approved assessment scale is the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR). Initially released in 1979, it has been widely used around Australia and is accepted by institutions in many countries (Ingram, 2015; Wylie & Ingram, 2010). The ISLPR provides a detailed description of how a language user develops from zero to native-like proficiency. There are twelve levels, namely zero, formulaic, minimum creative, basic transactional, transactional, basic social, basic vocational, vocational, advanced vocational, and native-like levels of proficiency. Each macro-skill of speaking, listening, reading and writing is described in detail, and the outcome of an ISLPR test is a profile showing the candidate's proficiencies in each of the four macro-skills.

In the USA, the ACTFL published its well-known proficiency guidelines in 1986 and performance guidelines for primary and secondary learners in 1998 (ACTFL, 1998, 2002, 2012). Proficiency is described as a continuum with five different proficiency levels (novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished) in terms of four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The novice, intermediate, and advanced levels are further divided into low, mid, and high sublevels with corresponding descriptions provided. The guidelines aim to provide a means to evaluate functional language ability, which is the ability to use language to accomplish real world communicative tasks.

Meanwhile in Europe, the CEFR was developed and used to describe achievements of foreign language learners/users. Not just a tool to evaluate language proficiency like the ACTFL guidelines, the CEFR is useful for both language teaching and assessment. In the CEFR's (Council of Europe, 2001) words:

> The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively (p.1).

At the core of the framework are the Common Reference Levels describing different levels of language learning. They consist of a scale of six proficiency levels, each of which is comprehensively described: breakthrough (A1), waystage (A2), threshold (B1), vantage (B2), effective operational proficiency (C1), and mastery (C2). The CEFR is the scale of particular interest for this thesis given that it has been adopted and adapted by MOET for

the Vietnamese context. The self-assessment scales used in the self-rated English proficiency survey (see chapter 6) were taken from the CEFR.

### 3.1.3 Summary

In conclusion, the term language proficiency has been defined in different ways, sometimes synonymously with linguistic competence as a component of communicative competence and sometimes in a broader sense similar to those of Bachman (1990) and Stern (1983) as a multifaceted concept to incorporate both knowledge of language, competence, and ability to use language. This study concurs with the view of language proficiency as the capacity to make use of knowledge about the language in communication. In this sense, language proficiency can be described according the different levels as mapped in different proficiency frameworks such as those of the ACTFL or CEFR.

## 3.2 Teacher language proficiency

This section starts by discussing two closely related concepts, teacher professional competence (TPC) and teacher language proficiency. It then focuses on the latter as one of the main factors distinguishing native and non-native English speaking (NES and NNES respectively) teachers, and more importantly, as a critical component of TPC due to its influence on teachers' confidence and teaching practice. Finally, the section reviews the empirical studies documenting NNES teachers' language proficiency.

### 3.2.1 Teacher professional competence and teacher language proficiency

Teacher language proficiency refers to the proficiency in using the target language. It is a component of TPC. TPC is a multifaceted construct that has been defined in various ways. Trappes-Lomax (2002) listed three types of skills that a language teacher needs, namely having the required language proficiency; having knowledge of an appropriate methodology; and understanding how the language works. Researchers such as Nicholas (1993) and Pasternak and Bailey (2004) viewed TPC similarly to Trappes-Lomax but clearly emphasized the importance for teachers to teach in culturally appropriate ways, and behave appropriately in the target culture. Similarly, Pachler, Evans, and Lawes (2007) considered TPC as incorporating knowledge of second language acquisition theory, pedagogy, curricula, and culture as well as the teacher's proficiency in the target language and an awareness of its structure and features.

Other researchers added that it is also important for language teachers to be proficient in assessment, material development, and using technology to facilitate learning. For example, Farrell and Richards (2007) defined TPC as consisting of the following factors:

- knowledge of relevant subject matter (e.g., learning theory, applied linguistics, pedagogical grammar, methodology);
- mastery of a broad range of teaching skills;
- ability to develop tests, curriculum and materials;
- ability to use resources such as videos and computers;
- proficiency in English (p.56).

Different countries also have published their own requirements and interpretations of TPD. In England, for example, a newly qualified teacher must show competence in four areas, of which language proficiency belongs to the first.

- Knowledge and understanding;
- Planning, teaching, and class management;
- Monitoring, assessment, recording and reporting and accountability;
- Other professional requirements (Barnes, 2002, p198).

In the Vietnamese ETCF (see section 2.4), teacher language proficiency belongs to the first of the five domains of knowledge necessary for a language teacher.

There is a unanimous consensus in the literature regarding the importance of teacher language proficiency as an important component of TPC. All these definitions of TPC have one common component: teacher language proficiency. This observation agrees with Berry's (1990), Briguglio and Kirkpatrick's (1996), Franklin's (1990), and Lavender's (2002) finding that teacher language proficiency is often considered the most important of the multiple components of TPC. This importance is reflected in Pasternak and Bailey's (2004) framework (see figure 3.1) in which language proficiency and professionalism are perceived as continua, "rather than an either-or-proposition" (p.163). Four types of language teachers can be located in this framework with regard to their language proficiency and professional preparation.

| | Proficient in the target language | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professionally prepared as language teacher | 1 | 3 | Not professionally prepared as language teacher |
| | 2 | 4 | |
| | Not proficient in the target language | | |

***Figure 3.1* Continua of target language proficiency and professional preparation (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004, p.161)**

While all agree that teacher language proficiency is an important component of TPC, there is disagreement about the necessary teacher language skills and proficiency level (Barnes, 2002). Elder (1991) provided a definition for teacher language proficiency comprising normal language use and various specialist skills. These include the ability to use a range of questioning techniques, rhetorical signaling devices, and simplification strategies to communicate effectively to students, monitor their understanding, and guide classroom discussions. Similarly to Elder's definition, that of Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, and Foell (2006) pointed out two areas of language proficiency required for foreign language teachers, namely global language proficiency and language proficiency for the specific purpose of teaching.

The difference between global and specific purpose language proficiency can be traced back to Cummins' (1979) distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP describes the ability to use language successfully in school settings. This distinction between conversational and academic dimensions of English language proficiency has been further elaborated, for example to highlight the range of cognitive demands and contextual support involved in particular language activities (Cummins, 2008). For language teachers, both global and specific purpose language proficiency are important.

Regarding language proficiency for teaching, Riegelhaupt (1994) provided a comprehensive list of functions and strategies of oral skills needed. Pearson et al. (2006) elaborated the list and identified the following skills as necessary for oral classroom teaching: oral comprehension of students, oral reading, oral presentation of an instructional activity, question formulation, technical vocabulary.

Elder (1994) identified four language-related abilities as central to the role of the language teacher:

- ability to use the target language as medium and object of instruction;
- ability to modify target language input as comprehensible to learners;
- ability to produce well-formed input for learners in terms of grammar and pronunciation;
- ability to draw leaners' attention to the formal features of the target language.

Richards (2010) proposed more specific language competencies that are needed in order to teach effectively. These include the abilities:

- To comprehend texts accurately;
- To provide good language models;
- To maintain use of the target language in the classroom;
- To maintain fluent use of the target;
- To give explanations and instructions in the target language;
- To provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g., of vocabulary and language points);
- To use appropriate classroom language;
- To select target-language resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, internet websites);
- To monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy;
- To give correct feedback on learner language;
- To provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty;
- To provide language enrichment experiences for learners (p.103).

Due to limited research on the language proficiency for the specific purpose of teaching, it is often the case that global language proficiency tests are used to measure teacher language proficiency. Thus the levels required for pre- and in-service teachers to attain are also regularly set according to such global scales (see section 3.2.3).

In summary, while teacher language proficiency is still far from a well-defined notion, the general consensus is that it is a fundamental component of the language teacher's proficiency or competence. In the EFL context, teacher language proficiency becomes even more crucial (Nakata, 2010) as discussed in the next section.

### 3.2.2 NNES teachers’ language proficiency

This section now looks at NNES EFL teachers in particular who need to attain and then maintain a certain acceptable level of proficiency in order to teach the language effectively (Farrell & Richards, 2007). As Heaton (1981) argues, by improving language skills, a teacher can improve their teaching. Evidence supporting this can be found in the early literature concerning the dichotomy between NES and NNES teachers and the studies concerning teachers’ confidence.

When compared to NES teachers, NNES teachers often considered themselves inferior in areas of language proficiency. C. Tang (1997) examined 47 NNES teachers’ perceptions of their proficiency in comparison with that of NES teachers. The participants perceived NES teachers to be superior in areas of fluency such as speaking, pronunciation and listening and associated themselves with areas of accuracy. Reves and Medgyes (1994) conducted an international survey with 216 in-service EFL teachers in ten countries, including both NES and NNES teachers. NNES teachers were perceived to speak poorer English, use bookish language and be less confident. The authors identified obvious perceived differences in teaching behaviour between NES and NNES teachers (Reves & Medgyes, 1994) and grouped them into three categories including use of English, general teaching approach and specific teaching approach. Reves and Medgyes (1994) argued that most of these differences were attributable to language proficiency differences

Farrell and Richards (2007) point out that NNES teachers’ proficiency may influence their teaching practice including the choice and use of teaching methods as well as the quality of input teachers provide for their students. Effective teaching requires successful communication with students, which in turn requires teachers to structure their language output for maximum clarity (Fillmore & Snow, 2002). Teachers’ language output also serves as input for their students. Since rich input is fundamental to language development (Ellis, 1994), and since teachers’ language output might be the only input available for students in EFL contexts, the local teachers need to attain a high level of language proficiency.

A teacher’s confidence in his or her own ability to serve as a model of linguistic competence is also a crucial part of maintaining a positive classroom environment (Fraga-Canadas, 2010) and motivating their students. While NNES teachers with high levels of language proficiency are success stories, and real images of what students can aspire to

be, NNES teachers' language limitations may hamper their ability to play such a role. Their anxiety in language performance may even discourage their students from learning and using the language. This is what Horwitz (1996) refers to as negative messages about language learning. When teachers themselves do not feel comfortable with their language performance, how can they inspire and encourage their students to speak the language?

Indeed, research in different ESL/EFL contexts has shown that low proficiency is linked to teacher's lack of confidence (Murdoch, 1994; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). Reves and Medgyes (1994) asserted that the English proficiency of NNES teachers correlated with their self-esteem as professionals. The higher the level of proficiency they had, the less self-conscious, hesitant and insecure they were. The authors explained the difficult situation of those NNES teachers suffering from language proficiency limitations as a vicious circle: their constant realisation of their relative English-language limitations led to a poor self-image which meant a further deterioration in their language performance. A stronger feeling of inferiority was created as the starting point of a new circle. The essential factors in this 'causal chain' were the lack of teaching qualifications, of time spent in an English-speaking country and of frequency of contact with native speakers. The authors concluded that since the language is both the subject matter and the medium of instruction, teaching ESL/EFL requires both high levels of oral and written proficiency and appropriate use of English in different situations. In their words, NNES teachers need to "minimise the deficiencies so as to approximate their proficiency, as much as possible, to that of the NES teachers" (Reves & Medgyes, 1994, p. 364).

In Sri Lanka, results from a survey conducted in two key English teacher-training institutions (Murdoch, 1994) revealed overwhelming evidence suggesting that the majority of 208 NNES pre-service teachers regarded language proficiency as the foundation of their ability to fulfil their professional role. Nearly 90 per cent of the participants agreed that a teacher's confidence is most dependent on his or her own actual degree of language competence. Over 77 per cent wanted language proficiency to be the first priority in the training curriculum and wanted 40 per cent more of their course to be given over to language work. Murdoch went on to call for proper status to be given to language improvement in teacher education.

To sum up, language limitations can hinder NNES teachers from effective teaching practice, and may lead to lack of confidence to teach (Horwitz, 1996). English proficiency is therefore perceived as one of the critical ingredients for being successful NNES

teachers (Braine, 1999, 2010; Medgyes, 1994, 2001). It even has been stated that NNES teachers' most important professional duty is to make improvements in their English proficiency (Medgyes, 2001). While native-like pronunciation or intonation might not be necessary, there is no doubt that NNES teachers need a sufficient mastery of English to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals (Crystal, 1998; Davies, 1991).

### 3.2.3 Language proficiency requirements for NNES teachers

One important question is what level of language proficiency NNES teachers should have. Many countries have established different standards suitable to their own contexts of English teaching and learning. In the USA, the collaboration between ACTFL and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) resulted in the ACTFL/NCATE program standards for the preparation of foreign languages. They require foreign language teachers to have a high level of language proficiency and understanding of the organisation of the target language, the differences between its different varieties as well as with respect to other languages (ACTFL, 2002). The ACTFL oral proficiency interview (OPI) was implemented as a required assessment of foreign language pre-service teachers' language proficiency. Pre-service teachers are required to achieve an Advanced-Low level on the ACTFL OPI. This level assumes that pre-service teachers can provide sufficient target language input to the learners. Regarding global language proficiency, different requirements are specified for different languages. For example, teachers of Spanish, French, and German must achieve the Advanced-Low level while the requirement is Intermediate-High for teachers of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

The CEFR has been accepted as the international standard for language teaching and learning not only in Europe but also in many other parts of the world (North, Ortega, & Sheehan, 2010). For example, in Japan, the framework has been modified to the local context and termed CEFR-J in order to improve the country's English language teaching and learning to world standard. In an interim report on the progress of developing CEFR-J, Negishi, Takana and Tono (2012) described the three stages of the development: the creation of the preliminary versions of CEFR-J, the validation phase, and the pilot for using the revised CEFR-J at school. Some of the CEFR's levels were sub-divided, and the can-do descriptions were adapted to the Japanese context (Negishi et al., 2012; Tono & Negishi, 2012).

The Japanese also have their own English proficiency test known as the EIKEN tests. There are approximately 2.5 million test takers every year at sites across Japan ("EIKEN: Test in practical English proficiency," 2015). The EIKEN is a seven-level set of tests, including Grade 5, 4, 3, Pre-2, 2, Pre-1, and 1. EIKEN's Grades 3, 4, and 5 are comparable with CEFR's A1. The other four EIKEN Grades are equivalent with CEFR's four levels from A2 to C1.

In another Asian context, namely Hong Kong, the establishment of standards for teacher language proficiency started much earlier. In 1996, the Hong Kong government started developing benchmarks or minimum language standards of competence in English language, for all teachers including English language teachers. This move was triggered by research documenting teachers' falling English language standards (e.g., Tsui, Coniam, Sengupta and Wu, 1994). The result was the Language Proficiency Assessment of Teachers of English (LPATE), a test of standards of English language ability for Hong Kong primary and secondary teachers of English. Subsequent to the LPATE policy announcement, all pre-service teachers are required to meet minimum English language standards before they can join the profession. The examination syllabus and specifications for the LPATE test were first published in 2001. In the first five years, the test was administered to in-service teachers. Since 2006, it is only required of new teachers. Revision of the test started in 2005 and was completed in 2007.

The revised version consists of five components namely classroom language assessment and reading, listening, writing, and speaking tests. The reading and listening tests are analytically marked and then converted to a scale with five levels of proficiency. A minimum level of three must be obtained to pass. The writing, speaking and classroom language assessment components are scale-based with descriptors specifying levels of achievement on different scales. A minimum of level three (one 2.5 allowed) must be obtained on all six scales to pass. It is also required that all five components of the test be passed. In-service teachers who failed to reach the accepted standards would be retrained or possibly dismissed. The minimum standard (level three) equates impressionistically with IELTS 6.5, indicative of a level needed to operate at tertiary level and a defensible standard for NNES teachers (Coniam & Falvey, 2013).

In Vietnam, MOET also recognised the need to establish a set of standards for teachers' language proficiency. Similarly to Japan, Vietnam embraces a contextualised version of the CEFR. However, the implications of the standard are less dramatic than Hong Kong's

policy in that teachers are given opportunities for language proficiency improvement. This is reflected in the creation of the Vietnamese ETCF (see section 2.4). The framework proposes that teachers demonstrate proficiency in the target language at an appropriate level on the CEFR: Upper secondary teachers, C1; lower secondary and primary teachers, B2.

### 3.2.4 NNES teachers' language proficiency as documented in the literature

Section 2.6 has previously presented a detailed discussion of the fact that Vietnamese teachers' English proficiency was reported to be lower than MOET's requirements. The literature has much further evidence concerning NNES teachers' lack of proficiency and confidence.

D. Liu (1999) proposed that NNES teachers needed to have an excellent command of English, meaning having the ability to use English fluently and idiomatically. He however commented that while most NNES teachers might possess commendable knowledge about English, not many of them use it well. Discussion below surveys results from specific EFL contexts.

In China, Ping (2013) reported a shortage of qualified teachers of English, especially in the rural areas. In Thailand, Bryson (2004) reported that teachers were nervous about attending training because they were not confident they would understand NES instructors. Indeed, the average level of language proficiency of English language teachers in Thailand is low; according to Wall (2008), 51 per cent of Thai English teachers self-reported their proficiency as beginners' level. In Japan, an education ministry survey conducted in 2014 found that 28.8 per cent of teachers at lower secondary schools and 55.4 per cent of teachers at upper secondary schools had achieved EIKEN's Grade 1 or Grade Pre-1 (CEFR's C1 or B2) (Staff Report, 2015). These numbers are slightly higher in comparison with 2013's statistics (52.7 per cent and 27.9 per cent respectively). However, they are still far from the ministry's goal that is 75 per cent for upper secondary schools and 50 per cent for the lower level (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [MEXT], 2013). In Hong Kong, the first administration of LPATE in 2001 resulted in a public outcry in the media because of the low pass rates (Coniam & Falvey, 2013; I. Lee, 2004). It was reported that less than 33 per cent of the teachers passed the writing test (e.g., *South China Morning Post*, 2001).

There are studies that survey teachers in several contexts. Nunan (2003) found that the English proficiency of teachers in several EFL contexts (namely China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam) was insufficient to provide learners with rich input needed for successful language acquisition. He concluded that the reviewed EFL countries' invested resources are not achieving the desired goal and suggested that steps should be taken to ensure teachers' language skills were significantly enhanced.

One study critical to this thesis is that of Butler (2004). She investigated NNES teachers' self-assessment of their own English proficiency in comparison with the perceived minimum level needed to teach, in the Asian EFL contexts of Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. The instrument had seven language domains: listening comprehension, oral fluency, spoken vocabulary, pronunciation, spoken grammar, reading comprehension, and writing. 204, 206, and 112 teachers in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan respectively answered the survey. The results revealed that teachers self-assessed their language proficiency in productive skills (oral fluency and writing) as weaker than that of receptive skills (listening and reading). In addition, the teachers' perceived language proficiency was lower than the level they considered necessary to teach English. Statistically significant gaps were also identified between these two perceived levels. The widest gaps were found in oral fluency, and the smallest in listening. Based on the results, Butler argued for an urgent necessity to improve NNES teachers' language proficiency.

T. Tang (2007) replicated Butler's (2004) study with 53 secondary school teachers in China. The result agrees with Butler's (2004) findings as the majority of the teachers sampled perceived their proficiency levels to be lower than the minimum levels they thought necessary to teach English. The largest gap between the two levels was however found in listening comprehension.

Lee (2009) adopted the instruments used in Butler's study (2004) but only used four domains (listening, oral fluency, reading, and writing). The participants were primary teachers of English in Korea. It was found that the teachers rated the desired minimum levels higher than their current perceived levels of English proficiency in all domains. The participants also tended to rate their current proficiency levels of receptive skills (listening and reading) higher than productive skills, namely speaking and writing. This result therefore corroborated Butler's study (2004). The largest gap was found in speaking, and the smallest in reading. Lee (2009) concluded that teachers tended to perceive that they lacked the English proficiency levels necessary to teach English effectively in Korean

elementary schools. Regarding the levels of English proficiency teachers thought necessary for an elementary school teacher to attain, the mean scores did not exceed 4.0 on a 6-point scale. Therefore, Lee's (2009) participants perceived that they would not need advanced levels of proficiency to teach English effectively.

### 3.2.5 Summary

In conclusion, teacher language proficiency is considered a fundamental component of teacher professional competence. Language proficiency is the bedrock of language teachers' professional confidence (Murdoch, 1994, p. 254), which in turn influences their teaching practice. Therefore, it is essential for NNES teachers to continuously reflect on and improve their language proficiency in order to become more confident in teaching and teach more effectively. Administrators and educators working in many contexts have already proposed specific standards of language proficiency that NNES teachers should attain. However, the literature indicates that NNES teachers very often fail to meet such requirements.

## 3.3 NNES teacher professional development

Since pre-service education cannot provide everything a language teacher needs to know, and since the knowledge base of teaching is continually changing, professional development is an essential part of any teacher's life (Farrell, 2007). Lange (1990, p.250) defined teacher professional development as "the process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth." Similarly, Craft (2000) explained teacher professional development is all types of learning by teachers in both formal and informal settings across different contexts after their initial pre-service training. Crandall and Miller (2014) listed several practical ways for teachers to initiate and continue learning and growing. These include participating in professional organisations and becoming familiar with publishers, journals; joining professional learning communities such as teacher inquiry groups, study circles; exploring both online and offline resources including journals, online discussions, and blogs; attending local, national or international workshops and seminars; engaging in individual or collaborative research projects; observing other teachers' classes or taking part in coaching, mentoring, and team-teaching; keeping teaching journals, e-portfolios, or teacher autobiographic narrative inquiries crafted in the form of stories to reflect on teaching and learning. The following sections will discuss the theories underlying teacher professional development.

### 3.3.1 Approaches to effective teacher professional development

There are two approaches to professional development (Farrell, 2007). Traditionally, teacher professional growth is presumed to happen through workshops conducted by outside experts. This top-down approach to professional development assumes that the transmission of knowledge in workshops can change classroom-teaching behaviours. In reality, workshop sessions of this nature have little actual or only short-term effects on classroom teaching (Farrell, 2007). The recent literature supports the view that teachers rather than the outside experts are the "legitimate knowers, producers of legitimate knowledge, and as capable of constructing and sustaining their own professional practice over time" (K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p.3). This bottom-up approach to professional development assumes that professional development happens as teachers articulate their inner world of choices as responding to the outer world, their teaching context (Mann, 2005). Teachers are believed to be capable of creating difference as they explore the nature of their own decision-making and classroom practices via reflective practice.

Earlier, Wallace (1991) identified three major models of teacher professional development:

- an apprenticeship model in which less experienced teachers learn from those with more experience;
- an applied science or theory-to-practice model in which teachers learn from research and experts then apply these knowledge in their own contexts;
- a reflective approach in which teachers critically analyse, reflect on, and adapt their own practice.

All three models require teachers to be reflective and routinely to question their own teaching practice, beliefs about teaching and learning while being sensitive to the complex cultural contexts where they work (A. Murray, 2010; Wallace, 1991). Critical reflection, therefore, plays a key role in effective professional development for teachers. Farrell (2007, p.176) summarises that reflective teachers can develop:

- a deeper understanding of teaching;
- an evaluation of what stage they are at in their professional growth;
- more skills in self-reflection and critical thinking;
- more complex and clearer schema about teaching;

- a more coherent personal approach to classroom teaching;
- more elaborate pedagogical reasoning skills;
- more informed decision-making skills;
- themselves as more proactive and confident teachers.

According to Farrell (2007), there are three main types of reflective practice, namely reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for action. The difference between these three types lies in the time of reflection and its purpose. Reflection-in-action happens during the event, such as classroom teaching. Reflection-on-action occurs after the event, and reflection-for-action takes place when teachers think about future actions. In addition, there are two main approaches to reflective practice. The first one emphasises reflection only on classroom actions while the other involves the broader historical, sociopolitical and moral context of schooling. Only through the latter, known as critical reflection, can teachers become agents of change (Farrell, 2007).

As the bottom-up approach to teacher professional development becomes more and more popular, professional development needs to expand to reflect interactions between teachers, their teaching, and their contexts. Hardy (2012) understood teacher professional development as be a situated, multi-faceted concept. He approached professional development as policy, research, and as a part of teachers' work. He defined teacher professional development as a socio-political practice influenced by teachers' working and living contexts and the individuals or groups who are engaged in, support and create it. He argued that it is essential to recognise the complicated nature of the concept and the interaction, sometimes conflictual, between the factors and people involved in order to offer effective professional development for teachers.

Professional development needs not only improve teachers' knowledge and instructional practices but should also accelerate students' learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Guskey, 2000). It should be relevant to their particular needs and context and immediately applicable to their teaching practice (Crandall & Miller, 2014; Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010; Takaki, 2005). It needs also to cater to teachers' preferences for different types of professional development (Crandall & Miller, 2014).

As adult learners, teachers can be instrumental knowers, socialising knowers, or self-authoring knowers (Drago-Severson, 2004). These three types of knowers are those

primarily interested in acquiring step-by-step procedures that are sure to succeed, those attracted to working with others and seeking their approval, and those committed to independently reflecting on their practice (Drago-Severson, 2004). Thus some teachers prefer engaging with other colleagues while others favour independent professional learning. There are also those who prefer to combine different types of professional development.

Other researchers also have noted that effective professional development involves creating learning opportunities over a long time, helps teachers deepening and extending their skills, promotes talks and collaboration among teachers, challenges their assumptions about learning, and has administrative support (Desimone, 2011; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

Finally, the literature suggests that effective professional development can be promoted through professional learning communities (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Professional learning communities or communities of practice are groups of people who meet regularly either informally or formally to share expertise and work collaboratively to improve (Calderón, 1999; Wenger, 1998). For teachers, such gatherings can focus on the goals of an institution, such as deciding a course of action as a team to examine students' learning, or on a particular area of interest or concern to the individual teachers (Murphey & Sato, 2005). The meetings can be conducted face-to-face or online via collaborative online workspaces such as wikis, blogs, discussion boards and chat rooms (Crandall & Miller, 2014). Effective professional learning communities have five characteristics: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Such communities can offer teachers the opportunity to see themselves as part of a broader profession where they are supported and also encouraged to help each other in learning (Zhao, 2013).

In summary, teacher professional development has shifted from the traditional in-service training with workshops and courses organised by outside experts to a more long-term approach that facilitates teachers' development via reflective practice and collaborative learning while being sensitive to the contexts where teachers live and work.

### 3.3.2 Stages of teacher professional development

Teacher professional development is a life-long dynamic process (Fullan, 1995; Maskit, 2011). While the importance of identifying these different stages for planning efficient guidance and activity throughout a teacher's career is indisputable, researchers still have not achieved consensus in determining these stages (Huberman, 1995). Despite their differences, these models generally consider teacher professional development either as a linear progression with constant improvement in one's abilities and professional proficiencies or as an up-and-down process characterised by potential repetition of different processes (Maskit, 2011).

One popular model is the Teacher Career Cycle Model (Burke, Christensen, Fessler, Mcdonnel, & Price, 1987; Fessler, 1991) consisting of eight stages: Pre-service- Induction- Competency Building- Enthusiasm and Growth- Stability- Career Frustration- Career Wind-down- Career Exit. Pre-service is the period of preparation before entering the profession. Induction is the first few years of employment, during which teachers strive for acceptance by colleagues, parents, and students. In the Competency Building stage, teachers are eager to improve their teaching skills and abilities. The fourth stage, Enthusiasm and Growth, is when teachers reach a high level of competence in their work and continue to progress professionally with a high level of job satisfaction. At the next stage, Stability, teachers' careers reach a plateau and they started to lose motivation to join professional programs. Career Frustration is characterised by stress and anxiety as teachers begin to wonder why they are still teaching. Career Wind-down can be a pleasant or unhappy stage as teachers prepare to leave the profession. The last stage, Career Exit is the period after teachers leave their work. One advantage of this model is that it was designed as a practical tool for professional development and therefore has lent itself to be a framework for research on the same topic. In addition, stages in this model are not necessarily related to the length of teaching experience, and it is possible that teachers do not pass through all stages.

Research shows that teachers at the stages of Competency Building and Enthusiasm and Growth have the most positive attitudes towards pedagogical changes while teachers at Career Frustration and Career Wind down have the least positive attitudes (Maskit, 2011). While earlier in their career, teachers are characterised by a desire to face challenges and develop professionally, continuous intellectual growth with deepening practical knowledge, and openness toward changes, teachers at the latter professional development stages are

reported to experience a decline in job satisfaction, an increasing feeling of work-related fatigue, and a natural decrease in willingness to initiate processes of change at work.

### 3.3.3 Motivations underlying teacher professional development

Motivation is a multi-faceted construct that has behavioural, cognitive and affective components (Gardner, 2010). Harmer (2001) defined motivation as an internal drive directing one's behaviour towards a goal. It is what is responsible for "why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain the activity" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.7). Just as much as one's capacities, motivation greatly influences actual performance and quality of learning (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). Along with language aptitude, it is a key element that determines success in learning a second language (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In educational settings, motivation is recognised as one of the most prominent affective factors (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

Motivation is an important factor influencing the excitement or boredom of any activity (Williams & Burden, 1997), and teacher professional development activities are no exception. In comparison with studies on students' motivation, there is much less research on teacher motivation. It is, however, observed that teachers have a lower level of on-going motivation and higher levels of stress than those working in many other fields (De Jesus & Conboy, 2001). Teachers' motivation to teach is influenced by many factors including personal, social factors; classroom environment; socio-economic status; students' behaviours; examination stress; rewards; self-confidence and personality (Alam & Farid, 2011).

Regarding initial reasons to teach, Brookhart and Freeman (1992) reviewed 44 studies within the teacher education literature and concluded that altruistic, service-oriented goals and other intrinsic sources of motivation are the primary reasons behind choosing teaching as a career. Later studies had similar findings. One example is that of Kyriacou, Hultgren, and Stephens (1999): in their study, intrinsic reasons cover inherent aspects of teaching, such as the enjoyment of working with children or an interest in the subject matter knowledge and expertise. Altruistic reasons imply the view of teaching as a socially worthwhile and significant job. Extrinsic reasons cover other attractions of teaching like long holidays, stability, and status.

More recent research on teachers' motivation underlying their career choice has been guided by the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice) model developed and

promoted in a series of studies (Richardson, Watt, & Kılınç, 2012; Richardson & Watt, 2005, 2008, 2010; Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). The FIT-Choice model represents different psychological factors involved in the choice of teaching as a career. The sequencing of the model consists of socialisation influences leading to influences of task perceptions, self-perceptions, values and fall-back career. In short, socialisation influences comprise the positive influences of prior teaching and learning experiences or of significant others such as family members, friends and colleagues. It also includes the social dissuasions or negative influences from other people or from the portrayal of teaching as an undesirable career choice by mass media. Task perceptions are made up of task demand and task return (social status and salary). Self-perceptions refer to one's perceived teaching abilities, while the fall-back career construct reflects the possible situation of people unable to pursue their career of choice and thus directed toward teaching. The value component represents the major motives (intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic) identified by Brookhart and Freeman (1992). It is differentiated into intrinsic value, personal utility value (job security, time for family, and job transferability), and social utility value. Social utility value factor resembles altruistic motives. It is comprised of the values regarding shaping the future of children, enhancing social equity, making a social contribution, and working with children.

Although the FIT-Choice model was originally developed and validated in Australia, it has been fruitfully applied in several other contexts such as the U.S.A, Germany, and Norway (Watt & Richardson, 2012; Watt et al., 2012). Most studies employing the FIT-Choice model follow a quantitative approach with a large sample of participants and survey questionnaire. There is an absence of studies that apply the model with a qualitative approach and with a small participant sample. Although this study will not refer back to this model explicitly, it will become clear in the later parts of the thesis that the values cited here are also highly relevant to the context of the Vietnamese teachers.

While the literature regarding teacher education abounds with studies investigating teachers' initial motivations to teach (e.g., Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Watt & Richardson, 2012; Watt et al., 2012), there is a lack of studies regarding NNES teachers' on-going motivations to teach and to improve English proficiency. Dörnyei (2000) has referred to this on-going motivation as the motivation to be a teacher as a lifelong career. Teachers' on-going motivations to improve is of no less, if not more importance than the initial reasons behind their choice of teaching career. It is crucial to investigate such on-going

motivations to remain in the profession and strive for improvement. To the best of my knowledge, in the Vietnamese context, no such studies exist.

### 3.3.4 Problems with NNES teacher professional development

It is agreed that language teachers should continue to pursue professional development throughout their lives. Peyton (1997), for example, has urged foreign language teachers to maintain proficiency in the target language and consider such maintenance and improvement an on-going process regardless of the skills and knowledge they already possess. It is also agreed that both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should help teachers improve their English proficiency as well as their professionalism (Barnes, 2002; Berry, 1990; Chacón, 2005; Cullen, 2002; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Lavender, 2002; Liu, 1999; Murdoch, 1994; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). Yet, despite the importance of language proficiency for language teachers, the literature suggests that in-service foreign language teacher education programs do not offer many opportunities for language teachers to maintain or improve their language skills but instead focus on pedagogical knowledge. In other words, the language proficiency of these NNES teachers is often taken for granted. Undergraduate and post graduate TESOL programs often do not formally teach speaking and listening since they tend to assume that their pre-service teachers already have a high proficiency level (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004, p. 166).

Medgyes (1999) commented that language training is ignored in many TESOL programs and gave the example of his own Centre for English Teacher Training at the Evotvos Lorand University in Budapest. Consequently, their pre-service teachers did not attempt to make linguistic improvement. He argued that in order to prepare NNES teachers to be “effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals,” pre-service education needed to include language training program (Medgyes, 1999, p. 179).

Medgyes is not the only one who has emphasised the importance of language training for language teachers. D. Liu (1999) argued that many TESOL programs overlooked NNES pre-service teachers’ need to have the English proficiency required for success in their future teaching. D. Liu (1999) pointed out that most programs focused on enhancing students’ explicit knowledge of how the language operates rather than their ability to use the language; therefore they did not meet these pre-service teachers’ needs. In his study, more than half of the pre-service teachers believed that their training programs should incorporate a language improvement component in all its courses.

Similarly to D. Liu (1999), Shin (2008) reported that very few TESOL programs were tailored to meet the linguistic needs of NNES pre-service teachers. Shin concluded that since NNES teachers need to continuously improve their own skills in written and oral English, they should be supported to develop their English both during teacher training courses and outside the classroom.

Fraga-Canadas (2010) surveyed native and non-native teachers' language practices outside and inside the school setting. Based on the data from 106 returned questionnaires, She found that most NNES teachers experienced difficulties maintaining their language proficiency once they were in the profession, especially when confined to teaching lower-level classes for a long period of time. They also believed that their university language coursework had failed to provide them either with an adequate proficiency level or meaningful professional development.

Cooper (2004) reported the results of an online survey of 341 current foreign language teachers in Georgia, US, investigating how they perceived and evaluated the effectiveness of their professional preparation. The results strongly suggested that foreign language teacher development programs should include more time spent in language learning experiences in countries where the target language is spoken, and also more emphasis on developing language proficiency in the requisite university classes.

Schulz (2000) identified the existence of a professional consensus on the need for extended study abroad. In her words, “the ability to use the target language fluently, competently, confidently, and with a high degree of accuracy is an essential qualification for FL teachers” (Schulz, 2000, p.518). Schulz saw study abroad as a means of acquiring greater proficiency, and urged the official requirement of and called for financial support for an extended term of study abroad that aimed at developing an adequate level of language and cultural competence.

### 3.3.5 Summary

In summary, the literature concerning teacher professional development shows that for NNES teachers, it is of the utmost importance that language practice and learning are considered part of a continuing process throughout their career. Despite this acknowledged importance, not many teacher training and development programs have given due attention and efforts to help NNES teachers maintain or improve their language skills.

### 3.4 Overall summary

This chapter provides a review of the related literature to set a theoretical framework for the research. It discusses the theoretical nature of language proficiency with regard to NNES teachers' English proficiency development. The chapter agrees that for language teachers, language proficiency should be considered an important part of their professional competence rather than a fixed, unchanged symbol or standard representing a privileged status in the profession (Braine, 1999; Medgyes, 1994; Murdoch, 1994; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). Teachers need to reflect on their language use, as this task is compulsory and vital to their professional competence (Farrell & Richards, 2007). Especially for NNES teachers, language proficiency is an ability that needs to be continuously maintained and developed. The chapter also discusses the various English proficiency standards required for NNES teachers at different contexts, and the approaches to effective teacher professional development. The chapter concludes by calling for due attention to be given to the English proficiency development of NNES teachers.

# Chapter 4: Research questions

In order to investigate Vietnamese EFL teachers' English proficiency development, this chapter justifies the research questions arising from a pilot study, the practical situation in Vietnam as described in chapter 2, and the literature review presented in chapter 3. It starts by describing the pilot study and its results.

## 4.1 Pilot study

To examine if the topic of NNES teachers' English proficiency was worth pursuing in the Vietnamese context, a pilot study was conducted with six in-service teachers. The first selection criteria were participants' availability and willingness to participate in a one-hour group discussion. All participants were enrolled in postgraduate courses at The University of Queensland, Australia. They were between 23 and 28 years old and were on study leave from their teaching positions. Four participants were university teachers of English in different regions of Vietnam while the other two taught the language at upper secondary schools. The participants were all recipients of the prestigious Australian government AUSAID scholarship. In 2014, 185 AUSAID scholarships were provided to Vietnamese citizens who were working in different professions ("Overview of Australia's aid," 2014). These teachers, therefore, were among the best Vietnamese teachers.

During a loosely structured group discussion, the participants were invited to firstly share their language learning experiences and teaching practice. The researcher acted as the moderator of the discussion using a set of suggested topics and questions (see appendix B). The discussion was audio-recorded and then transcribed for themes.

The first theme emerging in the discussion is the participants' confidence that they were linguistically proficient enough to teach English. This finding is unsurprising as these participants had to score a minimum 6.5 in IELTS in order to gain admission to The University of Queensland. The participants however mentioned several language-related difficulties during their current study in Australia including the challenging reading materials with much jargon and confusing writing styles, the need to produce high quality academic writing, and the hard-to-understand accents of some Australian and international students. All participants acknowledged that they had been most conscious about English proficiency development during their pre-service teacher training and their preparation for IELTS. They all considered English proficiency related modules as an essential part of their training. Their responses concur with the results of studies of teachers' perceptions in

other contexts as previously reviewed in chapter 3. The tertiary teachers further suggested that their colleagues teaching at primary and secondary levels were even more anxious about their English proficiency due to limited support for English proficiency development.

Another important theme is the participants' concerns regarding the appropriateness and practicality of the CEFR's B2 standards set by MOET as they revealed their confusion and lack of information regarding both this policy in particular and NFL Project 2020 in general.

The pilot study shows that the topic of Vietnamese teachers' English proficiency development deserves exploration. If these high achieving teachers are still concerned about their own English proficiency, teachers working at lower levels (primary and lower secondary) of the educational system probably are suffering the same if not worse anxieties. In addition, the perceptions and difficulties of these teachers need to be examined because they are most directly affected by NFL Project 2020 policy while working with much more limited resources and support. It is not only fair to listen to their voices but also crucial for appropriate and meaningful policy and development programs to be created and implemented.

### 4.2 Research questions

The literature review indicates that NNES teachers in Asia are often reported to have low English proficiency (e.g., Nunan, 2003; Ping, 2013) and fail to meet the proficiency standards required by education administrators (e.g., Bryson, 2004; Coniam & Falvey, 2013). Recently in Vietnam, MOET has proposed CEFR's B2 as the required English standard for teachers working at the primary and secondary levels. The result of a nationwide survey of the teaching work force, however, has revealed that teachers are struggling to meet this requirement (see chapter 2). Therefore, there is an urgent need for studies investigating Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes towards English proficiency development. Do they think that they need to improve their proficiency? If yes, then what aspects of language proficiency do they want to improve the most? The study also aims to examine the participants' perceived language proficiency (PLP) in comparison with the level they perceived as required for their teaching (PRLP) and with the CEFR's B2 standard set by MOET. Based on the results of previous studies conducted by Butler (2004), Lee (2009), and T.Tang (2007) in similar Asian EFL contexts, it was hypothesised that there would be a gap between the two levels with teachers' PLP being lower than

PRLP. The first research question (RQ) of the study and its subsidiary questions are as follows

- RQ 1: What are the Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their English language proficiency (PLP) and responses towards MOET's English policy?
    - Is there a gap between the two levels, PLP and PRLP?
    - What are the participants' opinions of the CEFR's B2 standard prescribed by MOET?

The literature review also shows that NNES teachers' English proficiency development should be considered a lifelong process. This process starts when NNES teachers are first language learners, then pre-service teachers, and then continues throughout their professional development as teachers and language users. If language learning is accepted as never complete, NNES teachers should be considered lifelong learners with all the difficulties, anxiety and needs typical of a language learner (Horwitz, 1996). Although the literature has abundant evidence to support the importance of developing NNES teachers' English proficiency especially during pre-service training (e.g., D.Liu, 1999; Murdoch, 1994), there is a lack of studies that document how NNES teachers maintain and develop their language proficiency once they are in the profession. While there are many studies examining the motivation underlying teachers' career choice (e.g., Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Watt et al., 2014), there is a lack of studies investigating teachers' on-going motivation for improvement and staying in the profession. In the current educational context of Vietnam, the need for these two kinds of studies is even more important. The Vietnamese teachers' achievements on MOET's language proficiency test (see chapter 2) need to be interpreted together with these teachers' English learning history, career development, and their situated contexts. It is also beneficial to investigate the difficulties these teachers encounter during their English proficiency development so that appropriate support plans can be created. The second research question and its subsidiary questions are as follows:

- RQ 2: How do the participants describe their English proficiency development?
    - What are the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency development?
    - What are the challenges to participants' English learning?

The literature review shows that many studies have approached the issue of NNES teacher's English proficiency from a purely quantitative approach or the popular combination of surveys and interviews. There is still a lack of studies following a qualitative approach to focus on the individual teachers in their situated contexts (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). Pasternak and Bailey argued that attention should be drawn to the "individual teachers' proficiency and professional preparation" (2004, p.170). It is important to consider the contextual particularities of both the teaching environment and the teacher as an individual (Kasai, Lee, & Soonhyang, 2011). These contextual factors include types of instruction, curriculum goals, relationships between teachers and students, and idiosyncrasies and other individual characteristics of the teacher in a particular school context. This study adheres to the view that a holistic approach that combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches can provide more thorough and comprehensive insights into NNES teachers' language development. It is believed that such an approach can facilitate understanding of teachers' working contexts, learning history, and contextual difficulties so that we can propose appropriate standards for NNES teacher language proficiency and provide them with meaningful training and support (see chapter 5 for a description of the study design).

In summary, this study views English proficiency as an important part of NNES teachers' competence. It argues that NNES teachers' language learning should be viewed as a continuous process and that the result of language proficiency assessment (e.g., MOET's B2 standard test result) is only a product of such a learning process at one given time. To have a more comprehensive understanding of NNES teachers' English proficiency, it is important to recognise that NNES teachers are life-long learners of the language. Therefore, it is necessary to consider these teachers' English learning history and career development while assessing their English proficiency. The current study combines both quantitative and qualitative elements and is guided by two research questions with the four subsidiary questions as explained and expanded above.

- RQ 1: What are the participants' perceptions of their English language proficiency and responses towards MOET's English policy?
    - Is there a gap between the two levels, PLP and PRLP?
    - What are the participants' opinions of the CEFR's B2 standard prescribed by MOET?

- RQ 2: How do the participants describe their English proficiency development?
    - What are the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency development?
    - What are the challenges to participants' English learning?

## Chapter 5: Overview of research design

Chapter 3 reviewed the literature to present essential theoretical reasons to pursue the current research direction. The practical need to improve Vietnamese NNES teachers' low level of English proficiency (see chapter 2), and my personal interest in fellow NNES teachers' language learning experience (see chapter 1) also fuelled the project and shaped its design. As stated in chapter 4, this study combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches in order to provide as complete a picture as possible of the Vietnamese NNES teachers' English proficiency development experiences amid the current educational reforms attached to NFL Project 2020. This chapter starts by justifying and presenting the overall research design, followed by a description of the context and procedure of data collection and analysis. More detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis procedure will be provided in subsequent chapters (6- 8) together with the findings.

### 5.1 Research orientation and design

There are decisions to be made in how research is conducted including choice of problem and questions, methodological concerns, types of data to be collected and how they are to be analysed. Researchers bring to their research their different assumptions about social reality. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) provide an insightful summary and analysis of four important set of assumptions identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979). The first set is of an ontological kind opposing nominalist and realist viewpoints regarding whether social reality is external to individuals or a product of individual consciousness. The second set is epistemological and relates to the debate between positivists and post-positivists. While the former views knowledge as objective and tangible, the latter sees it as personal, subjective and unique. The third set of assumptions is concerned with the portrayal of human beings as products of their environment or as initiators of their own actions with free will and creativity. This is the difference between determinism and voluntarism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The fourth set of assumptions is methodological and relates to the choice between an objectivist or positivist approach and a subjectivist or post-positivist approach.

Positivists subscribe to quantitative methods such as survey and experimental design to generalise findings to a broader population. In second language education, this research tradition is commonly used to "investigate the effect of different methods, materials,

teaching techniques, types of classroom delivery, and so on, on language learning" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p.6). Post-positivists advocate qualitative methods such as observation, interviews and narrative, to investigate the "subjective experience of individuals" (Cohen et al., 2011, p.6). They take into account the subjects' feelings, perceptions, experiences, and relations with those around them. Qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, is now widely accepted as appropriate for the study of second language development because of its ability to provide meaningful insights into the complex nature of language learning.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches both have strengths and weaknesses, and the debate between the two has tended to give way to the rising popularity of mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). A mixed methods research integrates both qualitative and quantitative features in the design, data collection, and analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and this combination complements the strengths while alleviating the weaknesses of each method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Cohen et al. (2011) summarise that mixed methods research is an approach that:

> … yields real answers to real questions, that is useful in the real world, that avoids mistaken allegiance to either quantitative or qualitative approaches on their own, that enables rich data to be gathered which afford the triangulation that has been advocated in research for many years, that respects the mixed, messy real world, and that increases validity and reliability; in short, that 'delivers'. (p.26)

The value of mixed methods design has been acknowledged as offering both "breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (R. B. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p.79). It also provides insights to both confirmatory and exploratory questions while enabling verification and generation of theory in the same study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This is aligned with the purpose of the current study that is to explore a rarely investigated issue: in-service NNES teachers' English proficiency development during their teaching practice and earlier language learning histories. This study assumes that, as individuals are complex beings engaged in social interaction with others, and as teachers' language learning is a complex issue influenced by many process, it is best to strike for a more balanced position between the two research approaches.

The present research employs a mixed research methods design combining a self-rated language proficiency survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry. In particular, the self-rated English proficiency survey aims to provide an overview of the

participants' perceptions of their English proficiency while the qualitative data are to provide insights to explain the participants' survey responses. Data generated from the survey will provide answer to the RQ 1 (What are the Vietnamese EFL teachers' PLP and responses towards MOET's English policy?).

RQ 2 will be answered based on the analysis of data generated from the qualitative data collection (How do the participants describe their English proficiency development?). The semi-structured and narrative interviews allow participants to express their understandings of the world, and represent their subjective interpretations of issues related to their own language development. The methodologies of narrative inquiry and thematic analysis of the texts were chosen because they allow participants' voice to emerge from data. In this way, theory is emergent from text, in a manner similar to grounded theory as described by Corbin and Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Figure 5.1 offers a visual representation of the major components of the research design.

The mixed methods design of the study combines quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures. Quantitative data were generated using a self-assessed English proficiency survey. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry procedures. Thus, there were three stages of data collection.

The overall aim of the first two stages is three-fold. These stages first aimed at comparing teachers' perceived level of language proficiency (PLP) to the level they rated as required for their teaching position (PRLP). Based on results of related studies in other contexts (see section 3.2.4), it was hypothesised that there would be a gap between these two levels. Teachers' perceptions of the PLP and PRLP of different language skills would provide information regarding the perceived strong and weak areas of participants' English proficiency. Such information would be useful for future teacher training. Secondly, the first two stages aimed at collecting teachers' responses about the relevance and practicality of the training course, participants' strategies to maintain and improve language proficiency, and the difficulties they faced during the process. Thirdly, these stages created a pool of participants from which some could be selected for the repeated interviews during the narrative inquiry procedure. The aim of the last stage, narrative inquiry, was to elicit more personal and detailed views of some particular teachers and generate insights to further illustrate or provide new perspectives to those discovered in the previous stages.

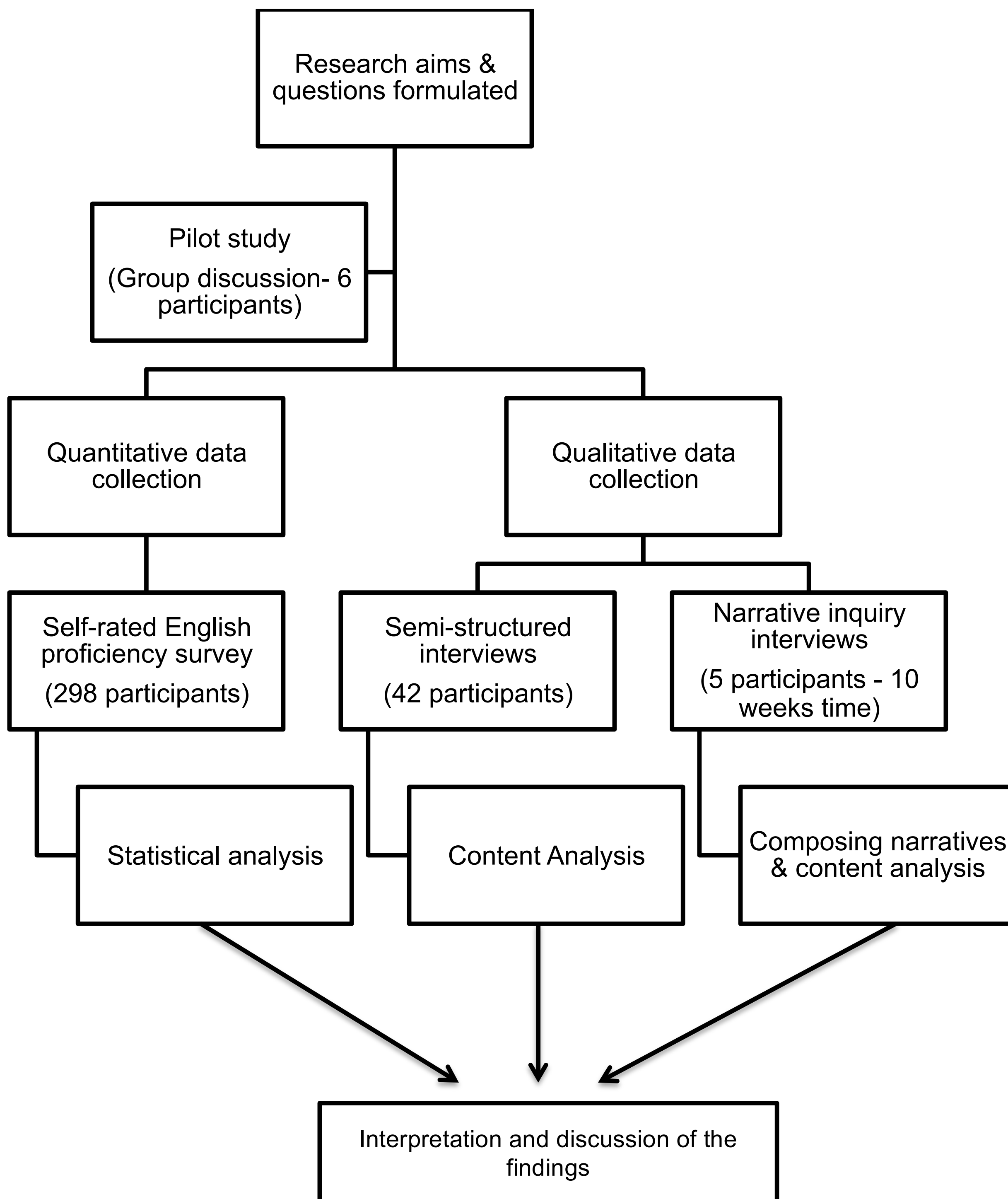



***Figure 5.1*** **Research design**

## 5.2 Context of data collection

The present study was conducted when a major intensive training course for in-service teachers was being offered in Vietnam as part of the NFL Project 2020 (see section 2.3). Within the last few years, this course has been delivered by different trainers throughout the country, but its structure and materials are essentially the same. The aim of the course is to improve teachers' English proficiency and use of appropriate teaching methodology. It

consists of two major modules comprising 400 periods (45 minutes each) of English proficiency development and 180 periods of English teaching methodology. Based on the course design, it is clear that the main aim is to help teachers reach the required CEFR's B2 standard.

Participants were recruited from those enrolled in this course in four provinces of Northern Vietnam, namely Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong, and Thanh Hoa. These sites were chosen because the course was being delivered there at the time of data collection. In addition, the course being offered at these locations was conducted by the same group of trainers. This simplified the procedures needed to obtain gate-keeping permissions to approach and recruit participants. Restricted time and budget also prevented data collection in Southern Vietnam. Figure 5.2 illustrates the four locations of data collection, and table 5.1 provides the number of participants recruited in each site. More information regarding the participants during the survey (see section 6.1.1), semi-structured interviews (see section 7.1.2), and narrative inquiry (see section 8.1.4) stages will be subsequently provided in chapters 6-8 respectively.

***Figure 5.2*** **Data-collection sites**

**Table 5.1** ***Distribution of participants across four provinces***

| | Hanoi | Nam Dinh | Hai Phong | Thanh Hoa |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary teachers | 30 | 32 | 41 | 39 |
| Secondary teachers | 35 | 44 | 37 | 40 |
| Total | 65 | 76 | 78 | 79 |

### 5.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

Data collection was carried out over almost four months from late 2012 to early 2013. In the first stage, 298 participants completed the survey. Of these participants, 42 were chosen to be interviewed in the second stage. Finally, five participants were chosen and further interviewed multiple times using narrative inquiry techniques over a 10-week period. Data collection started first in Nam Dinh, and then Hanoi, Hai Phong and Thanh Hoa respectively.

During the pre-data collection stage, ethical issues were carefully considered and permissions were obtained from a research review committee at the School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Queensland (see appendix D) in 2012. Then, I obtained permissions to approach the participants from the gatekeepers at the teacher-training institution responsible for the training course. The institution then provided me with information regarding each of the data sites including the timetable, locations of the venues, programs and materials, and names with contact information of each trainer. I engaged and recruited participants during their break time. All relevant ethical clearance information was clearly explained to the participants following the university's ethics guidelines.

The interviews were conducted either during lunch break or in the evening when the participants had finished the day's training. Locations of the interviews varied from the training venues' meeting rooms to nearby coffee shops. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were also asked if they were willing to participate in the narrative inquiry procedure, a series of multiple interviews over 10 weeks. Five participants with various lengths of teaching experience, and different working contexts were chosen. Due to the limited time and budget available for data collection, all these five participants were selected from Hanoi. As each participant was interviewed several times, I spent the longest time collecting data in Hanoi.

Data analysis was conducted in the following manner: first the quantitative data was analysed using quantitative data analysis software (IBM SPSS Statistics 20). Next the 42 semi-structured interview sessions and narrative inquiry sessions were transcribed and then analysed for themes. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately from each other then used to triangulate and interpret the findings. The subsequent chapters will describe the data analysis procedure in detail.

In summary, this chapter has justified the choice of a mixed methods design, explained the overview of the study design, and described briefly the context and procedures of data collection and analysis. The following chapters (6-8) will explain the data collection instruments and procedures in more detail together with the findings of each of the three stages of the study.

## Chapter 6: Participants' self-assessed English proficiency

One aim of the study is to investigate participants' perceived English language proficiency (PLP) in comparison with the level they perceived as required (PRLP) for their teaching practice (RQ 1). This chapter starts by describing the self-assessment methodology before analysing and presenting the survey findings and discussion.

### 6.1 Methodology

#### 6.1.1 Participants and data collection procedure

As explained in section 5.3, participants were recruited from four data-collection sites, namely Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong and Thanh Hoa. The survey was distributed to 350 secondary and primary school EFL teachers during their participation in a professional development course. Most participants completed and returned the survey immediately while others gave theirs back on the following day or during the semi-structured interviews. In total, 298 surveys were returned. Of the 298 participants, only 32 were male teachers. This imbalance ratio unsurprising as the percentage of female teachers at the primary level in Vietnam at the time of data collection was around 77% (World Bank, 2015). Table 6.1 presents detailed information with the participants grouped according to their working locations, teaching levels, and length of teaching practice.

**Table 6.1** ***Survey participants***

| Location | Level of teaching | | Teaching experience | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | Secondary | <=5 years | 5-10 years | > 10 years | |
| Hanoi | 30 | 35 | 7 | 29 | 29 | 65 |
| Nam Dinh | 32 | 44 | 11 | 25 | 40 | 76 |
| Thanh Hoa | 39 | 40 | 10 | 45 | 24 | 79 |
| Hai Phong | 41 | 37 | 15 | 35 | 28 | 78 |
| Total | 142 | 156 | 43 | 134 | 121 | 298 |

#### 6.1.2 Instrument

In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information (age, education background, teaching experience, etc.) and their contact information. In

the second part, they were asked to rate their PLP and PRLP. Participants were clearly explained that the PRLP should reflect their opinion in comparison with the mandated standard of English proficiency. It was clearly explained to participants that the survey was not an assessment of their English proficiency.

The survey comprises rating scales for each of five language skills. These skills consist of listening, reading, speaking interaction, speaking production, and writing. The six-point Likert scales were based on the CEFR's self-assessed grid (Council of Europe, 2001). MOET has adopted these scales in the Vietnamese English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF). At the time of the data collection, an official translated version of the CEFR's self-assessed grid was not available in Vietnamese; therefore, I translated the rating scales into Vietnamese to facilitate the participants' comprehension. This translated version was revised after receiving comments from two Vietnamese PhD students in Applied Linguistics at The University of Queensland.

For each language skill, participants were asked to rate their PLP first, and then their PRLP from 1 to 6 corresponding to CEFR's six levels (from A1 to C2). It was also possible for the participants to rate their proficiency between levels. For instance, a participant might first self-evaluate his/her own reading comprehension ability as 3.5 (PLP), the mid-level between level 3 and level 4. The participant might then consider level 4.5 as the PRLP for reading skills in order to teach English effectively. The self-rated language proficiency survey can be found in appendix A.

### 6.1.3 Data coding and analysis

Participants' responses to the survey were coded as follows: Participants' demographic information was given numeric codes. Number 1 was assigned for primary school EFL teachers, and 2 for those teaching at lower secondary schools. Participants' length of teaching experience was also assigned a code 1, 2, and 3 according to whether the participants had been in the profession for less than 5, from 5 to 10, or more than 10 years. The four data-collection sites were assigned numbers from 1 to 4. This coding step allows the participants to be grouped according to their teaching levels, teaching experience, and data-collection sites.

Participants' ratings of their English proficiency were entered as they were, from 1 to 6 in 0.5 increments. Descriptive statistics of the data including frequencies, means, and standard deviation were generated. The coefficient-alpha reliability for the PLP rating

scales is .73. Bearing in mind that the acceptable reliability coefficient of .70 in most social science research situations (Field, 2009; Santos, 1999), this number indicates that the scales used in the present study produce reliable scores. Across the four data-collection sites, the homogeneity of variance assumption for the overall PLP is met, with $F(3, 294) = 1.35$, $p > .05$. The Shapiro-Wilk test results show a slight departure from normality in the whole population, $W(298) = .98$, $p = .002$. The normality assumption is met in three of the four data-collection sites (Hanoi: $W(65) = .99$, $p = .62$; Nam Dinh: $W(76) = .97$, $p = .10$; Hai Phong: $W(78) = .98$, $p = .12$). In Thanh Hoa, the Shapiro-Wilk test is significant with $W(79) = .96$, $p = .02$. As Field (2009) has pointed out, with large samples, the Shapiro-Wilk test can easily be significant even when the scores are only slightly different from a normal distribution. Visual inspection of the data histogram and Q-Q plot in conjunction with the values of skew and kurtosis indicates that the data are relatively normally distributed. Still, statistic tests were conducted with data from the whole population of 298 participants in conjunction with results of tests using data from each data-collection site.

The coefficient-alpha reliability for the PRLP scale is .61, approaching the acceptable reliability coefficient of .70 (Field, 2009; Santos, 1999). This relatively low Cronbach value should be attributed to the small number of items in the survey rather than its reliability as the scales were taken from the CEFR's self-assessment grid. Across the four data-collection sites, the homogeneity of variance assumption for the overall PRLP is met, with $F(3, 294) = 1.14$, $p > .05$. The Shapiro-Wilk test results confirm the normality assumptions with all populations, $W(298) = .99$, $p > .05$, as well as in all four data-collection sites (Hanoi: $W(65) = .97$, $p > .05$; Nam Dinh: $W(76) = .98$, $p > .05$; Thanh Hoa: $W(79) = .98$, $p > .05$; Hai Phong: $W(78) = .98$, $p > .05$). Therefore, as both the homogeneity of variance and normality distribution assumptions were met, statistical tests were mainly conducted with data of the whole population rather than data from each collection site.

Each participant has ten scores representing the PLP and PRLP in five language skills (see above). In addition, for each participant, the average overall PLP and PRLP scores for all skills were calculated. These scores will be referred to as the overall PLP and overall PRLP scores. For each language skill, the average scores of PLP and PRLP were calculated across the whole population or according to different ways of grouping participants. Henceforth, these scores will be referred to as the skill-related PLP and PRLP scores (e.g., listening PLP and PRLP scores). One-way ANOVA tests were calculated to examine if participants' responses varied across the four locations or were affected by the length of teaching practice. Independent t-tests and Cohen's *d* effect sizes were used to

compare primary and secondary school teachers' responses. Eta-squared $\eta^2$ and Cohen's *d* effect sizes were calculated for ANOVA and t-tests respectively.

The average overall PLP scores and the average skill-related PLP scores of the whole population (298 participants) were calculated. The average overall PRLP was compared with the standard set by MOET (CEFR's B2 or 4.0 on a 6-point scale). Next, participants were divided into two groups based on the gap between their PLP and PRLP. This gap scores were coded as "Enough" or "Lacking" depending on whether the participants perceived that they possessed (PRLP – PLP <= 0) or lacked (PRLP – PLP > 0) the necessary English proficiency. Paired samples t-tests were employed to compare the overall PLP and PRLP scores. Similar tests were conducted with the skill-related PLP and PRLP scores. The alpha level in paired t-tests was adjusted based on the Bonferroni multiple comparison method. An alpha level of .0025 was used (.05 was divided by 20 comparisons). This step examined whether there was a gap between the two levels of PLP and PRLP.

### 6.2 Results and discussion

This section presents results of the self-assessment survey in order to answer RQ 1 concerning Vietnamese EFL teachers' PLP in comparison with PRLP.

#### 6.2.1 Participants' overall PLP

During data analysis, participants were grouped according to their teaching levels, lengths of teaching experience, and data-collection sites. Detailed descriptive statistics of the overall PLP when participants were grouped according to each of these three factors are provided in tables 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 respectively.

**Table 6.2** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PLP according to data-collection sites***

| | *N* | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | 65 | 2.10 | 3.80 | 3.03 | .37 |
| Nam Dinh | 76 | 2.00 | 3.60 | 2.72 | .40 |
| Thanh Hoa | 79 | 1.80 | 3.40 | 2.71 | .39 |
| Hai Phong | 78 | 1.90 | 3.60 | 2.61 | .35 |
| Total | 298 | 1.80 | 3.80 | 2.76 | .23 |

The first feature is that the average overall PLP for all 298 participants is relatively low at 2.76. This represents a level lower than CEFR's B1 level (at 3.0 on a 6-point scale). Hanoi has the highest average overall PLP, followed by Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, and Hai Phong. A one-way ANOVA test indicates statistically significant differences, $F(3, 294) = 15.63$, $p < .01$ with a small effect size $\eta^2 = .14$. Due to the difference in sample sizes, post hoc comparisons were conducted using Hochberg's GT2 test (Field, 2009), which indicates that the mean score in Hanoi is significantly different from the mean scores in other locations ($p < .01$). However, no significant difference was detected between the other three locations.

**Table 6.3** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PLP according to participants' teaching levels***

| | *N* | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary | 142 | 1.80 | 3.50 | 2.58 | .33 |
| Secondary | 156 | 1.90 | 3.80 | 2.92 | .40 |
| Total | 298 | 1.80 | 3.80 | 2.76 | .23 |

**Table 6.4** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PLP according to participants' teaching levels in four locations***

| Location | | *N* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | Primary | 30 | 2.77 | .30 |
| | Secondary | 35 | 3.25 | .25 |
| Nam Dinh | Primary | 32 | 2.53 | .33 |
| | Secondary | 44 | 2.86 | .40 |
| Thanh Hoa | Primary | 39 | 2.53 | .37 |
| | Secondary | 40 | 2.89 | .32 |
| Hai Phong | Primary | 41 | 2.52 | .28 |
| | Secondary | 37 | 2.71 | .39 |

Table 6.3 presents the overall PLP according to participants' teaching levels, indicating that secondary school EFL teachers rated their English proficiency higher than their colleagues in primary schools. An independent t-test was conducted to examine whether this difference is statistically significant. Primary EFL teachers rated their English proficiency significantly lower than that of secondary teachers, $t\,(294.14) = 8.09$, $p = .000$ with a large effect size $d = .93$. This difference between the ratings of primary and

secondary school teachers is also significant in all four locations as presented in table 6.4 (Hanoi: $t(63) = 7.1$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.74$; Nam Dinh: $t(74) = 3.8$, $p = .000$, $d = .90$; Thanh Hoa: $t(77) = 4.7$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.04$; Hai Phong: $t(76) = 2.4$, $p < .025$, $d = .56$). These differences have a large-sized effect in Hanoi, Nam Dinh and Thanh Hoa ($d >. 8$) and a medium-sized effect in Hai Phong ($.5 < d < .8$).

Table 6.5 presents the descriptive statistics of the overall PLP with regard to the length of participants' teaching practice. The participants were broadly categorised into three groups, consisting of those with five years or less, from more than five to ten years, or more than 10 years of teaching experience.

**Table 6.5** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PLP according to participants' teaching experience***

| | *N* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| <=5 years | 43 | 2.64 | .38 |
| 5-10 years | 134 | 2.73 | .42 |
| >10 years | 121 | 2.81 | .39 |

The data show that participants with more than 10 years of teaching experience rated their language proficiency higher than those with five to 10 years of teaching practice. The latter, in turn, perceived their proficiency to be higher than those joined the profession in the last five years. A one-way ANOVA test confirms a statistically significant difference between the three groups for the whole population of 298 participants, $F(2, 295) = 3.16$, $p = .04$ with a small effect size $\eta^2 = .02$. Due to the difference in sample sizes, post hoc comparisons were conducted using Hochberg's GT2 test (Field, 2009). The result indicates that the overall PLP of participants with more than 10 years teaching experience is significantly different from that of those with less than 5 years of teaching practice. However, the difference between participants with between 5 and 10 years of experience and those with less experience is not statistically significant.

Meanwhile, one-way ANOVA tests with data from each data-collection site show no significant difference between the three groups. (Hanoi: $F(2, 62) = .07$, $p > .05$; Nam Dinh: $F(2,75) = 2.33$, $p > .05$; Thanh Hoa: $F(2,78) = 1.61$, $p > .05$, Hai Phong: $F(2,77) = .18$, $p > .05$). The descriptive statistics of the overall PLP in four locations according to length of teaching experience are presented in table 6.6.

**Table 6.6** ***Descriptive statistics of PLP in four locations according to participants' teaching experience***

| Location | | *N* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | <=5 years | 7 | 3.04 | .39 |
| | 5-10 years | 29 | 3.01 | .38 |
| | >10 years | 29 | 3.04 | .36 |
| Nam Dinh | <=5 years | 11 | 2.52 | .24 |
| | 5-10 years | 25 | 2.69 | .48 |
| | >10 years | 40 | 2.80 | .37 |
| Thanh Hoa | <=5 years | 10 | 2.52 | .41 |
| | 5-10 years | 45 | 2.72 | .41 |
| | >10 years | 24 | 2.78 | .32 |
| Hai Phong | <=5 years | 15 | 2.63 | .33 |
| | 5-10 years | 35 | 2.58 | .34 |
| | >10 years | 28 | 2.63 | .38 |

### 6.2.2 Participants' skill-related PLP

Table 6.7 presents the participants' skill-related PLP. Across the whole population of 298 EFL teachers, listening and speaking (interaction) were rated the lowest, followed by speaking (production) and writing skills. Reading PLP was rated the highest. The below table provides more detailed descriptive statistics.

**Table 6.7** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PLP***

| | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | .50 | 4.00 | 2.22 | .68 |
| Reading | 2.00 | 5.50 | 3.51 | .77 |
| Sp-Interaction | 1.00 | 3.50 | 2.56 | .59 |
| Sp-Production | 1.50 | 4.00 | 2.67 | .57 |
| Writing | 1.50 | 4.50 | 2.83 | .62 |

A repeated measure ANOVA was conducted with the whole population (298 participants). Mauchly's test indicates that the assumption of sphericity is violated $X^2(9) = 48.69$, $p < .05$, therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity ($\hat{\varepsilon}$

= .94). The results show that PLP scores are significantly different across language skills, $F(3.74, 1111.89) = 205.44$, $p < .05$. Post hoc test results only reject the difference between the Speaking (Interaction) PLP and Speaking (Production) PLP scores. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that the participants rated their reading proficiency the highest, followed by writing, speaking (interaction and production), and listening proficiencies respectively.

Participants' skill-related PLP in different data-collection sites are provided in appendix E (tables E.1- E.6). Repeated measures ANOVA tests with data from each location confirm there are differences across language skills (Hanoi: $F(4, 256) = 64.56$, $p < .05$; Nam Dinh: $F(4, 300) = 41.92$, $p < .05$; Thanh Hoa: $F(3.50, 273.14) = 56.67$, $p < .05$; Hai Phong: $F(4, 308) = 49.75$, $p < .05$).

Turning to groupings according to teaching levels (table 6.8), those working at the secondary levels rated their English proficiency in all language skills higher than those at the primary level. Independent samples t-tests indicate that the differences between primary and secondary teachers' ratings are statistically significant ($p < .0025$) with a medium size effect (Listening: $t(296) = 3.13$, $d = .36$; Reading: $t(296) = 6.14$, $d = .71$; Speaking (Interaction): $t(296) = 4.40$, $d = .52$; Speaking (Production): $t(296) = 5.19$, $d = .60$; Writing: $t(296) = 4.54$, $d = .52$).

**Table 6.8.** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PLP according to participants' teaching levels***

| | | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | Primary | 2.09 | .64 |
| | Secondary | 2.33 | .70 |
| Reading | Primary | 3.24 | .73 |
| | Secondary | 3.76 | .73 |
| Sp-Interaction | Primary | 2.40 | .56 |
| | Secondary | 2.70 | .59 |
| Sp-Production | Primary | 2.49 | .51 |
| | Secondary | 2.82 | .58 |
| Writing | Primary | 2.67 | .57 |
| | Secondary | 2.98 | .63 |

As for length of teaching career, table 6.9 shows that those with more than 10 years in the profession rated their PLP in all five-language skills higher than their colleagues with shorter working experience. One-way ANOVA tests however indicate that those differences are not statistically significant for four skills (Listening: $F(2, 295) = 2.27$, $p > .05$; Reading: $F(2, 295) = .19$, $p > .05$; Speaking (Production) $F(2, 295) = .32$, $p > .05$; Writing: $F(2, 295) = 1.69$, $p > .05$). Only for Speaking (Interaction), the ANOVA test confirms a statistical significance with $F(2, 295) = 4.86$, $p = .01$ with a small effect size $\eta^2 = .03$. Due to the difference in sample sizes, post hoc comparisons were conducted using the Hochberg's GT2 test (Field, 2009) and found only one significant difference ($p < .05$) between the two groups of participants with less than 5 years experience and those with more than 10 years of teaching practice.

**Table 6.9** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PLP according to participants' teaching experience***

| | | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | <=5 years | 2.14 | .73 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.15 | .72 |
| | >10 years | 2.32 | .62 |
| Reading | <=5 years | 3.44 | .80 |
| | 5-10 years | 3.51 | .78 |
| | >10 years | 3.52 | .77 |
| Sp-Interaction | <=5 years | 2.33 | .54 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.54 | .61 |
| | >10 years | 2.65 | .58 |
| Sp-Production | <=5 years | 2.60 | .60 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.67 | .58 |
| | >10 years | 2.69 | .55 |
| Writing | <=5 years | 2.70 | .62 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.82 | .66 |
| | >10 years | 2.90 | .58 |

### 6.2.3 Participants' overall PRLP

Detailed descriptive statistics of the overall PRLP when participants were grouped according to their teaching levels, lengths of teaching experience, and locations of working context are provided in tables 6.10, 6.11, and 6.12 respectively. As previously explained in

section 6.1.3, the homogeneity of variance assumption and normality assumption for the overall PRLP are met, thus statistical tests were conducted with data of the whole population rather than data from each data-collection site.

**Table 6.10** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PRLP according to data-collection sites***

| | *N* | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | 65 | 2.00 | 3.10 | 2.53 | .27 |
| Nam Dinh | 76 | 1.50 | 3.20 | 2.39 | .33 |
| Thanh Hoa | 79 | 1.40 | 3.10 | 2.32 | .33 |
| Hai Phong | 78 | 1.70 | 3.10 | 2.31 | .28 |
| Total | 298 | 1.40 | 3.20 | 2.38 | .32 |

The first feature is that participants' average overall PRLP is relatively low. Hanoi had the highest overall PRLP followed by Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, and Hai Phong. A one-way ANOVA test detects a statistically significant difference between the four locations, $F(3, 294) = 7.40$, $p < .01$ with a small effect size $\eta^2 = .07$. Due to the difference in sample sizes, post hoc comparisons were conducted using Hochberg's GT2 test (Field, 2009). The result indicates that the mean score in Hanoi ($M = 2.53$, $SD = .27$) is significantly different from the mean scores elsewhere. However, no significant difference is detected between the other three locations. This result is consistent with the participants' PLP as previously reported.

**Table 6.11** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PRLP according to participants' teaching levels***

| | *N* | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary | 142 | 1.40 | 2.90 | 2.26 | .24 |
| Secondary | 156 | 1.70 | 3.20 | 2.50 | .24 |
| Total | 298 | 1.40 | 3.20 | 2.38 | .32 |

The secondary school EFL teachers' PRLP is higher than that of those working in primary schools. Independent t-tests were conducted to examine whether this difference is statistically significant or not. For the whole population of 298 participants, primary teachers rated the PRLP significantly lower than that of secondary teachers, $t(296) = 7.07$, $p = .000$ with a large effect size $d = 1.00$.

Table 6.12 presents the PRLP of three groups of participants, namely those with five years or less, from more than five to ten years, or more than 10 years of teaching experience. The PRLP data shows that participants with more than 10 years of teaching experience rated the overall PRLP higher than those who had from more than five to 10 years of teaching practice. The latter, in turn, had a higher overall PRLP than those who joined the profession in the last five years. In other words, the more experienced participants perceived a higher PRLP than the other groups. This pattern is similar to the participants' PLP as previously reported. However, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted and detects no significant differences between the three groups for the whole population, $F(2, 295) = 4.95$, $p > .05$.

**Table 6.12** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall RLP according to participants' teaching experience***

| | *N* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| <=5 years | 43 | 2.29 | .53 |
| 5-10 years | 134 | 2.35 | .26 |
| >10 years | 121 | 2.45 | .29 |

### 6.2.4 Participants' skill-related PRLP

Table 6.13 provides more detailed descriptive statistics across the whole population of 298 participants. The table shows a pattern similar to that found for the participants' PLP. Listening PRLP and speaking (interaction) PRLP are the lowest, followed by speaking (production) and writing PRLP. Reading PRLP is again the highest. Similar to the overall PRLP, statistical tests were conducted with data of the whole population rather than data from each collection site (see section 6.1.3).

**Table 6.13** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PRLP***

| | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | .50 | 3.50 | 1.93 | .59 |
| Reading | 1.50 | 4.50 | 2.83 | .60 |
| Sp-Interaction | 1.00 | 3.50 | 2.26 | .57 |
| Sp-Production | 1.50 | 4.00 | 2.38 | .49 |
| Writing | 1.00 | 4.50 | 2.52 | .64 |

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the significance of these differences. Mauchly's test indicates that the assumption of sphericity is met $X^2(9) = 16.85$,

$p > .05$. The results show that the perceived PRLP are significantly different across language domains, $F(4, 1188) = 109.95$, $p < .05$. Also similar to results with teachers' PLP, post hoc tests' results only reject the difference between the scores of Speaking (Interaction) and Speaking (Production). Participants' skill-related PRLP in different data-collection sites are provided in appendix E (tables E.3-E.6). Repeated measures ANOVA tests in each location confirm there are differences across language skills (Hanoi: $F(4, 256) = 17.85$, $p < .05$; Nam Dinh: $F(4, 300) = 29.92$, $p < .05$; Thanh Hoa: $F(4, 312) = 37.46$, $p < .05$; Hai Phong: $F(4, 308) = 32.00$, $p < .05$). It is, therefore, possible to conclude that the participants rated the PRLP for reading the highest, followed by the PRLP of writing, speaking (interaction and production), and listening respectively.

With respect to teaching level (table 6.14), those working at the secondary level rated the PRLP in all language skills higher than those teaching at the primary level. Independent samples t-tests indicate that the differences between primary and secondary EFL teachers' ratings are statistically significant ($p < .0025$) with a medium size effect (Listening: $t(296) = 3.46$, $d = .40$; Reading: $t(296) = 2.18$, $d = .25$; Speaking (Interaction): $t(296) = 3.81$, $d = .44$; Speaking (Production): $t(296) = 5.30$, $d = .62$; Writing: $t(296) = 3.95$, $d = .46$).

**Table 6.14** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PRLP according to participants' teaching levels***

| | | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | Primary | 1.81 | .61 |
| | Secondary | 2.04 | .54 |
| Reading | Primary | 2.75 | .59 |
| | Secondary | 2.90 | .60 |
| Sp-Interaction | Primary | 2.13 | .55 |
| | Secondary | 2.38 | .56 |
| Sp-Production | Primary | 2.23 | .47 |
| | Secondary | 2.51 | .46 |
| Writing | Primary | 2.37 | .63 |
| | Secondary | 2.65 | .61 |

As for length of teaching, table 6.15 shows that those with more than 10 years in the profession rated the PRLP in all five-language skills higher than their less experienced

colleagues. The only exception is that participants with five or less years of teaching experience rated the PRLP for reading higher than the other groups.

**Table 6.15** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PRLP according to participants' teaching experience***

| | | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | <=5 years | 1.93 | .58 |
| | 5-10 years | 1.88 | .60 |
| | >10 years | 1.99 | .58 |
| Reading | <=5 years | 2.85 | .58 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.81 | .64 |
| | >10 years | 2.83 | .57 |
| Sp-Interaction | <=5 years | 2.02 | .55 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.25 | .54 |
| | >10 years | 2.36 | .58 |
| Sp-Production | <=5 years | 2.31 | .51 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.34 | .45 |
| | >10 years | 2.43 | .52 |
| Writing | <=5 years | 2.34 | .74 |
| | 5-10 years | 2.48 | .61 |
| | >10 years | 2.62 | .61 |

One-way ANOVA tests however indicate that those differences are not statistically significant for four skills (Listening: $F(2, 295) = 1.05$, $p > .05$; Reading: $F(2, 295) = .63$, $p > .05$; Speaking (Production) $F(2, 295) = 1.50$, $p > .05$; Writing: $F(2, 295) = 3.71$, $p > .05$). Only for Speaking (Interaction), the ANOVA test confirms a statistical significance with $F(2, 295) = 5.66$, $p = .004$ with a small effect size $\eta^2 = .04$. Due to the difference in sample sizes, post hoc comparisons were conducted using Hochberg's GT2 test (Field, 2009) and find only one significant difference ($p < .05$), between the two groups of participants with less than 5 years experience and those with more than 10 years of teaching practice.

In short, the participants' PRLP repeats the same pattern identified for the PLP. Secondary school teachers tend to rate the PRLP for all language domains higher than those teaching at the primary level. Similarly, teachers with more than 10 years in the profession

considered that they needed a higher PRLP in all five skills than those with less teaching experience.

### 6.2.5 Summary and discussion

**What are the participants' PLP and PRLP?**

Regarding the PLP, the statistical analysis firstly shows that the participants, regardless of their teaching level and length of teaching, rated their English proficiency low. The average overall PLP is 2.76, which is lower than the CEFR's B1 level (at 3.0 on a 6-point scale). Secondly, of the four locations, Hanoi has the highest average overall PLP. This result is unsurprising because of the city's superior status, both as the country's capital and as an economically advantaged area. The biggest and most prestigious EFL teacher training universities are located in Hanoi, and the EFL teaching job market there is also the most competitive between the four locations. Thirdly, of the five language skills, listening has the lowest PLP score followed by speaking (interaction and production). Participants rated their reading PLP the highest followed by writing PLP. These differences between the five skill-related PLP scores are statistically significant. If the goal is to help students communicate effectively in English as specified in NFL Project 2020, it is important for teachers to improve their productive skills. Next, the statistical test conducted with the whole population indicates that only participants with more than 10 years in the profession rated their overall PLP significantly higher than those who had recently started teaching. However, similar tests conducted in each data-collection site detect no difference between the three groups of teachers. Finally, participants at the secondary level of education rated their English proficiency significantly higher than those at the primary level, both regarding the overall PLP and the skill-related PLP. This difference is statistically significant.

Regarding the PRLP, the statistical analysis identifies similar patterns to those of the PLP. Firstly, the average overall PRLP is low, at only 2.38 on a 6-point scale. Next, participants in Hanoi also rated the PRLP the highest of the four locations. Thirdly, of the five language skills, reading PRLP was rated the highest, followed by writing PRLP. Listening PRLP together with speaking (interaction and production) PLP and PRLP were rated relatively low. Fourthly, participants' length of teaching experience generally does not affect their rating of the PRLP. Finally, participants at the primary level rated their PRLP significantly lower than those at the secondary level of education. This result raises important questions: Do the participants perceive teaching at the primary level to be less demanding

than at the secondary level? Do they perceive differences in ELT at these two levels of education? These questions cannot be answered based on the survey data alone. Chapters 7 and 8 will provide insights into these issues based on the analysis of the semi-structured and narrative interviews.

**Is there a gap between the two levels, PLP and PRLP?**

As explained previously in Section 6.1.3, based on the differences between the overall and skill-related PLP scores and those of PRLP, participants were categorised into two groups, namely Enough and Lacking. Figure 6.1 (see tables E.7 - E.8 in appendix E) shows that in terms of the overall PLP and PRLP scores and contrary to all expectations based on other studies in apparently similar EFL contexts and the Vietnamese context in particular, nearly 90 per cent of the participants (267/ 298) perceived that they possessed the required English proficiency to teach.

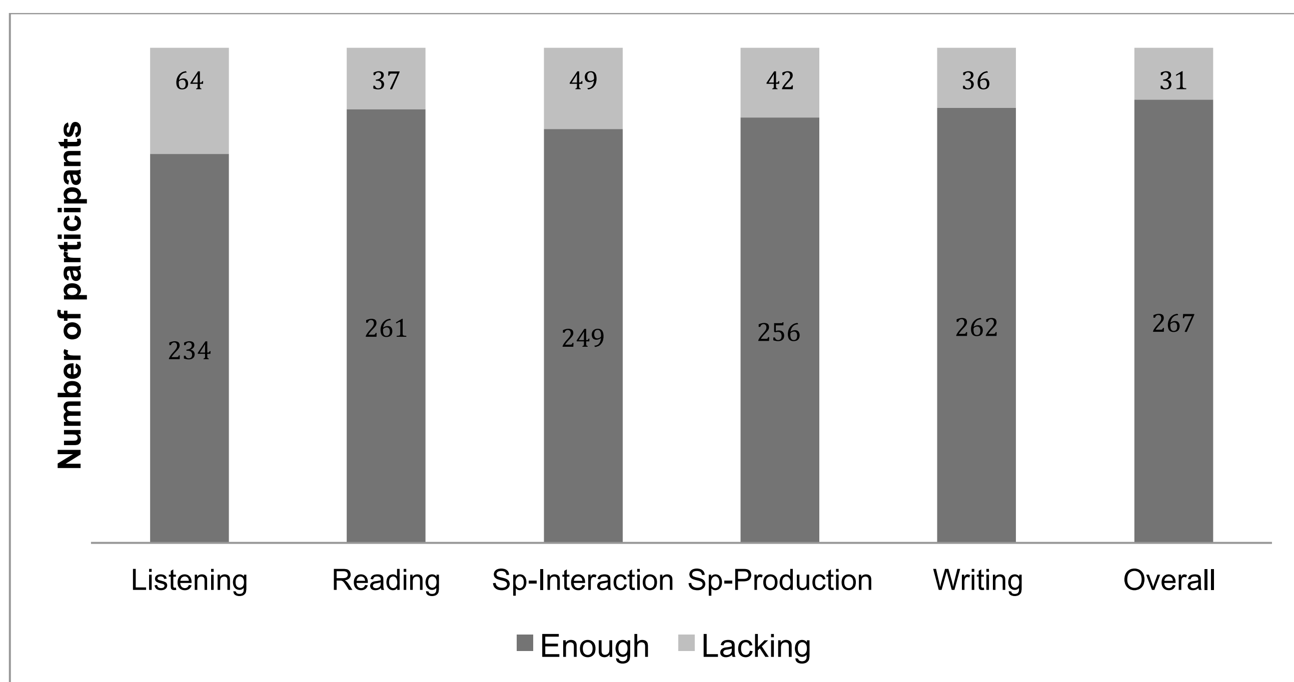



***Figure 6.1*** **Number of cases in the Lacking and Enough groups**

Of the whole population, a clear majority of participants rated their overall PLP higher than the overall PRLP (see table 6.16). This trend is repeated in all data-collection sites as reflected in figure 6.2 below.

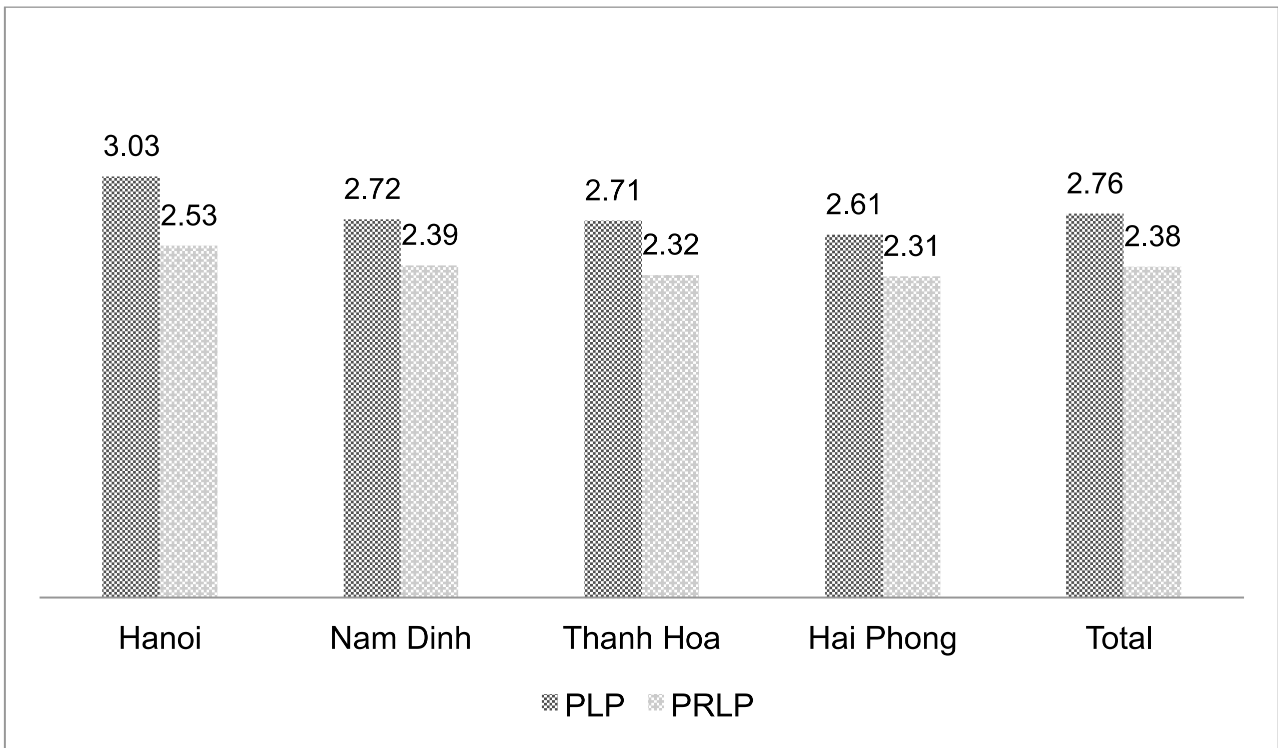



***Figure 6.2*** **Participants' overall PLP vs. PRLP in four data-collection sites**

**Table 6.16** ***Descriptive statistics of the overall PLP and PRLP***

| | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PLP | 1.80 | 3.80 | 2.76 | .40 |
| PRLP | 1.40 | 3.20 | 2.38 | .32 |

A paired samples t-test conducted with data from the whole population indicates that a significant difference exists between teachers' overall PLP and the corresponding PRLP, $t(297) = 19.28$, $p = .000$. This difference represents a large size effect with $d = 1.01$.Similar statistical tests conducted in each data-collection site indicate similar findings (Hanoi: $t(64) = 13.29$, $p = .000$; Nam Dinh: $t(75) = 8.00$, $p = .000$; Thanh Hoa: $t(78) = 10.44$, $p = .000$; Hai Phong: $t(77) = 8.40$, $p = .000$).

With respect to the gap between the skill-related PLP and PRLP, figure 6.1 (and table E.8 in appendix E) shows that for nearly 85 per cent of the participants the PLP scores are higher than the PRLP scores in all five language skills. The largest gap is found for reading, followed by writing as shown in figure 6.3 and table 6.17.

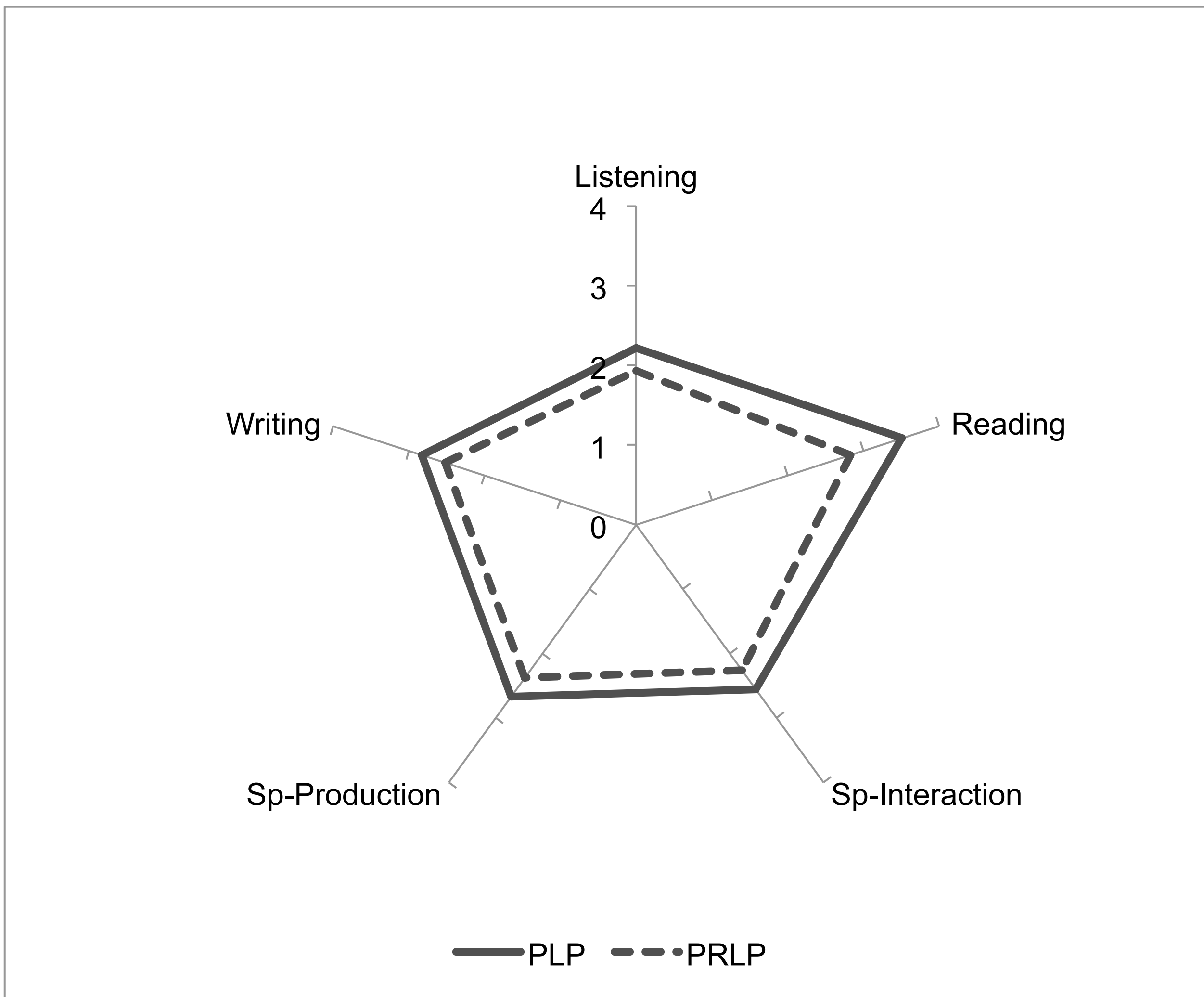



***Figure 6.3*** **Gaps between the skill-related PLP and PRLP**

**Table 6.17** ***Descriptive statistics of the skill-related PLP and PRLP***

| | | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Listening | PLP | 2.22 | .68 |
| | PRLP | 1.93 | .59 |
| Reading | PLP | 3.51 | .77 |
| | PRLP | 2.83 | .60 |
| Sp-Interaction | PLP | 2.56 | .59 |
| | PRLP | 2.26 | .57 |
| Sp-Production | PLP | 2.67 | .57 |
| | PRLP | 2.38 | .49 |
| Writing | PLP | 2.83 | .62 |
| | PRLP | 2.52 | .64 |

Paired samples t-tests conducted with each skill confirm statistically significant differences between participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP (Listening: $t(297) = 6.53$, $p = .000$, $d = .46$; Reading: $t(297) = 13.91$, $p = .000$, $d = .99$; Speaking (interaction): $t(297) = 7.83$, $p = .000$, $d = .52$; Speaking (Production): $t(297) = 8.63$, $p = .000$, $d = .55$; Writing $t(297) = 8.94$, $p = .000$, $d = .49$). These differences are of medium effect size except for reading skills which has a large effect size $d > .80$. These results indicate that the overwhelming majority of participants strongly believe that they had the English proficiency levels necessary to teach English effectively.

Similar statistical tests were conducted for the different data-collection sites. Table 6.18 presents the results of these paired samples t-tests. The tests are significant ($p < .0025$) in all locations with regard to the reading PLP and PRLP scores. For the other skills, the gap between the two levels is statistically significant ($p < .0025$) in at least two locations. Although the Bonferroni correction accounts for the increased possibility of type-I error, it can become very conservative as the number of tests increases (Field, 2009). Thus, the modified alpha .0025 might increase the risk of generating false negatives (type II errors).

**Table 6.18** ***Paired samples t-tests of skill-related PLP and PRLP in each data-collection site***

| Location | | *t* | *df* | *Sig.* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | Listening | 3.00 | 64 | .004 |
| | Reading | 13.28 | 64 | .000 |
| | Sp-Interaction | 5.98 | 64 | .000 |
| | Sp-Production | 6.96 | 64 | .000 |
| | Writing | 5.88 | 64 | .000 |
| Nam Dinh | Listening | 3.70 | 75 | .000 |
| | Reading | 6.53 | 75 | .000 |
| | Sp-Interaction | 3.66 | 75 | .000 |
| | Sp-Production | 2.89 | 75 | .005 |
| | Writing | 2.85 | 75 | .006 |
| Thanh Hoa | Listening | 2.62 | 78 | .011 |
| | Reading | 5.61 | 78 | .000 |
| | Sp-Interaction | 5.12 | 78 | .000 |
| | Sp-Production | 5.56 | 78 | .000 |
| | Writing | 6.31 | 78 | .000 |
| Hai Phong | Listening | 3.65 | 77 | .000 |
| | Reading | 6.01 | 77 | .000 |
| | Sp-Interaction | 1.50 | 77 | .138 |
| | Sp-Production | 2.94 | 77 | .004 |
| | Writing | 3.44 | 77 | .001 |

The trend in the data is that the overall PLP and skill-related PLP scores are higher than the respective PRLP values regardless of data-collection sites, participants' teaching levels and length of teaching experience. This trend can be seen clearly in figures 6.4 – 6.5 below (and tables E.1 and E.2 in appendix E).

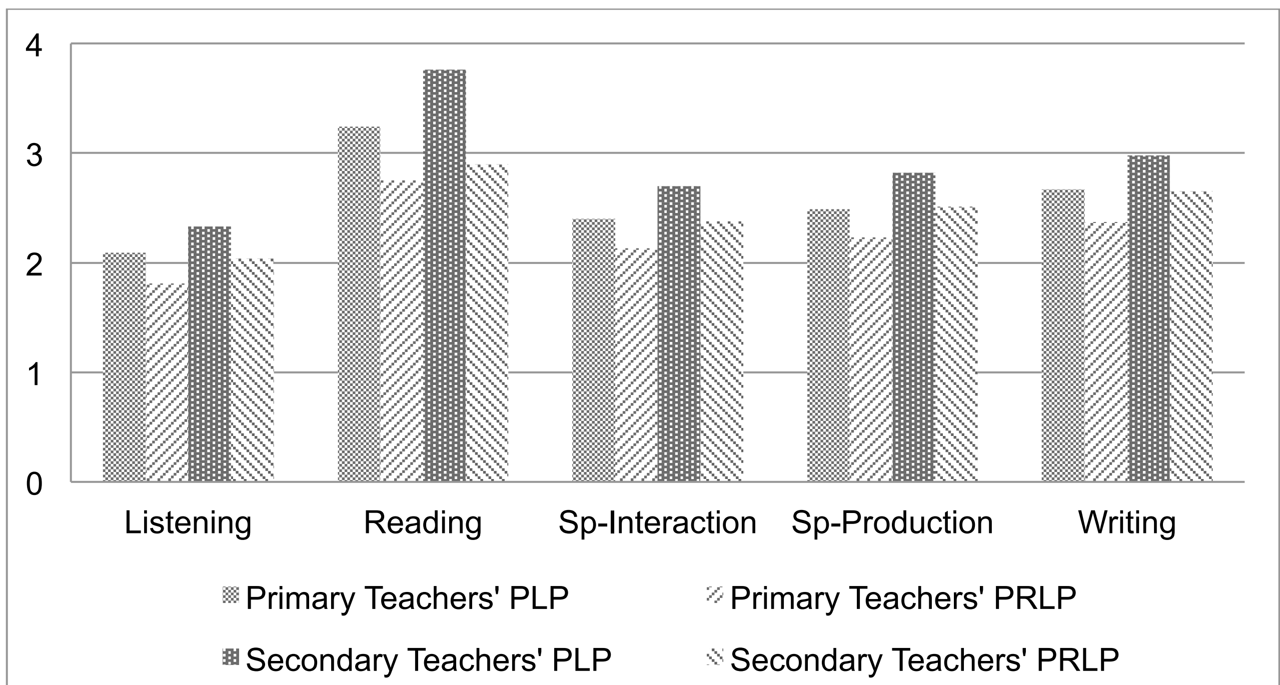



***Figure 6.4.*** **Participants' PLP vs. PRLP according to participants' teaching levels**

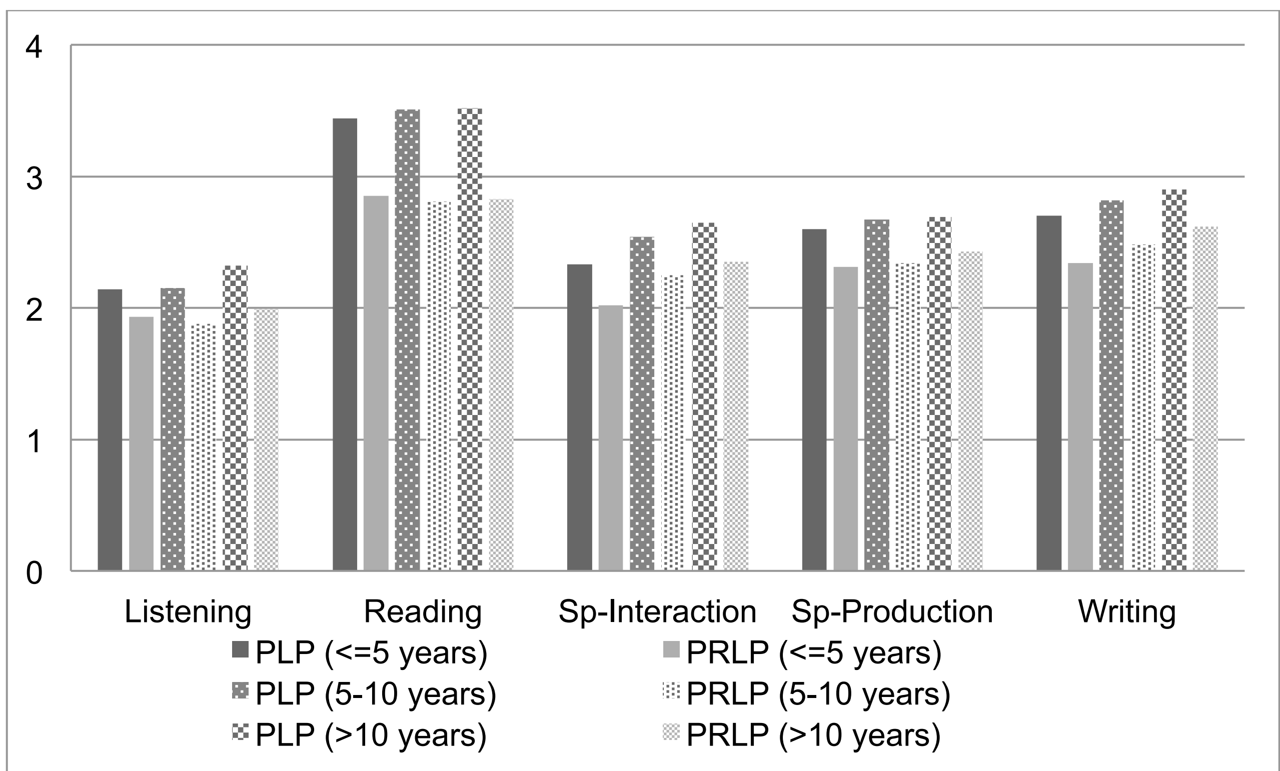



***Figure 6.5.*** **Participants' PLP vs. PRLP according to participants' teaching experience**

In summary, similarly to previous studies in the literature (e.g., Butler, 2004; T.Tang, 2007; Lee, 2009), the current research reveals gaps between the overall and skill-related PLP and PRLP scores. However, the results are in contrast with those conducted in other EFL contexts. Teachers in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China self-assessed their English

language proficiency to be substantially lower than the level they perceived as required for their teaching practice (PLP scores were lower than PRLP scores). Most participants in this study perceived that they possessed the English proficiency required for their current practice.

### 6.3 Overall summary

This chapter has presented the language proficiency self-assessment methodology and findings. The results show that most participants rated both the PLP and PRLP levels lower than CEFR's B2 level. One important finding is the mismatch between the participants and MOET regarding the required English proficiency for teachers. This finding is different from related studies conducted in similar contexts, and requires further investigation in addition to a purely quantitative research approach.

Another important finding is that participants' average overall PRLP ($M$ = 2.38) and all five skill-based PRLP scores are lower than 3.50. Meanwhile, the English proficiency standard that MOET mandated for primary and secondary teachers is CEFR's B2 or 4.0 on a 6-point scale. This finding, therefore, clearly represents a mismatch between the participants' perceptions and MOET's policy regarding the level of English proficiency teachers need to attain to teach English effectively in Vietnam. The results, however, cannot explain why participants rated the PRLP scores lower than CEFR's B2. In addition, questions are raised regarding why speaking and listening PRLP scores are the lowest of the five skills when the aims of ELT as specified in NFL Project 2020 is to develop communicative skills. The qualitative data presented in subsequent chapters will shed more light on this matter.

# Chapter 7: Semi-structured interviews

As previously discussed, qualitative methods are required to answer some questions raised by the previous chapter and to investigate the characteristics of and challenges to participants' English proficiency development (RQ 2). This chapter describes the semi-structured interview methodology (the interview procedure, participants, and data analysis) before presenting the findings and discussion. Extracts from participants' responses are used to illustrate different themes that emerged from the interviews.

## 7.1 Methodology

### 7.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

The interview is a popular research methodology to explore people's experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations at a depth that is impossible with questionnaires. Richards (2009) categorised three essential types of interview, namely the structured interview, the open interview, and the semi-structured interview. The first type, also known as survey interview, makes use of precisely formulated questions to elicit responses that can be quantitatively compared across respondents. The second type embraces an open structure with questions that are not predetermined; therefore, respondents can determine the direction of the interview. The last, also the most commonly used, is based on an interview guide that identifies main topics to be covered but still allows sufficient flexibility. The researcher has a clear picture of the topics that need to be investigated but is also prepared to explore any unexpected aspects that may emerge during the interview. Respondents can also lead and shape the interview to some extent.

The current study employs semi-structured interviews to probe into participants' experiences and beliefs in order to explain their responses to the English proficiency self-assessment survey. The choice of this interview format is due to the need to generate rich data that are not available from the structured interview format. The open structured interview format is not employed due to the practical need to cover the selected research topics within the limited time and budget available for data collection.

The semi-structured interviews aim to generate participants' responses concerning the following issues: their perceptions of their English abilities, attitudes towards English proficiency development, responses to MOET's policy, and descriptions of their English proficiency development.

A set of guiding questions was prepared to ensure there would be enough data covering the research objectives (see appendix C). Some of these questions were developed from the Pilot Study. Others were generated during the data collection in order to follow new directions as they emerged.

### 7.1.2 Participants and data collection procedure

As explained in section 5.3, of the 298 participants who returned the English proficiency self-assessment survey, 42 were recruited to take part in the semi-structured interview. Of these 42 participants, four were male teachers. The recruitment was on a voluntary and availability basis. The numbers of participants for each data-collection site were not pre-determined but rather, depended on the number of volunteers and their available time for the interviews. While more than 42 participants expressed their willingness to participate in the second stage, due to the limited time available, it was impossible to interview them all. Meanwhile, all male participants who volunteered to be interviewed were chosen.

One recruitment criterion was to have teachers from different institutions and with different lengths of teaching experience. As presented in the following table, at the time of the interviews, the 42 teachers were working at 42 different primary and secondary schools. Their teaching experience ranged in length from two to more than twenty years.

**Table 7.1** ***Semi-structured interview participants***

| Location | Level of teaching | | Teaching experience | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | Secondary | <=5 years | 5-10 years | > 10 years | |
| Hanoi | 4 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 8 |
| Nam Dinh | 7 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 12 |
| Thanh Hoa | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 10 |
| Hai Phong | 6 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 12 |
| Total | 22 | 20 | 11 | 12 | 19 | 42 |

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese due to the sensitiveness of the research topic. As participants answered in Vietnamese, misunderstandings were minimised, and the participants did not worry about their English proficiency being assessed. Each interview was between thirty to forty-five minutes long and was audio-recorded with the

participants’ permission. Some interviews were conducted on the training site during the breaks. Others took place outside the training venues after classes.

At the beginning of each session, participants were clearly informed that the data would not be used to assess their English proficiency. Participants started by introducing themselves and their working context (institution, workload, colleagues, students, etc.). Next, they were prompted to explain their responses to the self-assessment survey. Then the interviews probed the participants’ attitudes towards and strategies related to language proficiency maintenance, personal and professional difficulties that hindered English proficiency development, attitudes towards the training course and the mandated English proficiency standard, opinions regarding the practicality of the program, and suggestions for improvement of pre- and in-service teacher training courses.

### 7.1.3 Data analysis

The data analysis embraces three important characteristics of qualitative analysis discussed by Dörnyei (2007) as a broad framework, being iterative, emergent and interpretive.

Firstly, the data analysis was iterative or moved back and forth without a clear separation between data collection and analysis. For example, the analysis actually began right after the first few interviews as I listened to the audio records again and revised the questions for subsequent interview sessions. The preliminary analysis of these interviews also influenced the choice of areas to focus on during later data collection.

Secondly, data analysis was emergent with open-ended aims and objectives. In other words, research questions and their answers could emerge during data analysis which was revisited multiple times. Data analysis was conducted as follows. First, the 42 semi-structured interview sessions were transcribed, not totally verbatim but for main ideas. However, whenever the participants expressed their opinions, perceptions and attitudes regarding language teaching and learning, the related sections were transcribed word by word. As the interviews continued, participants’ responses were concurrently transcribed and coded in NVIVO. Labels or nodes were given to different sections of the transcriptions expressing a particular idea or story. Sometimes the label came from the literature; for example “wash-back” was assigned to sections of data whenever participants mentioned how the standardisation test encouraged and forced them to improve their English proficiency. Nodes could also use the participants’ exact words or were chosen to best

summarise an aspect of the participants' experience. As the data analysis progressed, new codes emerged and were added to the code lists. As data from different interviews were continuously compared and contrasted, similar and related codes were merged into categories. Whenever a new category emerged, all data were revisited to look for similar instances of the concept or phenomenon.

Via such processes of coding, the data could be classified into categories with labels relating to the research questions. One general label, for example, is "language learning difficulties" that comprises three sub-categories or sub-labels, namely personal, institutional, and socio-cultural difficulties. Each of these sub-categories is made up of smaller sub-groups. For example, in institutional difficulties, there are three sub-groups, namely staff structure and resources, curriculum, policy and test wash-back, and training and support.

Finally, the analysis was interpretive as the outcome was the product of my subjective interpretation of data. Holliday (2007) argues that in qualitative research, the presence and influence of the researcher are unavoidable and can be valuable. As previously explained in chapter 1, my familiarity with the Vietnamese educational context and my experience as a foreign language teacher allow me to make accurate interpretations of the data with an insider perspective. Meanwhile, I am aware of the potential biases that may result from my position as a researcher and from my teaching experience. In order to limit these and guarantee that the findings and interpretations are trustworthy, I have taken care to argue reasonably and always back the interpretations with relevant evidence.

### 7.2 Results and discussions

This section presents the results and discussions, using extracts from the interviews to illustrate four themes that emerged from the analysis. The first two themes provide insights to RQ 1 regarding participants' responses toward MOET's mandated English proficiency level and the English development training course. The other two themes answer RQ 2 regarding the characteristics of participants' English proficiency development and the challenges hindering such a process. All participants' quotations were translated from Vietnamese to English by the researcher. The reference provided at the end of each quotation refers to the excerpt number according to its appearance in the thesis and the participant's ID number as coded during the data analysis. For example, No1.T43 refers to excerpt number one and teacher 43.

### 7.2.1 What are the participants' attitudes toward English proficiency development as part of their professional development? (RQ 1)

It is encouraging for teacher educators, policy makers, and those concerned about the Vietnamese teachers' English proficiency, to know that all 42 participants interviewed agreed that English learning, for them as NNES teachers, was a life-long process as expressed in the following extracts.

> As a teacher, every one of us learns by heart the motto: "A teacher is a lifelong learner." We are all aware that we need to continuously sharpen our English. [N1.T8]

> Of course we need not stop [learning]. Teaching and learning are closely related. A teacher must firstly be a good student. We need to continuously learn in order to teach. That's what I believe. It is true, not just for English, but also for other subjects. [N2.T43]

There can be a conflict between the participants' two identities, namely learners and teachers of the foreign language, as disclosed in excerpts N3.T33 and N4.T12.

> For my job, [my language proficiency] satisfies the requirements. For myself, no [it doesn't satisfy me] as I always want to improve. [N3.T33]

> I think I am good enough to teach my students… Satisfied? In fact I am really not satisfied [with my language proficiency]. I have just changed from teaching French to teaching English. You know, it is hard. [N4.T12]

From the perspective of a language learner, the participants were discontented with their low level of English proficiency. As language teachers, they were confident that they possessed the necessary English proficiency for teaching. The conflict between these two identities explains the participants' enjoyment of MOET's English proficiency development course despite their criticism of it as unsuitable, and impractical and their unfavourable responses to the CEFR's B2 standard (see section 7.2.2). For example, the following excerpt records the voice of a participant who believed in the benefit of setting CEFR's B2 standard as a motivating goal for professional development despite its questionable suitability for her teaching practice.

> I like to consider it [MOET's B2 standard] as a target to strive for. It is higher than my current proficiency, and probably not necessary for my everyday teaching. However,

> as a language learner, after so long learning and teaching the language, I feel bad that I do not qualify. [N5.T20]

NFL Project 2020 and MOET's intervention (the language development course) successfully motivated many participants to further improve as reflected in the following quotations.

> If not for this course, I was quite satisfied [with my language proficiency] as I am a key figure in the whole district. Yet after [joining] this course, I realise that: Oh my language proficiency is just of middling level. Well, [it] truly is. [N6.T21]

> I am a teacher, but more importantly, a learner of English. I am always a language learner. After such a long time learning and teaching English, I failed the B2 test. I am no longer considered good enough. I need to improve. [N7.T44]

Excerpt N7.T44 discloses that the length of teaching and learning English does not necessarily result in satisfactory English proficiency. Instead, participants often used the metaphors of 'getting lost' or 'rusting away' to describe the weakening of their language proficiency after teaching, especially at the primary level, for some years.

> After 10 years of teaching, most of what we have learned at [teacher training] university has rusted away. The more we teach, the more we forget. [N8.T9]

As we will see, for many teachers in Vietnam, maintaining and improving their language proficiency after graduating from teacher training programs is already a huge challenge. This is especially true if the teachers are required to teach at lower levels for a long time. Vietnamese teachers often work at one school, and teach at one level for an extended period, even for their whole careers, as there is no policy of teacher rotation. Changing teaching position is generally not encouraged, especially as teaching has been long considered a stable and secure job.

To sum up, the data reveal participants' positive attitudes toward English proficiency development as a result of their identity as life-long learners of the language. The conflict between participants' two identities deserves further investigation as it might influence their perceptions of PRLP, and responses to MOET's policy and teacher professional development programs. Participants' disclosures that the length of their teaching

experience might negatively influence their English proficiency will be discussed further in Section 7.2.4 together with other factors hindering their English proficiency development.

### 7.2.2 Participants' responses to the English proficiency development course and the CEFR's B2 standard mandated by MOET (RQ 1)

#### Participants' responses to the English proficiency development course

This section starts by reporting participants' positive responses to the course offered by MOET. It then will present the shortcomings of the course from the participants' perspectives.

The participants highly valued the English proficiency development course, firstly as an opportunity to improve their proficiency. Both the veteran teachers and those who had recently joined the profession acknowledged it as a rare and valuable opportunity to revise what they had learnt during their pre-service training programs. The following quotes express typical reactions.

> After so many years teaching English at the primary level, I have forgotten many things: grammar rules, vocabulary. My four language skills also have deteriorated. I know I should have worked on them, but there are so many things to do. Now I have an opportunity to revise all these knowledge. It is good. [N9.T6]

> It is precious to have an opportunity like this. I means, to get away from all the teaching and administration responsibilities and to refresh myself. It reminds me of my student life, doing all these exercises and activities. [N10.T10]

More importantly, the course created an environment for participants to use English with the trainers and their colleagues.

> I can feel the wind of change is blowing. The course, so far, gives me an opportunity to use English. The trainer is very kind and willing to share materials. Her pronunciation is perfect. I hope there are more courses like this. [N11.T14]

> I try to speak English in class with my students. However, it is not real practice since their English level is so low. Now I can converse with the trainers and my classmates. I can learn from them. [N12.T7]

Thirdly, the participants described the training course as providing a community of practice that they had been longing for. The course gave them access to knowledge via the

materials, course trainers and their colleagues. Participants made use of the course to seek help as expressed in excerpt N13.T34 below.

> …studying here is like having meals every day. I feel it [knowledge] gradually permeate me. There are many things that have confused me during my 10 years' experience of teaching, but I have no one to ask, no source from which to seek answers. The Internet can only provide partial and unverifiable solutions. [N13.T34]

The participants also valued the course as a great opportunity for networking with English teachers in the same region and from other parts of the province as conveyed in the following quotation.

> We are teaching at the same school, but this is the first time we have sat down and studied together for such a long period of time. We are much closer, not just as colleagues but also as friends. And all the other teachers from the other schools, I have heard about some of them but this is the first time we have met. In the last couple of weeks, not only do we learn new things from the course trainers, but we also learn from our friends, our colleagues. I think this is even more important. The trainers come and go, but these colleagues are staying, working close by. [N14.T23]

However, in addition to the above-mentioned positive responses, the participants also voiced dissatisfaction with several aspects of the course. The first shortcoming is the unsuitable timing of the course, which was offered during the school year. As participants had to travel to the training centres, many schools had to temporally substitute English sessions with other subjects or give students some time off. The participants were supposed to cover these cancelled sessions once they finished their training.

> This course should be organised during the school holidays, maybe during the summer holidays… Uhh, I am required to join this course to improve my language proficiency so that I can teach them [students] better. However, the truth is that right now, my students are having no English lessons. Their learning is being severely affected. They should have been learning English right now, but here I am. [N15.T28]

The length of the course also caused discontent. Participants complained that such an intensive, weeklong program put too much stress on them while not giving them enough time to review and work on the course materials. Some participants had to travel long distances to attend the course, and were too tired to revise the materials, or prepare for

the next sessions. Some participants stayed in temporary accommodation near the training centre; however, they, too, were also exhausted at the end of each day.

> Studying is like eating. I need time to digest all that information. Every day the trainers issue this huge pile of materials. I am grateful for their sharing. However, I have no time to work on them. At the end of the day, I am too tired to do my homework. And the next day, I will receive an equally huge set of materials. [N16.T31]

The participants also criticised the course for its exam-driven nature as it explicitly drilled them for the CEFR's B2 proficiency tests in the form of TOEFL/ IELTS exercises. They acknowledged their excitement to be informed about and become familiar with the tests; however, the participants pointed out that the course did not help improve their teaching practice.

> The trainers are trying to help us pass the B2 test, but what will happen after that? [N17.T24]

> I heard of TOEFL and IELTS long ago, but this is the first time I have been introduced to the test format. My students might ask me about them, so it is good to be aware of these tests… No, I am not teaching these [TOEFL/IELTS] materials in class. They are too difficult anyway. No, I am sure I will not use them. [N18.T29]

In addition to challenging the course's applicability to their teaching practice, a few participants voiced their concern regarding the selection of trainers.

> Some trainers were so young. Probably just in their late 20s. I don't feel embarrassed being trained by those much younger than me. However, as they don't have the kind of teaching experience I have, I am not sure if they know how to help me. [N19.T25]

Although this participant said that the trainers' age was not a problem, she implied that the trainers' lack of relevant teaching experience and understanding of her teaching context was due to their young age. Other participants voiced the same reservations. This reaction is reasonable and expected in the Vietnamese context where the concept of face is salient and evident in many everyday activities. Hofstede (1997) defined power distance as the extent to which the less powerful members of society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Vietnam is a collectivistic culture with high power distance (Q.N.T. Tran & Harding, 2009) as manifested in the respect of younger for older and more

experienced people. As many participants have years of teaching experience, they might lose face when being trained by those younger than themselves. One solution is that older and more experienced trainers be employed for future courses, but it is more important to establish and encourage more communication between trainers and trainees. In this way, a comfortable environment for collaboration can be created which will facilitate teachers' willingness to share their difficulties with their colleagues and trainers and work together to find solutions.

**Participants' responses to the CEFR's B2 standard**

Regarding the CEFR's B2 proficiency level specified by MOET as the required standard for English teachers, the participants supplied mainly unfavourable responses both via the survey results and interview data.

One feature of the survey results is the participants' low average overall PRLP score (see section 6.2.3). Of all 298 participants, the average overall PRLP ($M$ = 2.38) is lower than 3.00, or CEFR's B1 level. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese government and MOET have specified that EFL teachers at the primary and lower secondary levels need to reach CEFR's B2 level (or 4.00). Of the five language skills, the PRLP for listening was rated the lowest (PRLP: $M$ = 1.93, $SD$ = .59), followed by that of speaking (interaction) ($M$ = 2.26, $SD$ = .57). As these two skills are of vital importance for communication, this result questions the participants' ability to fulfil MOET's policy: to produce students who are able to use English independently and confidently for communication, study, and work in a globalised, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural environment. In other words, this result questions the participants' ability and commitment to teach English for communicative purposes. Meanwhile, it is fair to point out that the current training offered by MOET also does not seem to model CLT or promote English for communication. The participants, therefore, should not bear all the blame.

The semi-structured interviews further confirm participants' unfavourable responses to the required standards and allow us to explore related issues. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis: most participants disagreed with CEFR's B2 level standard; primary school teachers seemed to be more doubtful and dissatisfied with the target proficiency than the secondary level teachers; and lastly participants' PRLP for teaching is different from the PRLP for effective communication.

Regarding the first theme, most participants thought that they did not need a high level of English proficiency to teach. They believed that they were doing a good job despite their low self-rated language proficiency.

> I recently did not pass the B2 test. However, I don't feel sad. None of my students, or their parents, or the school administrators has ever made any complaints about my teaching. At the end of the year, my students pass their tests. Some even have won English competitions at the district level. [N20.T41]

Some participants described the CEFR's B2 standard as an 'out-of-nowhere' requirement, a temporary craze that would eventually fade.

> I recognise a strong resemblance between this project 2020 and the requirement for a certificate of proficiency in Information Technology some years ago. At first, they [MOET] were so forceful and determined. In the end, nobody cares. [N21.T8]

Many teachers voiced their concerns regarding the practicality and appropriateness of the standard, as expressed in the following quotations.

> I think B2 is a high standard, too high and not necessary. Teaching at the primary level, we don't need to have such a high proficiency. [N22.T37]

> I think B2 is too high. This target is more realistic for those recently graduated from teacher training institutions. For those like us, who graduated more than 10 years ago, it is too demanding. [N23.T38]

> Why B2? I don't understand how they came up with this specific standard. It is from a European framework, but Vietnam isn't a European country. I wish I were better informed. We deserve to be more than guinea pigs subjected to their "reforms" with no consent. At least, they should explain the policy more clearly. [N24.T40]

Excerpt N24.T40 shows that participants had not been introduced to CEFR framework nor how it was adapted to the Vietnamese context.

Both primary and secondary teachers expressed strong disagreement regarding the required standard for listening skills. The majority of teachers, especially those teaching in rural areas, complained about the lack of facilities needed for language teaching. Even basic facilities such as cassette players or CD players are not always available.

> My school has about three cassette players, but they are very old. The speakers make strange noises so it is very difficult to listen to the tapes that are also in bad condition. In addition, I have to book the cassette player in advance and the process is time-consuming. [N26.T35]

Some large secondary schools are lucky enough to have a computer lab consisting of a dozen old computers. The booking process for this facility is even more complicated, often involving a pre-booking a month in advance.

> We have to share the facility. It is not only used for English classes. Teachers of other subjects also want to use the room. I often have to book one or two months in advance. I probably can only use it once or twice a semester. Two or three students have to share a computer. Some computers have problems, but we don't have any technical support. [N27.T36]

The second theme emerging from the qualitative analysis is that the primary school teachers were more dissatisfied with CEFR's B2 level as the target proficiency than their colleagues at secondary schools. The first reason is that these primary teachers mostly perceived teaching English at this level as linguistically undemanding.

> Primary teachers teach little students little things. These elementary children are even struggling with spelling and writing in their native language, let alone English. [N28.T39]

Secondly, they perceived the main goal of English teaching at the primary level only as an introduction to the language, and a preparation for more serious learning at the secondary level. From most participants' perspectives, the perceived goal of teaching English at the primary level is not for communication, but rather to inspire students to learn English at later levels. The teachers' job, therefore, is to use songs, games, and numerous visual aids in class to attract students and to build up a comfortable classroom atmosphere.

> Elementary students are like a blank paper. The most important goal is to inspire them, to kindle in them the love for English. At the primary level, it is not about communication. They are living in a Vietnamese-speaking environment. Their parents speak Vietnamese. No one speaks English to them. They only watch cartoons in English if their family is wealthy enough to have cable television. [N29.T32]

The third reason and also a consequence of such a perceived goal of English teaching at the primary level, is that many participants appear to teach English as a content subject rather than a communicative language. They seem to strictly follow the textbook, and most participants associated teaching at this level with just introducing vocabulary and grammatical structures.

> At the primary level, the vocabulary is simple and the grammar structures are limited. Grade 2 has a few [structures], but in Grade 1 students mainly learn vocabulary. I have no difficulty with the simple words. For the more difficult words, I look them up in the dictionary at home. … Not much challenging with Grade 1 and 2 curriculums. [N30.T30]

This excerpt confirms a detrimental negligence of teaching English for communication. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the role of primary teachers are perceived wrongly to be not much different from an English-speaking babysitter organising games and chanting activities in English.

The third theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis is that participants' responses to CEFR's standard were affected by the exam-driven nature of their teaching. While the secondary level teachers acknowledged that they needed a higher level of proficiency in comparison with their colleagues at primary schools, their perceived goal of English teaching was exam-driven with a focus on vocabulary and grammar.

> Teaching English at secondary schools is definitely different from the lower level (primary schools). We don't just organise games, singing songs, and chanting phrases. The textbooks are more demanding in terms of vocabulary, grammatical features, and communicative activities. Most importantly, we need to prepare students for the lower secondary graduation exams and orient them for their upper secondary school, and later university education. [N31.T26]

The participants tended to rate the PRLP based on the difficulty of the materials, or exercises in the textbook. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated with regard to the PRLP of listening skills. Even with their low self-rated language proficiency, the participants showed great confidence as none of them reported any difficulties with the textbook's listening materials. They preferred to use the textbook as the sole source of materials and rarely used any extra materials.

> It is not challenging, in fact very easy. I don't have any problem at all. Most of the time students are required to listen to simple words, phrases, or songs. [N32.T27]

> The listening activities are not difficult. In addition, as I keep listening to the same things over and over again, from one year to another, from one class to the other, I have almost learnt everything by heart. [N33.T17]

It is undeniable that ELT in Vietnam is still strongly driven by exams. As listening is not officially included as a form of assessment, it is understandable that teachers feel less responsible or are less willing to teach or to develop this skill. The participants referred to different exams as important factors affecting their higher ratings of PRLP scores for reading and writing in comparison with those of listening and speaking

> In the end, what matters the most is students' performance in different tests: semester tests, graduation tests, upper secondary school or university entrance tests. Not only students but we, their teachers, are also assessed based on the tests' results. Hence, I have to teach according to the tests. [N34.T18]

To sum up, the participants' responses to the professional development course offered by MOET were mostly positive despite its shortcomings. Above all, the participants showed their appreciation of the course as an opportunity to sharpen their English proficiency and to network with the trainers and their colleagues. Regarding the CEFR's B2 standard, most participants rejected its suitability, as they perceived the English proficiency required for teaching as different from that required for authentic communication. As language teachers, they were satisfied with their PLP because as already noted, in Vietnam, English is a foreign language and the teachers and students do not use English outside of the classroom. However, from the perspective of life-long language learners, many acknowledged their disappointment in their ability to use English for communicative purposes (see section 7.2.1). This explains why, despite their disagreement with the specified CEFR's B2 standard, most participants agreed that they needed to and wanted to improve their English proficiency. The difference between what participants saw as necessary for teaching and necessary for communication makes a mockery of the supposed use of communicative language teaching; thus, more work needs to be done to realise the communicative goal of NFL Project 2020.

### 7.2.3 What are the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency development? (RQ 2)

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their language learning including their current plan and purposes for English proficiency development, the time they allocated weekly to English practice, their favourite and frequently used learning activities. From the analysis, four themes emerged as the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency practice: the spontaneity of teachers' learning; the three motivational factors driving English proficiency development; the dominance of traditional over internet-mediated learning activities; and the popularity of individual rather than collaborative learning activities.

#### Teachers' spontaneous language learning

The most significant feature emerging from the participants' descriptions was the spontaneous nature of their English learning. Participants seem to lack specific and either short- or long- term plans to continuously hone their English. Despite the well-articulated awareness and belief about the importance of lifelong learning (see sections 7.2.1 & 7.2.2), the participants were quite hesitant to discuss their actual plans for English improvement.

Most participants agreed that passing the B2 standard test was their current and important short-term plan while claiming a vague goal of having 'better English proficiency' as their long-term plan. Yet when probed with questions regarding how that goal would be realised, almost all participants admitted that they did not have specific objectives for English improvement apart from participating in the current teacher training course or pursuing postgraduate programs.

Participants often attributed this lack of a plan to the time-consuming tasks and responsibilities related to teaching and other commitments. To illustrate this, one participant, a newly graduated teacher shared some thoughts about her lack of clear plans to spend time purposefully on her English.

> I am kind of lazy [giggle] so … No, I don't have a plan or weekly schedule. As a newly employed teacher, I have many responsibilities to fulfil, many tasks to do during working hours. It is quite demanding. Then I have to tutor at home for some extra income. If I have some free time by the end of the week, I would rather spend it with my boyfriend. [N35.T19]

Some participants, while not directly stating that they had no specific plan, evaded the matter and supplied vague and formulaic phrases about the importance of having detailed schedules for language improvement.

> Both short-term and long-term plans are important. I need to continuously improve. Little by little, day by day. Little strokes fell great oaks. After some time I can accumulate a fairly large amount of knowledge. [N36.T15]

> Long-term plans are important and so are short-term plans. Long-term plans keep me inspired while the shorter ones help me stayed focused and on the right track to get closer to realising the long-term plans. [N37.T22]

Most participants (93 per cent - 39/42) however explained that while they did not spend time purposefully and solely on developing English proficiency, their English learning often happened by chance as in the following excerpt.

> I don't have a specific plan, but I know I need to improve. It is not because of the B2 standard test a few months ago. I always know that I need to keep improving. It is for my students, my colleagues, my school, and me. Yet I really don't have a plan. I did try to make schedules for language learning, but as a teacher, a wife, and a mother, there are so many things, little unnamed but very time-consuming tasks, to do. I just can't keep up with the deadlines. What's the point of making plans only to abandon them? So now I don't rely on plans anymore. If I have free time, I will sit down and learn some new words, read an article, or do some exercises. [N38.T16]

This spontaneous nature of teacher learning is further highlighted by the teachers' responses regarding the weekly average time devoted to English proficiency practice. Many participants refused to quote an approximate amount, explaining that it varied greatly from one week to another. A typical answer was that it depended on their teaching schedule and available free time.

> It is impossible to quote an approximate amount of time. I don't want to just say a random number. It varies and depends on my weekly schedule. When I have some free time, I might do something. [N39.T11]

Other participants explained that English learning was a natural process as a part of their teaching profession. They believed that their English practice was entailed in their every day life rather than a separate activity. As English learning could happen during various

activities including teaching, it would be impossible and inaccurate to quote an average amount spent on it.

> I am not a student anymore. I don't have time just to learn English. However, I do learn new things every now and then. It is part of the job. [N40.T23]

> It is rather spontaneous and, I guess, natural as well. I pick up new things here and there all the time without having to sit down and consciously working to improve my English. Just yesterday, I was watching a movie with my family and acquired a lovely word "serendipity". It is the name of the movie and means a nice thing that happens only by chance. I often learn new words that way. [N41.T12]

The participants who disclosed their amount of time spent on English proficiency development provided different numbers, ranging from half an hour up to eight hours a week. Even for these participants, there were also no particular plans or regular routine language learning activities. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the participants' English proficiency development is characterised by irregularity and extemporaneousness driven by personal and sudden interest as in the following quotation:

> I don't have any particular plan. If there is an interesting broadcast, I will watch it. If I happen to have a magazine or a new novel written in English, I might read it. Uhm, I do not make plans for language learning. It is sort of improvisation on the situation. [N42.T13]

**Motivational factors driving teachers' English proficiency development**

The second characteristic of participants' English proficiency development pertains to three main motivational purposes behind teachers' efforts to improve proficiency. These three goals are to satisfy their personal interests, to meet MOET's requirements and maintain face, and to improve their teaching.

Firstly, the participants' language learning is prompted by their personal interest and self-improvement needs. One teacher explained that she learned many words related to astrology because this is her favourite topic to read. Similarly another teacher explained how her hobby, embroidery, contributed to expand her English vocabulary as she regularly surfed the Internet to teach herself new embroidery skills. Other teachers explained how their daily life shaped their English learning as in the following excerpts.

> My husband often asks me to help him with all sorts of paperwork. He is an engineer, and is not very good at English. As I help him with his documents, I become familiar with the terminology. [N43.T24]

> After watching the movie series [Harry Potter], I got interested in the original novels so I looked them up on the Internet. Now I have nearly finished the second book in English, and already have learned heaps of words about magic and spells. [N44.T15]

> I like The Beatles. They are an old English boy band. Their music is kind of easy to listen to. My students love them too. The other day we listened to the song Obladi Oblada. [The participant sings] "Happy ever after in the market place. Molly lets the children lend a hand. Obladi Oblada. How life goes on." I taught them the phrases "lend a hand" and "life goes on". We sang together and had lots of fun that day. [N45.T13]

The second reason motivating participants' English proficiency development is that of passing the requirements specified by MOET and thereby maintaining face. They need to study in order to pass the B2 standard tests, and score higher on proficiency tests such as TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL, and postgraduate program entrance examinations.

> If I fail to achieve B2, I may face dismissal. MOET said that no teacher would be dismissed, but who knows. Their policies keep changing every year. I have been teaching English for thirteen years. If that worst-case scenario happens, I will feel very ashamed. There is no other way. I have to study hard. [N46.T27]

> I don't want to become a laughing stock for the whole school, my colleagues and my students. The [CEFR's B2] standard is too high. The test is too difficult. What can I do? I have no other choice but to study. [N47.T36]

The third and also the most frequently mentioned reason driving teachers' English proficiency development is that of improving themselves in order to better help their students learning English. All participants strongly agreed that as their English proficiency improved, their students would be the ones to benefit the most. One participant succinctly expressed this popular belief as follows.

> If I am a better English user, there is no doubt that my students' English will improve as well. After all, I am the living model of the language in the class. Not all students are lucky enough to have frequent access to the Internet or cable television. So they

> learn from me. If I am getting better, they will learn more. It is just that simple. [N48.T8]

Participants strongly believed that having a higher proficiency level would make them more confident in their own abilities. With a higher proficiency level and more confidence, participants believed that they could improve their current teaching practice to be more interesting and fruitful by employing various teaching methods, techniques and more diverse support materials. The following excerpts present some typical voices.

> I know when my students feel bored, and they also know when I feel tired, bored or angry. There is no way to hide it. Also we all know that students secretly, sometimes even openly, judge and compare one teacher with another, right? If you are not as good as the teachers who are teaching in other classes, students will feel unmotivated to learn. If you are better, they will respect you, and more willing to pay attention. [N49.T31]

> It is important for us [teachers] to improve our English proficiency. Students learn better when they respect their teachers… It is easy to have them fear you. However, in order to have their respect, the only way is to show them that you are good in English. If you are confident to use English frequently in class, students will be motivated to learn. You can be more flexible, and don't have to rely too much on the lesson plan or the textbook. [N50.T38]

When asked to clarify what they meant by 'getting better,' participants mostly employed a common response strategy, referring to both their and their students' performance in different tests and exams as a standard. In other words, success in English learning is interpreted as passing a certain kind of test with higher results. This perception of success applies to both teachers and students. The participants believed that their English improvement would benefit their students by improving their performance in end-of-semester English tests, lower and upper secondary school graduation tests, and most importantly university entrance examinations.

> My students will score higher on the final exams at the end of the year. Some might get through the district or even provincial round of student English competition. The class ranking will be higher. These are successes. There is nothing more tangible and practical than that. [N51.T33]

The various exams and tests in Vietnam not only target the students but also teachers themselves. The participants struggled to improve English proficiency not to develop communicative competence, but rather to score higher in MOET standard tests. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that teachers' English proficiency development is mainly exam-driven in addition to the participants' personal interest in the language.

**The dominance of traditional over internet-mediated learning activities**

The learning activities participants employed to practise English were broadly categorised into two types, namely traditional and internet-mediated activities. The latter refer to those that made use of the Internet with computers, laptops, tablets or mobile phones. In table 7.2, the numbers in brackets indicate the number of participants who mentioned these activities during the interviews.

**Table 7.2** ***Teachers' language learning activities***

| **Traditional learning activities** |
|---|
| Study English textbooks (Grammar textbook and EFL learners' resources) (40) |
| Watch analog or cable television broadcast in English (40) |
| Listen to radio programs broadcast in English (38) |
| Read written materials in English including newspapers, magazines, and novels (31) |
| Do practice sample tests (31) |
| Converse in English with colleagues, students, friends, and family members (24) |
| Pursue further education in English (14) |
| Organise a study group to prepare for particular tests (IELTS/ TOEFL/ B2 Standard tests) (5) |
| **Internet-mediated learning activities** |
| Watch online news, movies, or other video materials in English (27) |
| Read online English written materials (electronic versions of newspapers, novels, etc.) (20) |
| Listen to online podcasts in English (7) |
| Participate in online language learning courses (3) |
| Exchanging emails in English with friends or colleagues (2) |

Data from the above table show the overwhelming dominance of traditional activities over internet-mediated activities. One explanation for this preference is the participants' lack of

access to the Internet, which is directly related to both economic and administrative reasons. Vietnam is still a less developed country; therefore, it is understandable that many rural teachers, especially those located in economically disadvantaged areas, have difficulties in accessing online resources and support.

Of the traditional language learning activities, the most popular are the study of grammatical and phonetic materials while preparing for teaching. Forty participants stated that their main learning activity was to study linguistic books, textbook-related materials, and resources to prepare for various exams and language tests. As English language development is mainly driven by test wash-back, the ultimate aim of the development process seems not to improve the communicative competencies of the students but to prepare students to score higher in achievement and proficiency tests. This purpose makes participants' English proficiency development also exam-driven rather than learning English for communication.

The second most popular learning activities are reading traditional paper-based English-written newspapers, books, and watching and listening to programs broadcast in English on television or radio. However, when asked to clarify these traditional and old-fashioned ways of learning English (e.g., regarding the frequency of listening to or watching news programs), participants provided very vague answers, such as the following quote.

> It depends if I have free time or in the mood to do so. Some weeks I watch the news almost every night. Some weeks I hardly watch television. [N52.T29]

When asked to name some of their favourite television programs, radio channels, or asked to specify the English language newspapers to which they were currently subscribed or the novels they were reading, nearly all participants hesitated and appeared uncomfortable. The most frequently listed radio programs are those of the BBC and VOA channels. The most popular websites for reading and watching news are www.cnn.com and www.bbc.com.uk. However, I question how the participants could comprehend these materials as most, based on my EFL teaching and learning experience, seem to require a proficiency level of English that should be significantly higher than their current A2 or B1 level of English proficiency.

Another feature of the data is that no participant explicitly mentioned any language learning activities related to writing skills. One teacher shared that:

> I can't remember the last time I sat down and practised my writing. After graduation [from pre-service training], I just don't do it anymore. Now, in this course, I have to re-learn to do it properly, in an academic way. I haven't practised writing for a long time. [N53.T9]

Perhaps the participants neglected writing practice because they did not feel the need to do it, not until they joined this language development course. The participants explained that all the school reports were written in Vietnamese because the headmaster and most school officials were often not fluent in English.

> We hardly have to write anything in English. We, English teachers, are the minority in this school. The headmaster doesn't speak English. Of all the reports and records we have to prepare, only the lesson plans should be written in English. This is because the officials from DOET [Department of Education and Training] might visit our school and examine our lesson plans. Yet, some of us only prepare these [English written lesson plan] a few days before the officials' visit. [N54.T25]

Regarding another productive skill, speaking, 24 participants reported that they sometimes conversed in English with colleagues, friends, and more often with their children and students. The following excerpt provides a typical voice acknowledging the benefits of using English in class as a way of practicing listening and speaking skills.

> Last semester I changed the 15-minute written test into a 5-minute speaking test. Every week I tested three to four students. I gave them a list of topics at the beginning of the semester so they had time to prepare for it. It involved much more work and responsibility, but the students had an opportunity to use the language and I could practise mine. [N55.T7]

The unavailability of access to the Internet and the lack of need to use English result in the dominance of traditional learning activities, which in turn might affect the way participants teach English. Most participants, especially those working in rural areas, explained that they were the main source of the target language beside the textbooks. They reported that old technology such as cassette players, despite being obsolete in more developed countries, still prevailed over CD-players and computers in their schools. One teacher who was working in a mountainous school complained that even electricity was a rare commodity there.

> My school is in a mountainous area. Many students are minority people. Electricity just reached that area few years ago. The living conditions are still very hard. Once in a while, I can use my phone to access the Internet via 3G mobile networks, but it is very slow and expensive. You have to visit the area to know the reality there. You can't, really can't imagine how it is there. [N56.T20]

> Fourteen years into the twenty-first century, we [teachers] are teaching English, a language of development and a key to modern and successful life, but some of us still have not touched a computer keyboard. Some even don't know how to turn on and off a CD player. These are the luxuries we do not have. [N57.T35]

The participants who were fortunate enough to have access to some multimedia facilities criticised the fact that the administration and management of these technologies left much to be desired. In the following quotation, one teacher shared her discontent regarding how the school's controversial policy discouraged her and her colleagues from using the internet-connected computers.

> My school has Internet connected computers. If we [teachers] want to get online, we have to ask for permission from the school management board. They are afraid that the Internet materials might influence our political ideology. Every time we use the Internet, we have to write in the record notebook our name, the date, duration, and our purpose for using the Internet. We decided not to use the Internet to avoid all these hassles. Who knows? It might bring us trouble. [N58.T42]

Although most participants did not report such authoritarian policies being imposed in their schools, they acknowledged that there were rules and restrictions. It is unsurprising to learn that language learning facilities and other multimedia resources are used in many schools mainly for ornamental purposes.

**The popularity of individual over collaborative learning activities**

Another theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis is the strong dominance of individual over collaborative learning activities or activities that involve using English with other people.

As previously presented, the most popular learning activities are traditional learning activities comprising studying books on English language, watching television programs or listening to radio programs broadcast in English, and doing sample tests. These activities

are all self-focused and conducted individually. In the following excerpt, two participants described their highly individual methods of practising speaking.

> Everyday while commuting to work, I talk to myself quietly. I always wear a hygiene mask while riding my motorbike, so no one knows what I am doing. The topic is based on the current news or what ever I am interested in that day. I think it is a good habit and a good learning technique. [N59.T22]

> I often recite some monologues or read a piece of news while standing in front of a big mirror. This way I can see my mouth and also monitor my gestures for better performance. It is very important to pay attention to the pronunciation. I record my voice and listen to it later if I have time. Sometimes I hold a piece of paper in front of my mouth to watch and control my breath. [N60.T29]

Collaborative learning activities comprise practising the language with students in class, or with colleagues, and pursuing further education related to language teaching. While MOET officially requires schools to organise professional development activities such as teaching competitions, classroom observations and teacher-group discussions, most participants pointed out that these activities were not tailored to develop their English proficiency.

> Every couple of weeks we [English teachers] are required to attend a meeting to discuss teaching affairs and to report any difficulties we have encountered. That is the school and MOET's policy. We speak Vietnamese all the time. It is not for English proficiency development. [N61.T33]

This final characteristic of teachers' language learning is the most significant feature connecting all the other previously presented characteristics. Firstly, this preference for individual learning activities is intertwined with the participants' spontaneous language learning. Perhaps due to the spontaneous and unplanned nature of teachers' learning, a individual learning strategy is more practical. Secondly, the dominance of individual learning activities suggests that despite the stated communicative purpose of language learning, English is still taught and learnt as a content subject. The participants seem to equate practice with increasing their familiarity with the language system and sharpening their test-taking skills. They perhaps did not practise to use the language as a means of communication, but rather to improve their knowledge about the language. Thirdly, the preference for undertaking individual language learning also results in the prevalent choice of traditional learning activities over internet-mediated learning activities. This preference can be found even in the way of using the Internet reported by the participants.

Their use of the Internet can be categorised into three types, namely as a source of knowledge, as a source of teaching materials, and as an English-using environment. Most participants described their use of the Internet as a source of knowledge and teaching materials. The Internet enabled them to read more about particular linguistic features, mostly grammar and phonetics, to research English-speaking cultures, and to use online corpora and dictionaries. It also provided free supplementary teaching materials including visual aids and multimedia. Participants described using the Internet to search for the right English equivalent for a Vietnamese term and vice versa, to look up the correct pronunciation, collocations and usage of an English word or phrase. Some frequently mentioned websites included www.cnn.com, www.bbc.com.uk, www.learnenglish.britishcouncil.org, and www.wikipedia.com.

Only a limited number of participants used the Internet as an English-using environment. Just three participants claimed that they had joined online English learning courses offered for free or for modest prices. Although Web 2.0 technologies have allowed and encouraged collaboration between Internet users, only two participants mentioned these interactive features. Both participants were teaching in the capital city, Hanoi. As Hanoi is one of the country most economically advantaged areas, these two participants had better opportunities to access modern technologies. It is therefore unsurprising that the other participants were not aware of, or failed to exploit the potential of using the Internet as an environment that can facilitate language use and practice, and more importantly the development of professional communities. Rather than using their computers, laptops, tablets and phones as a bridge to access on-line English-using environments, they simply regarded these as tools to enter a virtual library, a source of English-language texts or multimedia.

In summary, this section reports four characteristics of participants' English proficiency development. The technological constraints faced by most participants and the tremendous test wash-back effect result in the spontaneous, exam-driven, and individual nature of their English learning with a dominance of traditional language learning activity. This finding deserves further investigation. Meanwhile, it is essential that MOET, teacher training institutions, and individual schools work together to promote cooperative learning strategies and establish language learning communities both online and off-line which are friendlier and more available to more teachers.

### 7.2.4 What are the challenges to participants' English learning? (RQ 2)

While the majority of participants agreed that English needed to be practised regularly and learning needed to happen both inside and outside the classroom, one theme that emerged from the interview data was the participants' overwhelming sense of helplessness when confronted by various challenges to their English proficiency maintenance and improvement. This section discusses these challenges and exemplifies them with excerpts from the semi-structured interviews.

**Lack of practice time**

The most frequently cited factor hampering participants' English practice was the lack of available time. Most participants (39/42) complained that they did not have enough time for language practice due to three main reasons, namely the heavy teaching workload at school, the influence of a second job or extra teaching, and family-related responsibilities.

Firstly, many participants complained about the amount of work they had at school. Their responsibilities comprised teaching several classes; designing, implementing, marking numerous tests; monitoring students' classroom behaviour; organising extra-curricular activities; and participating in professional development activities. As specified by MOET, teachers at primary, lower and upper secondary schools are to teach 23, 19, and 17 periods (45 minute each) a week respectively. Participants reported that their actual teaching was close to this regulation, and they were generally satisfied with their teaching responsibilities. None of the participants complained that their official teaching hours at school were so many as to negatively influence the quality of their teaching or reduce their available time for English practice. They, however, blamed the overwhelming paperwork for taking away valuable time to improve teaching and English skills. This paperwork was mainly linked to the school's administration or student affairs. One participant ascribed her lack of time to her responsibility to maintain fourteen different kinds of reports including records of classroom and extra-curriculum lesson plans, classroom management, students' transcripts, written comments for individual students' performance, plans to cooperate with parents, plans for professional development meetings and activities, and many more. Another participant protested with sarcasm as follows.

> I even have a separate notebook that reminds me of how many records and reports I am required to do. If I don't have all of them, I will be criticised and my yearly performance will be evaluated as 'does not fulfil responsibilities.' [N62.T37]

Not only did all these records take away valuable time from the teachers, they were also a source of stress.

> I get dizzy spending time on those records after class. My husband sometimes asks me why I have to stay up so late to fill in all sorts of notebooks not relevant to my teaching. I have to, sometimes, spend all night finishing the paperwork, for example when the educational managing agency inspectors come to my school. [N63.T27]

The participants also pointed out that such demanding and arduous efforts at maintaining all these records did not contribute to the improvement of pedagogical results. Most of these reports were irrelevant to their teaching, as one participant commented, “the nature of education is to work with the students, not to manage those records”. The same teacher later warned that:

> MOET should not abuse us with irrelevant paperwork procedures. Otherwise, we can’t help but complete them mechanically. [N64.T18]

In addition to the large amount of paperwork, the participants also complained about other time-consuming responsibilities not directly related to their teaching. Many participants were not only teachers of English but also form teachers. Form teachers in Vietnam play a major role, as they are responsible for managing the one class throughout its entire progress through the primary or secondary years. They have to keep records of each individual student, know their background and ability. They are expected not only to teach academic knowledge but also social skills in order to create harmonious and cooperative classes within the broader school community. Every week, there is at least one period (45 minutes) reserved for the form teachers to discuss class affairs with their students. The form teachers have to comment on students’ behaviour in the previous week and make plans for class events. It is an honour for teachers to have this role, yet it is also an extremely time-consuming position. A participant explained her perspective on performing such a role in the following excerpt.

> After three years, I was promoted to be a form teacher for the first time. The other teachers gave me much advice but I was still very anxious. I was expected to act like their second mother, yet I was only 25 years old. I was still single, even without a boyfriend at that time. Suddenly I had more than 40 kids under my wings. Forty kids, 40 personalities, 40 background stories. I had to know them all, and made sure I didn’t neglect any kids. I felt like a grumpy old woman every time I lectured them about their classroom behaviours. I was exhausted, and crazily busy that first year…

> Yet it was a very fruitful experience. I still maintain contact with some students from that class even now. They still often phone me for advice. [N65.T10]

Despite their descriptions of managing students and classroom affairs as time-consuming, all participants agreed that it was a rewarding and enjoyable experience. One participant explained:

> This job brings a lot of headache. A good form teacher must be a kind-hearted and devoted teacher. Sure, one can perform the role just for the sake of doing it, but the students will know. If a few years after their graduation, none of the students remember their form teacher, he/she must have done a bad job. It is also true for the teachers as well. Years later, I still remember almost all students in my classes. I felt like I have contributed meaningfully to their upbringing and development. That is the joy of teaching. [N66.T32]

In addition to the heavy workload at school, the participants also attributed their lack of time for language practice to the financial necessity to have a part-time job or extra-curricular tuition. The need to find extra income is due to Vietnamese teachers' meagre salaries. The average monthly salary of teachers is about VND 3 million (AUD$ 172) (Binh, 2013; Quang, 2008). Novice teachers are paid only VND 2 million (AUD$ 114), and teachers with 13 years of experience can only earn as little as VND5 million (AUD$285), less than what a recently university graduate can get in the private sector. Hence, to support themselves and their families, most teachers have to resort to a second means of financial support.

Most participants (30) offered after-class home tuition while the others (12 teachers) chose to have a second job unrelated to teaching. These jobs were quite diverse, ranging from running a small business, farming, translating, guiding tours, providing childcare services, to working in sales and marketing. Although the male participants only accounted for a small percentage of the participants (4 out of 42), they were all experiencing financial hardship and all had a second job. As traditionally expected in Vietnam, the husband must be the breadwinner and the main contributor to the family income. These male teachers were much more burdened with financial stress in comparison with their female colleagues, so had less time for language practice. The following quotations illustrate these male participants' hardships and lack of available time.

> Money is power. As a son, a husband and father, it is my responsibility to support my extended family. I don't have much spare time to stay at home doing practice

> tests. My parents, wife, friends and even children would look down on me if I only brought home my VND 3 million salary [about AUD$ 172]. That small amount is merely enough for coffee and travelling fuel. [N67.T22]

> Officially I earn less than VND 3 million monthly (about AUD$ 172). It is far from enough for a family of four people. I have to find other means to support my family, right? I borrowed money to open a small coffee shop. My parents do help running it from time to time, but I still have to spend most of my day there. [N68.T11]

Most teachers in Vietnam are female. In comparison with their male colleagues, they are more burdened with household responsibilities as they are culturally expected to be homemakers with responsibilities for maintaining a well-organised and prosperous household. According to the Vietnamese traditional beliefs, every woman must strive to attain the four virtues *Công- Dung- Ngôn- Hạnh* (Hardworking, Beautiful, Well-spoken, and Well-behaved). The official website of the Vietnamese Women's Union published an article regarding their interpretation of these four virtues in the modern world (Van, 2005). In short, women are held responsible for the family members' good health, the bearing and educating of the children while being elegant in social communications and behaving well both in the family, work place, and society. One participant described the stress and burden as follows.

> Being a teacher is like being a daughter-in-law, but for the whole society. At home, we have to satisfy our husband, take care of the children, and care for the extended relatives. At school, we have to satisfy the students, their parents, our colleagues, and school administrators. [N69.T16]

It is unsurprising to find that the majority of female participants (35/38) admitted that their personal life and family responsibilities reduced their English practice time. As one participant said:

> I just don't have time. Besides school duties, I have to take care of my children, my parents, in-laws, and relatives. Rarely do I have a free weekend. Even if I don't teach extra classes, there are always unexpected things: a wedding invitation from a friend or colleagues, a relative is admitted to hospital, or a local community event for the children. [N70.T6]

The reality that female teachers in Vietnam are exhausted from domestic responsibilities is also partly reflected in the statistics of female participation in postgraduate training

programs. Despite the female gender dominance in the workforce, more male teachers study for higher degrees, partly because they are not as burdened with family responsibilities and need a postgraduate qualification to increase their income. All four male teachers interviewed already had a master's degree in comparison with a modest number of 8 female teachers (out of 38 female participants). This tendency is true for almost all study majors in Vietnam including teaching. From 2006-2010, 27,335 female teachers graduated from MA courses, accounting for 41.1 per cent of postgraduate students. Also during this period, 611 females were awarded doctoral degrees accounting for only 22.47 per cent of those awarded the degree (Van, 2005).

**The strongly exam-driven English learning culture**

Another factor hindering teachers' language development is the wash-back effects of high-stakes English tests. As previously discussed in section 7.2.1, many participants reported a conflict between their longing to improve as EFL learners and their reluctance to practise English for communication as EFL teachers. Deep down, the participants were longing to improve their English proficiency, as one teacher put it:

> As an English learner, I'm never satisfied with my current competency. As Lenin said, study, study more, and study forever. I am forever a learner [N71.T2].

Yet, they believed that their English proficiency was good enough for their teaching practice because success in teaching and learning in Vietnam continues to be measured by students' various test scores. This achievement-driven perception of success led to the exam-driven nature of participants' teaching (see section 7.2.2). Consequently, participants felt reluctant to spend time improving their English skills for communication. Instead, they focused on how to help students (and also themselves) score higher in high-stakes tests (see section 7.2.3).

The exam-driven EFL learning culture is also reflected through most participants' English learning histories. Most of the interviewed participants started learning English in upper secondary schools between the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period is often known as *đổi mới,* or economic renovation, during which English replaced Russian to become the most popular foreign language. At that time, developments in English language teaching in Vietnam lagged behind the progress made in traditional English-speaking countries. The prevailing teaching methodology of that time was strongly influenced by grammar translation and audio-lingual methods.

> I started learning English in my upper secondary school. The 3-year program textbook emphasised the learning of vocabulary and structure. We spent most of the time in class doing grammar and reading exercises. We also practised writing; the most popular exercise was to rewrite a sentence using another grammatical or vocabulary structure without changing the meaning of the original sentence. [N72.T14]

> No, there was no listening practice. My teacher rarely spoke English during class. Pronunciation was practised in the form of written exercises. The odd-one-out exercise… For example, I was given four or five words and had to identify the one which had a vowel or consonant pronounced differently from the others. [N73.T34]

> I grew up in a rural area. We were poor. The whole country was poor at that time. My school had an English-Vietnamese dictionary, so my class borrowed it, and we copied it by hand. English written materials were rare, let alone listening materials. We did not have any [listening materials]. At teacher training college, I felt lucky to be able to listen to English radio programs in class. Yet it was only once or twice a week. [N74.T43]

As most participants learnt English with the main emphasis on grammar and reading, it perhaps became a habit for them to neglect speaking and listening skills especially when these two skills were not assessed in the current examination systems.

**Participants' lack of skills for self-study and lack of career commitment**

The immediately previous section refers to the exam-driven EFL learning culture as a cause of the conflict between participants' learner and teacher identities (also see section 7.2.1), which leads to participants' reluctance to practise English for communication. Another factor contributing to participants' tepid attitude towards communicative English proficiency development is the lack of life-long learning skills that, for some teachers, is due to their lack of career commitment.

This lack of enthusiasm for English learning can be traced back to the subpar and variable quality of EFL teacher education programs that neglect the importance of developing life-long learning skills. The quality of EFL teachers' training programs was variable due to the suddenly increasing popularity of English (see chapter 2). Several universities, colleges, and institutes started their own teacher training programs of which quality was not strictly controlled. Most participants reported that their pre-service education programs did not

provide them with skills to take charge of their own professional development including English learning. Participants recalled that their pre-service programs were burdened with many political subjects such as Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, History of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh Ideology, Scientific Socialism, and other marginally relevant subjects including General Geography, Logic, Informatics, and Socio-statistics (see section 2.6). It is therefore unsurprising that many participants lack essential skills for making professional development plans and also neglect the need to develop English communicatively.

The majority of the participants (38/ 42) graduated from formal EFL teacher-training programs. Of these 38 formally trained EFL teachers, nearly half (16/ 38) were not satisfied with their pre-service education. They cited various reasons ranging from unqualified trainers, curricula with too much focus on non-English-related subjects, non-communicative and exam-driven programs, and lack of support and guidance for English practice. Consequently, the participants were discouraged from learning English to communicate or pursuing professional development activities. Extract N75.T17 is one teacher's discontented voice regarding her pre-service training program. Her story is not exceptional.

> I enrolled in a night class to become an English teacher. One teacher was so unhelpful, even annoying. Instead of helping us, he spent most of the time scolding us as ignorant, lazy and stupid. Well, if we had been good at English, we would not have been in his class in the first place. The training program was superficial, as I had already expected. One could not expect much from such a night class. I had to self-study most of the time. However, it was hard to practise listening and writing alone. Do you remember the folktale about how differently the four blind fortune-tellers describe an elephant? I was like that blind fortune-teller. I managed to pass the graduation exams, but even now I still don't really know how I could practise these skills. That's why I failed the B2 test. [N75.T17]

Four participants were not originally trained as EFL teachers: one was trained to be a teacher of Russian, and another two as teachers of French. Even more surprisingly, the fourth teacher was formally trained as a Physical Education teacher, but at the time of the interview, was working as teacher of English at a primary school. As these participants became EFL teachers 'by accident', they lacked proper pre-service training while receiving limited in-service support and guidance. Their commitment to the EFL teaching career and

enthusiasm for English learning are questionable. The former Russian teacher explained that:

> I was trained as a Russian teacher. Now no one wants to study Russian, not many upper secondary schools offer Russian classes. I didn't want to retire early so I just took the offer [from MOET] to become an English teacher at the current primary school. [N76.T36]

Of the 42 interviewees, three, including the former Russian teacher, mentioned directly that they only considered teaching as a means to meet basic living expenses. As these participants were not determined to stay in the profession, they might lack passion to improve.

> Teaching is a good job, as I don't have to stay in the office for eight hours a day. My husband has a good job and can provide for the family. I just need to have a job so that he and his family cannot look down on me. Honestly, I spend most of my time caring for my children and family members. [N77.T9]

> I am taking a night class for a degree in commerce. Teaching is a stable job, but I can't stand that kind of life. You know, the slow pace of life without challenge and little communication with the outside world. It is like a closed world while I am very outgoing and sociable. [N78.T37]

These two excerpts might discourage educators and teacher trainers, but they do not represent the whole population's attitude. The interviews with the former French and Physical Education teachers show that they had been trying hard to better qualify themselves as EFL teachers.

**Lack of encouragements and support**

The lack of encouragement and support available from MOET, teacher training institutions, and teachers' schools also hinders in-service EFL teachers' language development. In 32 out of 42 interviews, participants complained about the lack of opportunities for English proficiency development. As previously discussed in chapter 2, NFL Project 2020 is a pioneer in its efforts to examine and offer language development courses. Therefore, it is unsurprising that no participants mentioned a prior EFL-related in-service training program. Although the participants reported that there was a monthly professional development meeting, its purpose was mainly to discuss teaching and class management difficulties (see excerpt N61.T33). At primary schools with a small number of English teachers, the

participants stated that they were required to participate in professional development activities with teachers of other subjects such as literature and physical education. English proficiency development was understandably never discussed at such meetings.

> There are only two English teachers at my school. We are still lucky to have each other. We are grouped into the Literature-Physical Education-Arts teaching group for professional development purposes. We meet every month, mainly to organise teaching and assessment. It [The meeting] is good for catching up and helps us become a harmonious community. As teachers, we don't meet very often, so this is a good activity… It is more like a socialising activity. It does not help me improve my English. Absolutely not! [N79.T11]

While most participants stated that they had an intrinsic motivation to improve English proficiency (see sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.3), they explained that this motivation was significantly lessened by this lack of opportunities and encouragement. The participants were almost alone in their English proficiency development that was mainly taken for granted by school managing boards and MOET. Many participants also complained that other kinds of professional activities were also neglected or carried out perfunctorily. As one participant described, "There wasn't any mentoring program or any official training." She further elaborated:

> After I was admitted into the school teaching staff, I just went with the flow and taught myself to improve. I wasn't trained as a primary teacher. In fact, I had never taught young children before. I did some tutoring during my pre-service training, yet my students were either teenagers or adults. Some teachers were kind and helpful as they allowed me to observe their classes. However, we did not discuss the teaching methodology or anything after the observation. I just took note of what seemed to work and used it in my class. [N80.T30]

Other teachers specified that only low levels of support were provided in terms of materials and libraries. If there were training programs, they were mostly related to the theory of language teaching, teaching techniques, the implementation of new textbooks, or the application of information technology in teaching. Trainings on these topics were described as intermittently organised by MOET or DOET, and were not available to all teachers. In fact, it was often the case that one or two representative teachers from a school were selected to attend the course. They would then be responsible for sharing with the other teachers what they had learned.

> The workshops are often organised in big cities. Only one or two of us can attend as the locations are far away and we still have classes to teach. That colleague is supposed to share with us what she has learnt. However, she is only a participant in the workshop, not an expert. She can only share with us what she understands from the workshop. If she misunderstands the trainer, all of us will make the same mistake. [N81.T26]

The lack of communities of practice or language learning communities also negatively affects participants' motivation to use English. All 42 interviewees admitted after graduating from teacher training programs they only remained in contact with a few of their classmates, but not for English proficiency development. In addition, participants complained that support for alumni in terms of career support or professional development was non-existent from all training universities and colleges. In other words, after finishing their pre-service training, the participants were literally cut off from their previous language learning communities. One participant expressed her disappointment and feeling of loss as follows.

> During my undergraduate years, I stayed in a hostel. There were twelve of us. We ate, hung out, and studied together. We shared study materials, lecture notes, computers and even clothes. We were like sisters. After graduation, I was on my own. Only some of us were lucky enough to find a job in the city. The others went back to their hometown. We lost contact and it was never the same. I found it hard. My colleagues were helpful, but were professionally distant. I guess as we are teachers now, we have to maintain face. Sometimes I wish I have my sisters with me, so I could freely share with them, and ask them about whatever troubles me. [N82.T21]

Other participants also shared their hope for friendlier and more English proficiency development-focused communities either at their workplace or across schools in the same districts. The latter is obviously more viable especially considering that many schools, especially at the primary level, only had one or two EFL teachers. These teachers are alone in their English proficiency development. As an English learning community is non-existent in most schools, these teachers are stranded on isolated islands away from their professional colleagues.

The lack of environments for using English is closely related to the lack of English learning communities. This lack of context for language use is an objective reason and one over which participants have limited control. Both the teachers and their students have no

immediate English-language needs outside their classroom, which severely lessens their motivation to use English for communication. Therefore, one challenge MOET needs to address is to create opportunities for genuine communicative needs. While computers and mobile phones with Internet connection and television programs broadcast in English have been increasingly more popular in Vietnam, accordingly contributing to the spread of English, these technologies are mostly available to those in urban areas with economic advantages. In rural areas where people have to struggle to meet basic living expenses, English, to most students and their parents, is just another subject at school. Nearly half of the participants (20) expressed their concern regarding such a perception of English in Vietnam as the most profound, the root cause of their low English proficiency.

> It would be great to practise with a native speaker. Unfortunately, the truth is, even for me, as a teacher of English, I have no one to use the language with but my own students and children. People say it is best to practise a foreign language where it is used. Right? [N83.T44]

> Perhaps the government should have a plan for the use of English. I see no point in keep changing the textbooks or harassing us, teachers, with all kinds of tests and assessment. They should solve the root cause of the problem by providing us a purpose for using the language. [N84.T39]

> My school is located in a remote area. Sometimes I question myself if my students really need to learn English communicatively at this level of study. Just for communicating with me in class? Even I don't have any use for English outside the classroom. [N85.T24]

> My students are naïve and not aware of the [alleged] importance of English. I try to help them realise why English matters in their future. I don't blame them if they are bored and not willing to learn, as I know most of them are from farming families. Their parents are struggling to earn a living, so they don't pay much attention to their children's education. It is hard to motivate students to learn something when they don't readily see its application in their lives. [N86.T15]

In summary, this section has uncovered four main reasons hindering participants' English proficiency development, namely the lack of time for practice, the strongly exam-driven EFL learning culture, participants' lack of skills for self-study and career commitment, and the limited encouragement and support. Data analysis also suggests that participants' language learning histories may influence their in-service English proficiency development.

This issue deserves further investigation with more qualitative data not available from the semi-structured interviews.

### 7.3 Overall summary

This chapter has presented findings and discussions based on the qualitative data generated from 42 semi-structured interviews. It shed light on the participants' attitudes toward English proficiency development, responses to MOET's language policy including the training course and CEFR's B2 standard, the characteristics of participants' English learning, and the factors hindering their English proficiency development. One important finding is participants' positive attitude toward English proficiency development as a life-long learning process. Another noteworthy finding is participants' ambivalence towards MOET's English policy as they considered the current training course impractical due to its exam-driven nature. Various factors encumbering participants' English practice have been identified.

The next chapter will present the narratives of five teachers so as to offer a more individualistic and detailed view of the participants' English learning history. The narratives will provide more insights regarding whether or not and how participants' language learning histories influence their English proficiency development. They will also illustrate the intricate interactions between the various personal and contextual factors challenging participants' English proficiency development.

# Chapter 8: Narratives of five teachers of English

One important aim of the study is to investigate participants' English proficiency development via their language learning and teaching narratives (RQ 2). Chapter 8 starts with a description of narrative inquiry as a research method. It justifies the incorporation of the methodology in the research design, and then describes the chosen participants, the data collection and analysis procedures. Next the chapter presents five career and English proficiency development narratives. Finally, the chapter ends by discussing the themes emerging across these narratives.

## 8.1 Methodology

### 8.1.1 Narrative and narrative inquiry

Narrative, as defined by the *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* (2014), is an account of events in a story. As an academic term, narrative carries many meanings but is often used synonymously with story telling (Riessman, 2008). As revealed in its etymology, the basis of narrative lies however in knowing, not telling (Barusch, 2012; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). While the Latin root, *narrate*, means to relate or explain, it originates from the Greek term *gno* that means to know. The word narrative, in this way, reflects a lasting desire of most researchers: to know or to understand what is going on.

When a narrator tells a story, a narrative form is given to an experience that can vary from a single event in life to an entire life history. This experience is not necessarily restricted to something that has already happened but can refer to what is imagined to have happened or might happen: Chase (2011) defined narrative as making meaning of past, recent or possible near future events. Narrative data range from traditional interviews, oral and written texts to visual images such as photographs, films, or paintings (Chase, 2011). Barkhuizen (2011, 2013) referred to the process of meaning- making via stories as narrative knowledging. It involves narrators, researchers and also consumers of research reports.

Using narratives or stories as data, narrative research can follow two directions, either to focus on the experience of the narrators or the use of various narrative devices (Bamberg, 2012). These two types of narrative research, as classified by Bamberg, are respectively research with narrative and research on narrative. Similarly, Pavlenko (2002) contrasted narrative inquiry and narrative study. While the former employs ethnographic means and

content-based analysis to elicit understanding of how narrators make sense of their experiences, the latter focuses more on how narratives are constructed using various narrative devices. The present research does not intend to study the narrative devices or the construction of narratives, and thus is aligned more with Bamberg's research with narrative and Pavlenko's narrative inquiry. It also identifies with Murray's (2009) description of narrative inquiry that puts narrative accounts and interpretations of narratives within a broader context. The paragraph below presents a more detailed discussion of narrative inquiry and its development as a research method.

Narrative inquiry in the sense in which it is applied in this thesis is a qualitative research methodology allowing the researcher to investigate the ways in which humans experience the world as revealed through their stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2013) attributed the development of narrative research to two parallel academic moves. The first is the rise of humanist approaches leading to the popular use of qualitative research. The second is known as the narrative turn (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) described this narrative turn as consisting of four changes of direction: the change of the researcher-researched relationship; a move toward the use of words as data; a shift of focus from the general and universal toward the local and specific context; and finally the widening in acceptance of alternative epistemologies (ways of knowing). These changes of direction do not follow a particular order, but rather can happen simultaneously. Due to these two developments, narrative has become a legitimate mode of thinking and writing in research (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). However, despite its increasing popularity, narrative inquiry is often described as a field still in the making (Chase, 2011) or as having a changing landscape (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). It is, therefore, necessary to present the underlying theories supporting the narrative inquiry approach.

All narrative inquirers share an assumption regarding the nature of human experience as stories. Namely, human beings make sense of their experience via the stories they tell themselves and others. As Hardy (1968, p.5) asserted, "we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative". Bruner (1990) referred to this mode of thinking (making sense of lives through narrative) as a narrative way of knowing in comparison with the logico-scientific mode. He claimed that it was through telling stories that human beings structured their experiences and understood themselves, their identities and their relationship with others. Narrative inquirers like Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that if humans

understood the world narratively, then it made sense to study the world narratively. For them, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience via the stories people tell and how they tell them. The main strengths of the method lie in its approach to understand phenomena from the perspectives of the participants by getting researchers into the real world of participants and their stories. It is therefore, a profoundly human way of carrying out research (Barkhuizen et al., 2013).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) trace the core of narrative inquiry to Dewey's (1938, 1991) theory of experience. Dewey argued that human beings learnt from reflecting on experience, confronting the unknown, making sense of it, and taking action. For him, experience is both personal and social. People are individuals but they are always in relations, or in other words, always in a social context. Studying one individual's experience, for example of language learning, would therefore involve more than that individual's learning but also require understanding of that experience in the individual's context, for example, learning with other people, with a teacher, in a classroom, in a community, and so on. Dewey also argued that experience was continuous as one experience led to another. Any individual's learning experience always has a history and that history is ever-changing as new events unfold. Narrative inquiry embraces these two characteristics of experience, namely interaction and continuity, and is conducive to documenting the changing conditions of lives and the impact these new conditions can have over time on all aspects of an individual's life, including language learning. It recognises that people make sense of their experiences according to narratives that are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, and also acknowledges that these narratives are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives (Bell, 2002).

Narrative inquiry has a relatively long history in general teacher education research and is a fast growing interest in the field of language teacher education (Barkhuizen, 2008). As teachers are no longer viewed just as subjects of study but rather as knowing professionals or agents of change (K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2002), their narratives of experiences have become the subject of research. The increased emphasis on teachers' reflective practice, teachers' knowledge (i.e., what they know, how they think, how they develop professionally, and how they make decisions in the classroom), and the increasing importance of teachers' voices talking about their experiences have all contributed to the emergence of narrative inquiry and its popularity over the last few decades (Cortazzi, 1993). As narratives can provide a way into teachers' beliefs and experiences, narrative inquiry can help understand those beliefs and experiences.

Connelly and Clandinin (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; F. M. Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, 2006; M. Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Phillion & Connelly, 2004) are important figures adapting narrative inquiry for educational purposes. They argued that through telling and retelling, living and reliving teachers' own stories, teachers' lived experiences, including their knowledge and practices, could be interpreted and understood narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). From this presentation of the works by prominent narrative researchers, it is clear that a narrative inquiry approach can make an important contribution to the current study of teachers' English proficiency development.

### 8.1.2 Justification for incorporating narrative inquiry into the present study

There are several reasons for employing narrative inquiry approach in the current study. One reason for incorporating narrative inquiry into the research design is the rarely investigated and sensitive nature of the research problem that is NNES teachers' processes of English proficiency development. This project is exploratory because to date the topic has been largely ignored in the NNES teacher literature, and to my knowledge work on it is non-existent in the Vietnamese context. The suitable research approach for this topic should be different from the controlled experimental environment and rigid hypothesis testing characterising the quantitative research approach. Rather, it should follow a qualitative and exploratory approach similar to grounded theory research developed by Corbin and Strauss (2008) so that new insights and theory can emerge from the data.

Second, of all the different research traditions grouped under the term qualitative approach, namely case study, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative research as listed by Creswell (2013), the appropriate approach should be the one that caters for the sensitiveness of the topic, in this case, NNES teachers' English proficiency. Therefore, it should involve gaining trust from and having direct communication with individual teachers who are teaching and living the experience of developing their language proficiency in Vietnam. This approach would involve sharing these teachers' experiences, in other words, making their worlds visible. Narrative inquiry fits with these requirements as it is influenced by Dewey's educational philosophy and allows the exploration of humans' experiences through their stories. For example, Murray (2008, 2009) positioned himself as a narrative inquirer and life-history researcher collecting language learning stories of Japanese to inquire into how they attained a level of English proficiency without living or studying overseas. He argued that language learning,

as a life-time process and a constantly changing experience, was not limited to a single event that could be studied at a discrete point in time. He advocated the use of narrative inquiry as the appropriate research method to investigate the experience of language learning, to document process and changes that occur over time.

Another feature of the present study that requires a narrative inquiry approach is the focus on the individual teachers. Narrative inquiry is about letting participants' voices be heard (Murray, 2009). It begins with experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Thus, this research approach fits with this study's objectives to document individual teachers' processes of English proficiency development in their everyday living and teaching contexts. By including narrative inquiry in the research design, the study can embrace the uniqueness of the individual teachers and lead to deeper insights to complement the distant panoramic shot of the population based on quantitative survey data.

The fourth reason justifying the inclusion of narrative inquiry is its ability to provide deep insights into the environments where the participants live and tell their stories. In this project, this is the English learning and teaching contexts in Vietnam. While "context is crucial to meaning making" (Phillion & Connelly, 2004, p.460) and the interpretation of narratives needs to be placed within a broader social, cultural and historical context (Murray, 2009), narrative inquiry can offer unique opportunities to understand local social practices of language education and the place of English in particular socio-cultural contexts (Hayes, 2013). For this to happen, it is essential to have a shared understanding of the socio-political and educational context between the researchers and the researched (Hayes, 2013). Due to my educational and work-related background as a language teacher and teacher educator, I have this advantage of a shared understanding of the contexts. With my advantage, a narrative inquiry approach can contribute to a deepened understanding of the participants' narratives while exploring the different contextual factors influencing their English proficiency development.

To explore the context and its influences on participants' English learning, this study adopts frameworks developed by Barkhuizen (2008) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested researchers place themselves within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to interpret participants' experiences. The first dimension, temporality, allows moving backward and forward between the past, present and future. The second is the personal and social dimension referring to the participants in

the story, their own experiences and interactions with others. The third dimension is that of the physical settings in which the story is located. Barkhuizen (2008) argued that narrative inquiry, a context-sensitive approach, was capable of reflecting the context at three different but interconnected levels. He illustrated the interconnectedness of these levels in a model of three concentric circles while presenting the narratives of two language teachers in South Africa. The central level is that of the individual teachers personal 'story' showing their inner thoughts, emotions, ideas and theories of language teaching. The second, 'Story' level is related to the teachers' working environment where they have less control and power over the complex variables constructing their teaching practice. The biggest, 'STORY 'level refers to the broad socio-political context where the teachers have even less power over the conditions influencing their teaching practice. Barkhuizen (2008) suggested exploring all three levels because they were interrelated and at times difficult to distinguish. Barkhuizen's model will be further explained in section 8.1.3.

Finally, as a NNES teacher myself, this research project is an inquiry into my own profession. The adoption of narrative inquiry is appropriate because it allows me, as a researcher, to acknowledge the involvement of my subjectivity in the research process. This is a common characteristic of qualitative research in general. However, narrative inquiry pushes this common characteristic to the extreme, as researchers have to reveal their position, acknowledge their subjectivity in the research design, data collection, interpretation, and presentation of findings. Only in this way can researchers win participants' trust. Yet, in order to get the whole story, researchers also need to honour that trust and its responsibility (Murray, 2009). The researchers have an opportunity not only to look into the participants' world, but also their own world with more insights, especially when the researchers and the researched share a mutual understanding of the context. Thus, the current study allows me to inquire into fellow teachers' experiences of language learning while enabling me to have a deeper and more critical understanding of my own experience and our shared English teaching and learning context. For me, this is a privilege not available through other research methods.

To sum up, this study incorporates narrative inquiry into the research design as a methodology for inquiring into the participants' experiences over time and in context. Narrative is understood as stories generated from open-structured interviews regarding teachers' English proficiency development. These narratives are composed as I attend to place, temporality and sociality, or in other words, situates myself in a three-dimensional space as proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). This enables me to move back and

forth between the personal and social, while simultaneously thinking about the past, present and future, and to do so with regard to the social environment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The method also allows me to explore the three levels of context that influence participants' English language development as suggested by Barkhuizen (2008).

### 8.1.3 Narrative inquiry analysis

As narrative inquiry is still "a field in the making" without clear boundaries, and an agreed framework of data collection and analysis (Chase, 2011, p.421), the following section locates this study's approach to narrative inquiry data analysis within the method's diverse literature.

While all narrative researchers share a common interest in the study of narratives or stories as the fundamental unit accounting for human experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), as discussed above (see section 8.1.1), they have different understanding of 'narrative', therefore, analyse the data in different ways. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) pointed out that "each inquirer needs to develop the criteria appropriate to her or his work" due to the variety of work under the umbrella term "narrative inquiry" (p.476). Chase (2011) confirmed this diversity as she reviewed the narrative inquiry field and commented on its lack of a well-developed protocol and framework for use.

Since then, there have been a few attempts to tackle the problem, among which are Andrews et al.'s (2013) list of theoretical divisions in narrative research and Barkhuizen's (2013) model of narrative inquiry analysis. Although the two partly resemble each other, I find Barkhuizen's model more practical and applicable to the current study. His definition was proposed as a diagram (see figure 8.1) with eight interrelated dimensions and three levels of context. This model illustrates how studies with different methods of collecting and analysing narrative data are located at different contextual levels and along the eight dimensions. Each dimension is presented as a continuum, namely epistemology, methods, content, form, practice, co-construction, categorisation, and storying. Three concentric circles represent the three levels of contexts that comprise the talk, telling, and macro-context levels. These three levels are different from the three levels previously discussed in section 8.1.2 that consist of the personal story, Story, and STORY levels. While the former (talk, telling, macro-context levels) are proposed to distinguish different methods of data collection and analysis, the latter (personal story, Story, STORY) are used to illustrate the power of narrative inquiry to explore the context of the participants' experience. Barkhuizen (2013) explained the first level of context as that of talk-in-interaction where

the interest of the narrative inquirers lies in the text level and a conversation analysis approach is often adopted. The second (Telling) and the third (Macro-context) are beyond-the-text levels of context. Telling is the local context of the narrative telling with regard to the physical setting, language choice, the purpose of talk, and conditions of interaction (e.g., time constraints, permission to talk) while the third level is the broader socio-cultural and socio-historical context. The following discussion explains how the current study locates itself in Barkhuizen's (2013) model of narrative inquiry data collection and analysis.

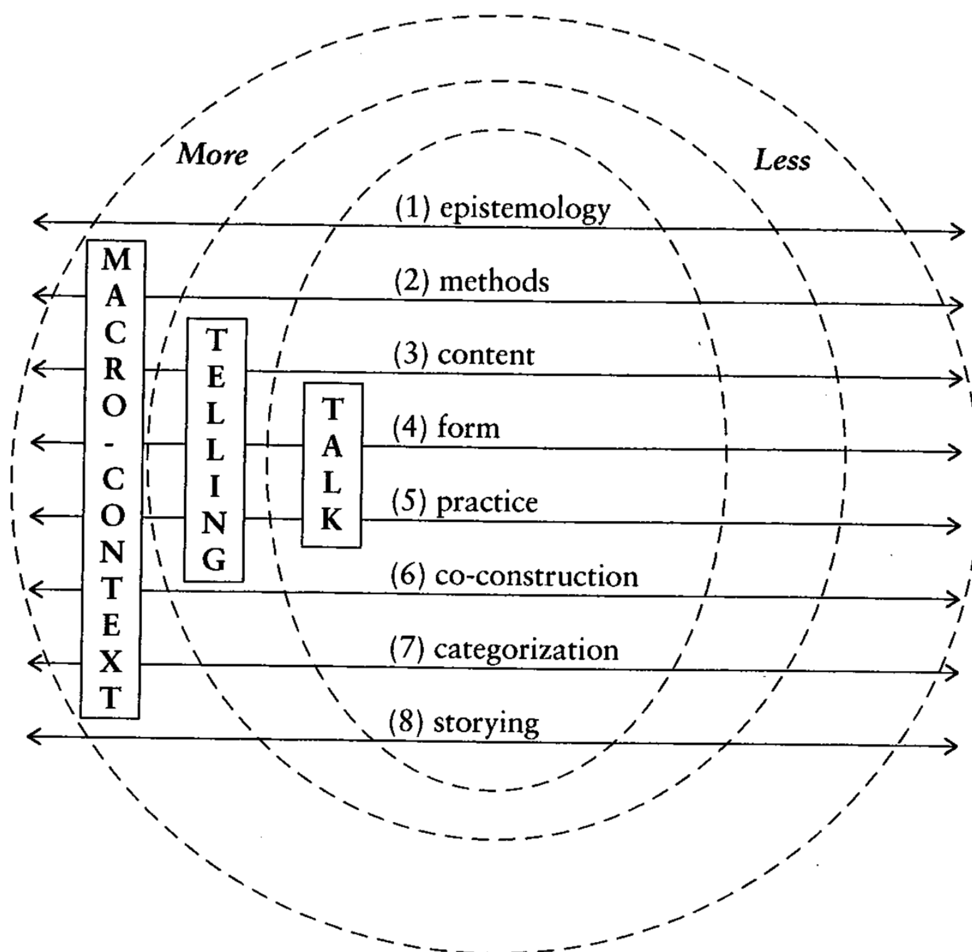



***Figure 8.1.*** **Dimensions of narrative analysis (Barkhuizen, 2013, p.6)**

Regarding the three levels of context, this study's interest does not lie in the textual context of narrative. The project focuses on the third, broadest context of English learning and teaching in Vietnam as it inquires how this context determines and influences teachers' language learning. However the researcher does recognise that the local context of narrative telling also plays a role in the construction of narratives and in turn, effects the results and findings of the study. For example, the semi-structured interviews were conducted at the training venues where the participants were preparing for the CEFR's B2

standardisation test. The narrative inquiry interviews were also conducted during a period when the NFL Project 2020 was imposing the CEFR's B2 standard. This location and time of data collection could have influenced the participants' choices of events or stories to share as well as their attitudes toward the training course and MOET's policy.

Regarding the first two continua, namely narrative epistemology and narrative methods, the current study takes the middle position between the two. It subscribes to the belief in narrative as a way of knowing about the world and that narrative inquiry can provide rich and insightful data into participants' language development, but it also makes use of quantitative survey data and semi-structured interviews as supplementary materials for the narrative research. In this way, the study generates both an overview of the larger population and close up details of some individual experiences.

Regarding the two dimensions of content and form, Barkhuizen et al. (2013) pointed out that narrative inquiry research in the area of language learning and teaching has mainly been concerned with narrative content. The current study follows this tradition with the focus being on the content of the narratives rather than the form of participants' stories.

For the next two continua of practice and co-construction, the current study is located at the 'less' position, as it does not focus on exploring how narratives are co-constructed or embedded in social practices. It does however acknowledge the influence of the researcher as an audience of the participants' narratives, which in some respects resembles the contextual co-construction of narratives during data collection and analysis.

Finally, the present study locates itself in the middle position of the last two dimensions of categorisation and storying. These dimensions are referred to in the literature as two major uses of narratives in the field of language teaching and learning, namely investigating narratives and writing narratives (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). As discussed previously, Polkinghorne (1995) refers to these two major uses of narratives as analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. The former refers to research using stories as data to produce paradigmatic analysis, or in other words thematic, content or grounded theory analysis. It involves continuous re-reading of data, coding and categorisation of data extracts, and reorganisation of them under thematic headings. The major themes and their subthemes are presented and illustrated by extracts from the narrative. The latter, narrative analysis refers to research that uses actions and events as data, and then produces stories as the result of data analysis. This study combines both methods: the participants' narratives

were composed based on the repeated interviews and then thematically analysed. The analysis of these stories provides a window into the world of the participants' language learning as it is socially situated in the Vietnamese context.

### 8.1.4 Participants and data collection

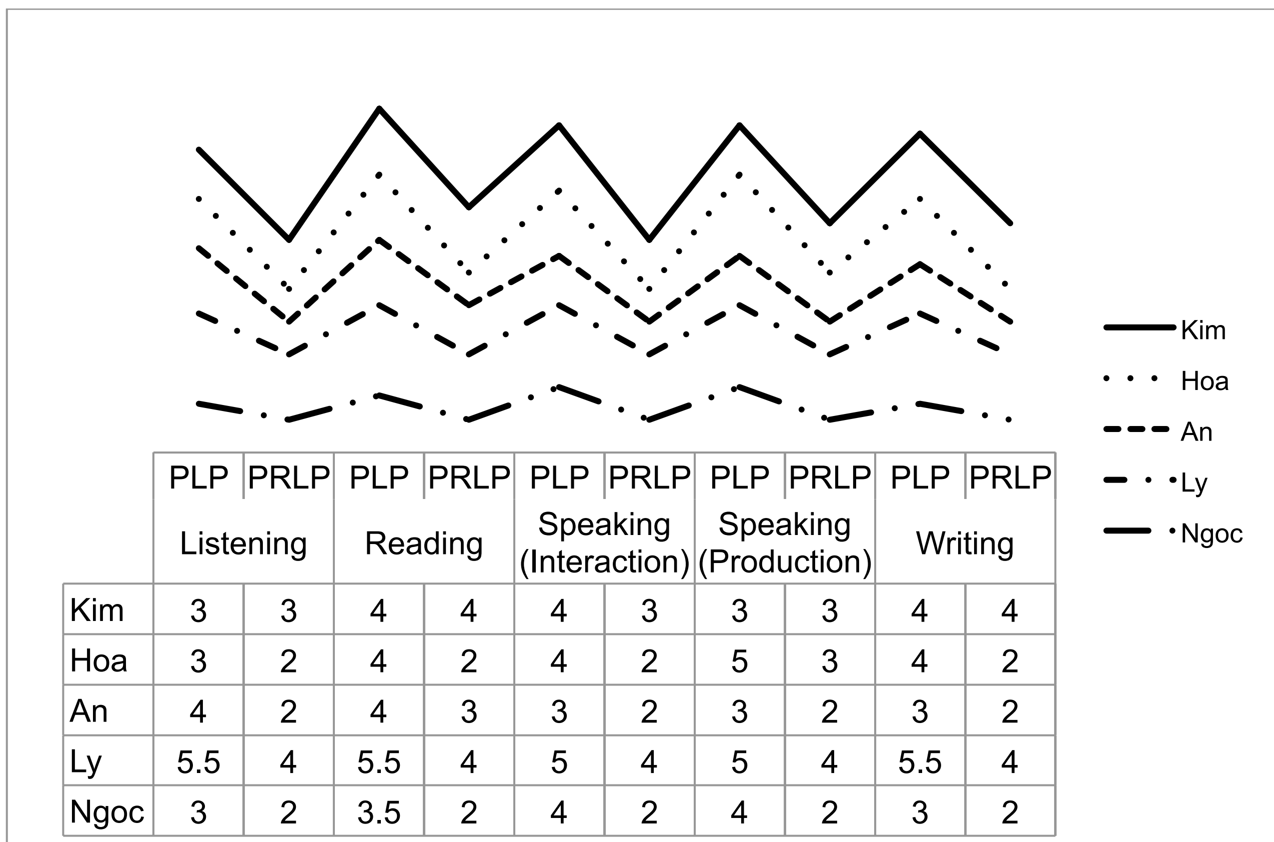
Having explored the narrative inquiry perspective and its suitability for this study, let us turn our attention to the five participants whose experiences will be explored. As previously explained in chapter 5, five participants were chosen for a series of multiple interviews over a ten-week period. Each participant was interviewed three to four times. Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese in participants' chosen locations, and was about one hour and a half on average. The participants were first asked the same questions as in the semi-structured interviews, but then they were allowed to take control of the conversations, and they freely shared any stories they considered important to their English learning history and teaching career. The researcher transcribed all interviews before compiling the narratives that were sent back to the participants for approval and clarification.

The criteria of choosing these five participants are based on their various lengths of teaching experience, and different working contexts. Table 8.1 below provides their demographic information.

**Table 8.1** ***Demographic information for the five narrative inquiry participants***

| | Gender | Teaching experience (Years) | Level of teaching | Type of school |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kim | Female | 14 | Secondary | Public |
| Hoa | Female | 12 | Secondary | Public |
| An | Female | 6 | Primary | Public |
| Ly | Female | 2.5 | Various | Language centre |
| Ngoc | Female | 6 | Primary | International & Private |

Figure 8.2 presents the five participants' perceived language proficiency (PLP) and perceived required language proficiency (PRLP), showing that for all five the PLP is higher than the PRLP. This trend agrees with what has been discovered in chapter 6 (where it was reported that for the whole population PLP was 2.76 and PRLP was 2.38). The figure does not compare each participant in relation to each other.




| | Listening | | Reading | | Speaking (Interaction) | | Speaking (Production) | | Writing | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Kim | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Hoa | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| An | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Ly | 5.5 | 4 | 5.5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5.5 | 4 |
| Ngoc | 3 | 2 | 3.5 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 |

***Figure 8.2.* Five teachers' PLP and PRLP**

### *8.2 The five narratives*

Narratives can open the door allowing the researcher and consumers of research to enter the participants' worlds. This section presents five narratives, each consisting of three main parts, namely teaching career, teaching context, and language learning history and development activities. These themes were chosen to resemble Barkhuizen's (2008) three interconnected levels of context and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (see section 8.1.2). The participants' narratives are provided in the same order in which the participants were recruited. Details are also provided of how each participant was recruited and where the interviews took place, in line with narrative inquiry's interest in contextual factors. Although I as the researcher have constructed the narratives in this way, and provide a short summary at the end of each section, at this point in the thesis it is the participants themselves who take centre stage as we read their narratives.

#### 8.2.1 Kim: A reluctant turns professional English teacher

Our first narrative is about Kim, a teacher with 14 years teaching experience currently working at a secondary school located in an outer district of Hanoi. A mutual friend, her

best friend and my classmate during postgraduate study, introduced us. Their close relationship made it easier for me to gain Kim's trust and access to her world.

**Teaching career: "The job has chosen me"**

Kim was formally trained as an interpreter, and at first had no plan to work as an English teacher. In fact, during the first year after graduation, she worked at a foreign-owned company located about 50km from Hanoi. After years of learning English, it was the first time that she had real-life interactions in English with people from other countries, mostly Korean and Japanese. Kim got married later then moved with her husband to Hanoi where he was working. Thanks to his connections, she successfully landed her first teaching job, a casual contract-based position at a private secondary school. As she wasn't trained as an EFL teacher, Kim was not happy with the job switch and was mostly concerned with financial-related matters.

> … my salary used to be much higher. Now, I had to make do with a scanty amount, even not enough for me to go out regularly to maintain relationships with my colleagues. I was very disappointed. [N87.T45]

As a solution, Kim started a small business selling clothes online. Teaching, for her, was a low paid but stable job with flexible time. The casual teaching schedule allowed her to take care of the family routine chores while running her online business. However, she was disheartened by the difference between real life teaching and what she had imagined as a noble job—a status traditionally attached to teaching in Vietnam.

> … the first few years, I was shocked. I naively supposed teaching to be always enjoyable with students who supposedly would all be good and well behaved. Real life is not like that. There are bad, lazy and impudent students as well. As a new graduate, and not formally trained as a language teacher, I was worried, even scared. I cried sometimes. [N88.T45]

Still, the job stability and its flexible schedule were enough to motivate Kim to enrol in a short teaching certificate course, and then to apply for a position at a public school. This was a permanent full-time teaching position (long-term contract-based position). Kim faced the selection process with a relaxed attitude, knowing that she could always find another well-paid translating job. Yet when she unexpectedly won the position, she considered it an epiphany revealing her destiny as a teacher and started to consider teaching more

seriously. In her words, “the job has chosen me”. She, however, added that her previous experience working at the foreign firm gave her an edge over the other applicants.

With her change of attitude towards teaching, Kim committed more time and effort to her professional development. She quit the clothing business and devoted more time to teaching-related jobs. She took in students for private tutoring after school hours and was actively involved in training students to compete in the district and national English contests. Determined to further improve her teaching and competitiveness, Kim enrolled in a part-time MA program in language teaching methodology in 2005. This was the first time she had participated in an officially recognised EFL teacher training program. She did well in the course, and was the first English teacher in her school to get an MA. Other teachers looked up to her, and she felt the pressure but also inspiration to keep pushing ahead. Kim pointed out that getting an MA in language teaching was important for her because she was previously trained as an interpreter, not as a teacher, at bachelor level. She felt the need to have a “proper degree” even though for teaching at secondary school, she was only officially required to have a bachelor degree in English. In 2011, Kim was granted a scholarship to pursue doctoral research study overseas. She considered it her biggest personal achievement. However, she turned down the offer for family reasons.

> I seriously contemplated the offer. I am too attached to my family, I have too many responsibilities. If I decided to go [overseas to study] for four years, there would have to be a plan for my husband and son. Too complicated. I decided to stop. Life is not exactly what we want it to be. [N89.T45]

At the time of the interview she described herself as a professional English teacher and was preparing to offer her students new tutoring courses for IELTS and TOEFL.

### Teaching context: A rural school wanting to prove itself

This second part of Kim’s narrative is about her teaching context at the time of the interview. Throughout her 14 years of teaching, Kim has only taught at two schools. The first was a private school with teenagers who had failed to qualify for the limited public schools in the district. These students did poorly, had behaviour problems, and often lacked diligence to study. Her one-year experience there was hardly enjoyable; however, it played an important role in shaping her teaching later:

> It was a hard time, yet it also taught me a lot. I did not know how to handle various situations. Having been through these failures and embarrassments I became more

confident and competent. Now, with hindsight and experience, I definitely would do better. [N90.T45]

Kim supplied two reasons for switching to the other school in 2000. Firstly, she felt it would be more secure to have a permanent and full-time position. Secondly, it was located conveniently for her children to go to school and for her to visit and take care of her extended family. This school was a public one, located in a formerly rural district of Hanoi.

From 2000 to 2013, Kim enjoyed the stability of her job while pursuing her postgraduate education. The year 2013 witnessed a major administrative development that impacted on teaching at the school: the formerly rural district was officially divided into two urban districts. Due to the new urban status, the school board of management felt that it was compulsory to raise the quality of education to be on a par with the capital's standard. Their very first attempt was aimed at promoting students' interests in learning English and raising the quality of teaching. As most of the students' parents were farmers struggling to meet expensive daily living costs, they often neglected their children's study. For many of these parents, English was of no more importance than other school subjects, even less important than Maths and Literature.

There were nine English teachers in the school. Of those, three were senior teachers about to retire. Two were young recent graduates who were pursuing their MA. The rest were of Kim's age. Following MOET's instruction for professional development, the teachers met briefly every two weeks to discuss teaching-related matters such as checking lesson plans, nominating teachers for teaching competitions, and preparing for mid-term and end-term tests. Every semester, the group had a professional development seminar. The majority of the time was spent on explaining the school's and MOET's policy, developing exam materials, and sharing teaching experiences.

**Language learning history and development activities**

This last part of the first narrative recounts Kim's English learning history since her childhood. Kim's parents were quick to keep up with the political and economic reforms. When Kim was in the eighth grade, they sent her to study English in a private tutoring class taught by a retired government officer. Most of Kim's classmates were still learning Russian as a compulsory subject, so she had an early headstart. The class was based on a set of textbooks called *Streamline* (Hartley & Viney, 1978). There was no speaking and listening practice, apart from regular pronunciation drills. Most of the time was spent on

grammar, and reading exercises. Kim was then accepted into an English specialised class in grade ten where English was taught from the very basic level. Thanks to her earlier exposure, Kim easily became one of the best students in her class. Still, listening and speaking were not given much attention until her bachelor-level education.

As Kim was training in translation and interpretation, she started practising conversations with her classmates and listening to news programs on the radio. However, she devoted most of her study time drilling various practice tests. There were grammatical, vocabulary, reading, writing exercises as well as listening and speaking practice. The reasons behind this choice of materials were simple. Firstly, these were the only materials available at that time. Secondly, the end-term examinations were often based on these practice tests.

Kim considered the first year after graduation working at the foreign-owned company as the most important period in her language learning history. During this time, she was constantly exposed to English both as a translator of the company's documents and an interpreter at several company meetings. She described the whole experience as fast-paced, arduous but very fruitful.

> It was difficult at first, especially the jargon. In the first few months, I often worked past midnight to finish translating the contracts. I was a newcomer, so there were so many new words and concepts to learn. I had no background in the field and had to self-teach or learn a lot from colleagues. It was tiring, but I felt useful. Besides, I felt good using English at work. [N91.T45]

After switching to the teaching profession, Kim felt less immediate pressure to improve her language proficiency due to the lack of an authentic need to communicate in English. Most of the time she only used English with students in class, and she could always resort to Vietnamese if needed. At home, she casually watched television programs in English, and read English newspapers. The practice was unplanned, rather spontaneous. Kim admitted that her husband was an inspiration for her listening practice. Their favourite pastime was to watch movies on cable television together. She cheerfully joked that his listening skills might be better than hers. In order to provide her children with early exposure to the foreign language, Kim spent time conversing with them in English. At school, bearing the responsibility of training students for English competition, Kim actively spent more time searching for previous years' test samples. While preparing materials for her class, Kim diligently worked on her grammar and vocabulary.

> The sample tests were quite difficult, even for a language teacher. I needed to study ahead and be ready and well prepared for students' questions. I did the test myself, and then marked myself. It was just like I am actually preparing for my exam. [N92.T45]

The next milestone in Kim's language learning history was when she studied the MA program in language teaching. Various written assignments and oral presentations gave her opportunities to improve English skills. Reading academic journal articles, attending lectures in English, writing essays and the mini-thesis all contributed to a fruitful language learning period. Yet, after the study concluded, Kim was back to her old casual and spontaneous practice routine.

At the time of the interview, Kim was participating in the NFL project 2020 training program together with five colleagues from her school. While expressing doubts about the course's practicality and applicability to everyday teaching, Kim talked positively of having an opportunity to meet and study together with colleagues from other schools. In addition, she was particularly interested in familiarising herself with IELTS and TOEFL. Her future plan was to open a language centre to tutor students for these tests.

> Up to now, I haven't seen many advantages of the program. Um, one good thing is that I have been introduced to IELTS, its format and required skills. The best thing is that I have got acquainted with fellow classmates. Some of them are really good, and know quite a few things about IELTS. So I need to improve, at least to reach their level. I am one of them, so I need to protect our group identity. [N93.T45]

This quotation reflects Kim's transformation from a teacher by accident to one with a strong sense of group identity. Kim's narrative demonstrates that success and colleagues' approvals and respect can work as intrinsic motivations that drive teacher professional development.

### 8.2.2 Hoa: A devoted and kind-hearted teacher

The second narrative is about Hoa, a dedicated teacher constantly caring for her students as if they were her own children. At the time of the interview, she had 12 years of teaching experience. I was introduced to Hoa by one of my old undergraduate classmates who was managing a private language centre in Hanoi. We usually scheduled to meet at Hoa's school during her free time between classes. Hoa admitted that she at first only agreed to participate in the interviews as a favour to her boss. She was an hour late for the first

interview, and chose her words carefully to answer the questions without providing much personal information. During the next two meetings, I provided her with more details about the study and myself. Perhaps it was both the assurance that her identity would remain anonymous and my persistence that encouraged her to feel more comfortable and willing to share more openly. I also found out that she did not mean to arrive late for the first interview. Rather, her responsibility as a form teacher of two classes often kept her busy and disturbed her daily schedule.

**Teaching career: "It is because of the children"**

Hoa's career path was not smooth but full of rewarding moments and fruitful achievements. She failed the university entrance exam, but was admitted more or less by chance to a teacher training college.

> I was disoriented at that time. I failed the matriculation exam and ended up in the [teacher-training] program. My parents thought it was not that bad for me to become a language teacher, so they didn't encourage me to retake the test the following year. I was disappointed with myself as well. [N94.T46]

With no plan of becoming a teacher, Hoa was disheartened during her study. Her English was much better than that of her classmates who were struggling to learn elementary English during the first year of the program. The many "irrelevant" subjects also bored her and made her think of the profession as unchallenging, a fall-back career for those who failed the university entrance tests.

> The program really bored me. I had to study English from the basic level with classmates who had not learned English seriously during their secondary school. I had to practise saying "Hello" and "How are you?" with them for one whole semester. There were only eight periods of English a week while I had to spend the rest studying irrelevant subjects such as Ho Chi Minh Ideology and Marxist-Leninist Philosophy. I felt like I was wasting my time. [N95.T46]

It was the teaching practicum in the second year that kindled her interest in the profession. She described the time as having something "subtle but abidingly appealing". She was charmed by being surrounded with children and "their inquisitive eyes and innocent behaviour."

> The practicum was like a life-changing milestone for me. I suddenly realised that the job wasn't that bad. The children were lovely, and I did not mind spending hours with

> them. In fact I really enjoyed being in the class, talking to them, teaching them the little things. When the practicum ended, I missed the children and knew that teaching was the perfect job for me. [N96.T46]

The teacher she met during the practicum was also a source of inspiration. Hoa described her as a passionate teacher who “clearly knew her stuff” and willingly introduced her to different teaching techniques effective with small children. This life-changing event made her realise that she was helping the children learn skills important for their future. In her words, she “found the purpose of her life.” After the practicum, Hoa was determined to pursue the profession and put more heart into her study. She also started tutoring during her free time to gain more experience and build up her network for the future job-hunting.

> I tutored a lot during my study, mostly in the evening. Each student was at a different level, and was challenging to teach in a unique way. When the student improved, I knew the teaching method was appropriate. Otherwise, I tried to find another more suitable teaching method. It was a trial and error process. It gave me opportunities to use what I had learnt and read about. [N97.T46]

Thanks to these efforts, Hoa was proud to be among the 23 out of 50 her classmates who managed to stay in Hanoi after graduation, and among the 12 “lucky ones” who found a teaching job.

After graduation, Hoa started teaching part-time at a private language centre (where she was still teaching at the time of the interview). The centre provided her with useful resources and rigorous training programs. In addition, she had opportunities to observe other teachers’ classes and team-teach with native speakers. Hoa’s first full-time job was at a low-ranking private lower secondary school. She described the school as very different from the dream school she had imagined. The students were naughty, lazy, sometimes even rude and violent. Yet Hoa did not lose heart. Rather, the experience strengthened her determination to stay in the profession.

> The students at this private school were the leftovers from the other public schools. They were like a bunch of “criminals”. It was hard to teach them, not just because they were lazy or less smart than the normal children. It was rather because almost all students had some personal issues. It was like going to the battlefield every day. After four years at the private school, I felt that my throat had become stronger, my lungs bigger, my voice louder. One kid had a condition, and started smashing everything around. The school had to call the police that time. It was discouraging to

> have such students during the first years. Many teachers just quit and looked for another job. I found them [students] different but not less lovely. In fact, because they were different, I felt that they even needed me more than the other normal kids. So I stayed and worked there for four years. [N98.T46]

During that time, Hoa enrolled in a night class program to get a BA in Education. She made that decision since she, similar to many other Vietnamese, believed that a college degree was “not good enough” and had a lower status in comparison with a university degree. Hoa’s education did not stop there as she subsequently enrolled for a MA program in language teaching. With her MA, Hoa successfully applied for a teaching position at a college but only worked there for one year, as she preferred to work with younger children. At the time of the interview, Hoa was teaching at a popular public lower secondary school in one of the main suburbs of Hanoi. With her experience and confidence in communicating and co-teaching with native speakers at the private language centre, she became the headmaster’s right-hand woman in establishing and maintaining exchange programs with a school in an Asian country where English is widely spoken.

**Teaching context: A highly-ranked and popular public school**

The narrative now turns to describe Hoa’s teaching context. Her current school was located in one of the densely populated suburbs of Hanoi. The school was ranked among the best public lower secondary schools. Every week, Hoa taught about 30 periods (45 minutes each). She complained about the heavy workload, but added that this was only temporary since she was covering for a fellow teacher on maternity leave. The students were mostly from middle-class families and were more docile with a better attitude than those at the private school where she used to teach. In addition, their parents were mostly intellectuals and office-workers, so they were aware of the importance of learning English and willing to invest in their children’s English education. In addition to teaching the students during official hours at school, Hoa also tutored English to some groups of children from her class, especially those who were lagging behind their classmates’ progress. She charged most of them a nominal fee while waiving it totally for those from less well-off families.

The school had eight teachers of English. Every two weeks, the whole group met and shared their teaching materials including exercise sheets, handouts, and other multi-media resources. They also organised peer-teaching observations but not regularly. One teacher was a native speaker who had been working at the school for a year. Hoa and other

Vietnamese teachers often observed his class. In the previous semester, for each lesson, the Vietnamese EFL and the native speaker had co-taught together. However, at the time of the interview, the native teacher taught while the Vietnamese teachers just sat at the back of the class and observed quietly. Hoa explained that was because the school headmaster wanted to give the students more exposure to the language during class time. She also added that:

> I think it is really worthwhile to have him in our [teaching] team. The students are excited. Even for us, teachers, we are also excited to have a native speaker around, so we can use English. Team-teaching requires time-consuming preparation and for some classes, it just doesn't work out. In particular, some teachers have difficulties communicating with him [the native speaking teacher] in class, and don't want the students to look down on them. So for now, we just sit at the back, observe the class, help the teacher maintain classroom order, and intervene when it is needed. [N99.T46]

In addition to teaching, Hoa was the form teacher of two classes, grade 7 and grade 8. Her school was not a boarding institution, but the form teacher's responsibility required her to be present at school throughout the week. Although she did not have to teach the whole time, Hoa found this school policy too rigid as compared with other schools in the suburb.

> I have to be here just in case something might happen in the two classes. At their age, the students are naughty and unexpected things happen all the time. I would like to be here to deal with the situation right away. That's also the school policy. My house is only three kilometres from here but the policy specifies that I have to be here throughout the day. Of course, if there are personal matters I need to attend to, I might get way once in a while, but that's against the rule. [N100.T46]

Hoa described the experience of being a form teacher as both time-consuming and rewarding. She told various stories of how she got involved with different students' personal lives, how most stories had a happy ending but some did not. She concluded that a form teacher was "like another mother to the students":

> It is a super busy job, and under-paid as well, just like the housewife and mothering experience. There are many notebooks to fill in, many contact numbers to remember, many stressful and delicate situations to solve. Yet, all these can never take away the happiness and satisfaction the job brings. It is like caring for your own children. A form teacher must consider students her own children. It is not enough

> just to fulfil the responsibilities. It requires a loving, decent heart. When they are sick, when they have difficulties, I need to be there… Being a form teacher is hard work, but it warms my heart. [N101.T46]

Hoa was also the organiser of the student exchange program to a neighbouring country. She was given this responsibility quite unexpectedly, when, a year earlier, the headmaster suddenly appointed her to accompany a group of teachers to welcome and pick up a NES teacher. She was the interpreter for the group, and was quite anxious about the new role.

> It was my first time being an interpreter. I had met native speakers before, at the private language centre where I was tutoring. This was different. This was in front of the headmaster, and other teachers. It went really well, and secretly I was proud of my performance that day. [N102.T46]

After that success, Hoa naturally became the headmaster's interpreter, and then gradually helped him with the school's foreign affairs. So far, she had helped organise two student exchange trips with foreign schools in a neighbouring Asian country and was preparing for a teacher professional development trip to a country where English was the first language.

In addition to teaching at the public school, Hoa was teaching casually at a private language centre. She spoke highly of the centre as providing her practical training and opportunities to work with native speakers of English. More importantly, she considered the centre as a community of practice, more friendly and helpful than her own official school.

> I am grateful for their training. They provide me with teaching resources, and practical teaching techniques. When I first joined the centre, I didn't have to do anything, just study the teaching materials, sample lesson plans, observe different classes, and get to know the other teachers. When I prepared for a lesson, I could consult the other teachers with no hesitation. I could walk into their classroom to observe their teaching. I just needed to ask. Everybody was so friendly. There was pressure, of course, but healthy pressure on how to improve. When I did improve, there were rewards… I don't have to play politics at the centre. Every one helps each other to improve. At my school, it isn't like that. [N103.T46]

### Language learning history and development activities

Reflecting on her English learning history, Hoa recalled that she was introduced to the language during her lower secondary education. For four years, she was taught by the

same teacher, who impressed her by speaking English during the lesson but failed to motivate her to study. Hoa attributed her lack of interest in the subject partly to the teacher's English-only method and the large number of students in the classroom, but also added that the curriculum was not interesting in itself.

> I didn't understand the teacher most of the time. There were no explanations in Vietnamese. The teacher said that whoever wanted to learn needed to sit in the first three rows in the classroom. She only used English with those students. At first, I wanted to study the subject, but those classmates who thought they were more interested in English than me always occupied the seats. I had to stay in the fourth or fifth rows most of the time, so the teacher thought I was not interested in practising… There were 50 students in my class, at different levels of English. The teacher only spoke in English to a few students who sat in the front and ignored the rest. No wonder I did not understand much and was discouraged to learn English. For four years, I almost learnt nothing. Anyway, the textbook was not interesting either, just full of grammatical drills and vocabulary exercises. [N104.T46]

Hoa also complained about the lack of continuity of the curriculum between lower and upper secondary education. Despite the fact that she had studied four years of English, in upper secondary school the program started again with the very basics of English to cater for students who had not previously studied English. However, Hoa reflected that it was actually an advantage for her to restart learning the language as it gave her a headstart and a sense of achievement.

> I felt more interested in the subject. As the teacher reviewed what I had already studied, I started to understand [the grammar] more. I was one of the few who always volunteered to answer the teacher's questions. Her compliments made me very happy and wanted to study more. [N105.T46]

Although Hoa had a better teacher at upper secondary school, she acknowledged that English learning still focused on developing understanding of grammatical rules, acquiring a fair amount of vocabulary, and practising structures in the form of sentence re-writing exercises. The purpose of English learning was simply to pass the university entrance examination at the end of grade 12. It was only during her teacher-training program that Hoa started to practise speaking and listening skills. She recalled that during the first year she could not speak English and had to take private tutoring classes to improve.

> Although I knew the answers to the teachers' questions, I did not dare to raise my voice to make my teachers and classmates listen to me. It was partly because I was scared to speak, to make mistakes. I was not required to speak in English during secondary school. Luckily I got a very good tutor. It was a good decision to enrol in her class although the tuition fee wasn't cheap. She left a great influence on me. She taught me techniques to improve my pronunciation. For example, she told me to get a piece of news from the paper, and look up all the words in it. I was also required to write down the phonetic transcriptions with correct stress mark for every single word. Then I had to practise reading the news aloud 30 to 40 times. She also checked my pronunciation in class. Thanks to her teaching, I got a mark of 7 [out of 10] for speaking in the second semester exam. The previous semester I had only got a mark of 4. Three marks might not be much, but it was a lot of effort, and for me, it was a huge encouragement. [N106.T46]

Hoa pointed out that she was strongly influenced both in a positive and negative way by her teachers. While her first English teacher discouraged her from learning the language, the other teachers, especially her tutor, not only inspired her to learn more but also influenced how she would later teach.

> I guess I was like a copycat <giggle>. If the teacher left an impression, it would last a long time. She [the tutor] had a teaching style that I greatly enjoyed. I now share what she taught me with my own students. [N107.T46]

Hoa recalled that her encounters with the teacher during her practicum, and then the tutor during her college years were the most important milestones in her language learning history. These teachers were not only role models for her teaching career but more importantly, inspired her to study the language. Thanks to her unceasing efforts to improve, Hoa passed the B2 proficiency tests and no longer worried about meeting NFL Project 2020's requirement.

Reflecting on her English proficiency development, Hoa realised that her strategies for English learning had changed over time according to the purpose of learning the language. At secondary school, she focused mostly on English grammar and vocabulary drilling tests in order to score higher on different tests. She was more passive and less willing to learn English by herself. During her college and later university studies, Hoa aimed to develop all four skills, namely reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. More importantly, she had more diverse types of language learning activities including participating in English speaking clubs, reading books written in English, and tutoring English as a part time job.

Of the three activities, Hoa considered the last one most important to her English proficiency development since it gave her confidence and motivation to improve further.

> In order to tutor those students, I needed to do a lot of preparation. I didn't want to be a bad tutor who just sat with them for two hours then took their money. I didn't want to be like my first teacher who failed to motivate me to study. I wanted to help them improve, so I spent hours preparing for each lesson. When I taught the students something, I also had an opportunity to revise it. I had to double check because I didn't want to give them the wrong explanation. I guess, in that way, the tutoring job motivated me to improve myself. [N108.T46]

Meanwhile the English-speaking clubs provided Hoa with opportunities to practise her communicative skills and also get involved with other students who were serious about learning the language. Not only did she join her college English-speaking club, but she also found and participated in those organised by other universities. However, she pointed out that most clubs were badly organised with irregular meetings and no proper guidance and support. There were different types of participants at various levels of English. The teachers rarely participated in the meetings, and there were no native speakers.

> I always tried to find a good [English speaking] club. At that time it was mostly via word of mouth as the Internet wasn't as available for most students. My favourite ones were those at Cao Ba Quat and Hang Quat streets organised by students and alumni from Hanoi National University of Education. The good thing was that we just needed to contribute a small sum of money to pay for the venue. It gave us an environment for language use and meeting with people who had a shared interest in learning English. On the other hand, it did not have a focus. We discussed all sorts of things randomly. It happened quite often that I had nothing to say. Whenever a topic unfamiliar to me was discussed, I just sat there silently and listened. [N109.T46]

Since entering the teaching profession, Hoa's English proficiency development was mainly for refining her teaching. Later, her role as the organiser of student exchange program required her to hone communicative skills, as she had to regularly contact staff from foreign institutions. Hoa's English learning activities also changed due to her busy schedule at school and her family-related responsibilities. She was less interested in reading grammar books but started reading English-language novels and newspapers more often. As the Internet became available and more popular, Hoa used it to gain access to English learning websites, watch English news, movies, and listen to English

radio and songs. She kept tutoring private classes, and still considered teaching the best way to improve her English. She was, however, referring to the tutoring at the private language centre rather than the teaching at her official school. She commented that not only did the language centre provide better training and support, but it also provided her with more opportunities to encounter and make friends with native speakers and other English teachers. In her opinion, the centre was more like a community for language learning than the school where she was officially working.

> I have been teaching there [the language centre] forever. It is like a family to me now. Every one knows each other and cares about each other. We help the newcomers to develop not just professionally but also emotionally. There is no competition, no politics. I don't have to worry about losing face there. [N110.T46]

This quotation illustrates the importance of having a community for language use. Although Hoa no longer went to the English-speaking club meetings, she did not miss the experience as she had found a community where she belonged, a community where she could discuss what she cared for the most: the teaching job and the students.

Hoa's narrative shows that although she became a language teacher by accident, her career was fruitful and enjoyable. Hoa was strongly influenced by her teachers, and the motivations that keep her in the profession and drive her professional development were the social values of the jobs as she enjoyed helping children and participating in language teaching and learning communities.

### 8.2.3 An: A disheartened teacher with ambivalent feelings

Our third teacher, An was a young teacher of English with who had been in the profession for six years. I met her at the training workshop organised by MOET for teachers in Hanoi. An was interested in the project and volunteered to participate in the interviews. We scheduled to meet in a small coffee shop near her rented house. Later we found out that we had mutual friends, my colleagues and her classmates during her secondary education in her hometown. An had a cheerful and friendly personality, and it was natural for her to share her life story with me.

#### Teaching career: "My parents got me the job"

At secondary school, An was innocent and carefree, and did not think much about her

future career. She only knew that she must pass the university entrance exam, as she was taught that was the only way to success and happiness. "There was no other way. I must pass," she recalled. An, however, did not make her choice of profession. In fact, it was her parents who decided that she should register for the teacher training university. Firstly, An did not perform well in her secondary education. Of the many subjects, she was only reasonably good at English and Literature. Secondly, teaching was the family profession as both of her parents were teachers at a public school in her hometown. Their connections would guarantee her a job after graduation. Persuaded by her parents, An started to prepare for the test diligently and scored high enough to get admitted into an English major program in a middle-ranked university. She felt relieved as she received the test's result, knowing that she had not let her parents down.

As An entered the pre-service teacher training program, she started pondering if she was really suitable for this profession. She was not excited about being a teacher, but was also not disappointed at the prospect. An embraced such ambivalent feelings throughout her bachelor study. As she did not excel during the program and only graduated with an average grade, she started to worry about her future prospects.

> All my friends gradually settled down while I was still struggling to find a job. I started to feel anxious. I did some private tutoring, but these temporary jobs could not guarantee a stable income… My close friends told me that I needed to "spend some money" if I wanted to get a job, but I didn't have many savings. [N111.T47]

As An was desperate in her job hunt, her parents informed her of their arrangement for her to teach English at a small public secondary school in her hometown. An took the opportunity, left the city and went back home to live with her parents.

> I had already spent four years in a rented 9m$^2$ room. I could not stand it anymore. It was also expensive to stay in the city without a proper job. So I thought I could come back home to my parents and get some teaching experience at that school. It really wasn't a bad option. [N112.T47]

Back in her hometown, An quickly settled down and became familiar with her new job. She considered the job unchallenging, and her colleagues were friendly to her. Yet she was extremely dissatisfied with the low salary. Although she offered some private tutoring, there was not much demand in a small town for learning English. In addition, as her school was neither popular nor highly ranked, An found it difficult to recruit students. Most of her

colleagues faced the same problem and had a second job to support their families. It was still easier for An as she was single and staying with her parents.

After three years, partly due to the failure of a personal relationship, An decided not to put up with the “boring dead-end job” and returned to Hanoi. She revised her English to sit for an entrance exam in a MA program in language teaching methodology while teaching casually at some language centres.

> I accepted whatever courses they requested me to teach. Most of them were for beginners of English. It gave me more experience, some money, and more importantly connections with the other teachers. [N113.T47]

Thanks to her growing network, An finally got a yearly contract at a primary school. Her current plan at the time of the interview was to finish the MA program, then with the better qualifications, apply for a long-term contract to secure a permanent position or find a better job in another school.

**Teaching context: An average public primary school**

At the time of the interview, An had been working for about two years at a public primary school in one of the less prosperous districts of Hanoi. Most of its students were from families with low incomes. Of the school’s three teachers of English, An was the youngest. Every month, the English teachers met for about half an hour to discuss their teaching. An described the meeting as a professional development activity but more importantly an opportunity for the teachers to socialise.

> The form teachers come to school more often. I am not a form teacher yet. I am also not required to stay at school throughout the day, so I hardly meet the other two teachers except at the monthly teacher meeting. Each of us takes turns to share any difficulties we have encountered during that month, then the head teacher talks about the plan for the next month. [N114.T47]

In addition to the monthly meeting, the three teachers had few other regular professional development activities. Once or twice a semester, they observed each other’s teaching but the comments were often vague and not very constructive. Other activities included checking lesson plans, participating in the yearly teacher competition, and taking part in any other training or workshop programs organised by MOET.

Every week, An taught about 17 periods. As she was not yet a form teacher, she was the one responsible for the English groups' monthly paperwork and reports. An was satisfied with her current workload but was disappointed with the support the school provided for young teachers.

> I did not receive any training from the other teachers. However, it wasn't their job to run such training, and not many schools offer such kind of orientation training anyway. Even my teacher training university does not offer any course specifically aimed at teachers of English at the primary level. The other teachers shared their lesson plans and allowed me to observe their teaching. That helped, but I still would prefer some kind of official training. [N115.T47]

An finally remarked that she was not happy with her current teaching context, except for her friendly colleagues; thus, she considered it only a temporary stop in her professional life.

**Language learning history and development activities**

Reflecting on her English learning history, An recalled it started during her lower secondary school years. As her parents were teachers at the same school, they paid close attention to her learning progress. An recalled that her parents would sometimes shout at her for neglecting to do her homework.

> My parents were both serious about my English learning. They considered it was as important as Mathematics and Literature. My father once shouted at me for an hour as I had failed to learn the list of irregular English verbs by heart. [N116.T47]

Despite her parents' efforts, An did not excel in English. Although she found the subject "quite interesting", she wasn't motivated enough to study it diligently. She completed all the homework assigned by her teachers, but did no more than that. As An entered upper secondary school, her parents decided to send her to a private tutoring class. In hindsight, she commented that the tutor did pique her interest in the subject as they often listened to English songs and read English short stories together.

> It was relaxing to study English with her. We of course had to work on the sample university entrance tests for most of the time. Yet it was the last 20 minutes of each session that I always looked forward to. During that time, I could pick one of her collected English books or magazines, and we studied anything I chose together. [N117.T47]

Leaving her hometown to study in Hanoi, An lived with two of her classmates in a small share-house. She described these friends as important for her English proficiency development, as they studied together throughout her bachelor degree.

> Every day we travelled to university together. We always sat as a group in class, had lunch together, and then came home. We shared everything from textbooks, bicycles, laptops, to food and clothes. We practised speaking, commented on each other's writing, and completed our assignments together. We were good learning peers. [N118.T47]

When An was at the beginning of her fourth year, she started to tutor English to the children of her landlord. It gave her some extra cash while allowing her to practise teaching skills.

> The children were very bright, and often asked me questions I found hard to answer. I didn't want to teach them something wrong, so it took me a long time to prepare for the tutoring. I spent almost half a day to prepare for a two-hour teaching session. I had to revise the grammatical rules, check the pronunciation of every word, and prepare the answer keys to all the questions. [N119.T47]

It was during this tutoring that An realised her limitations and felt the need to study more diligently. Yet, she was running out of time. After graduation with an average grade, An decided to take the IELTS exam to better her qualifications and increase her chance of getting a job. Despite her efforts, she only scored a 6.5 in the exam, and was not satisfied with her performance. At the time of the interview, An was relieved that she had passed the B2 standard examination but was angry that she had been tested without having been given proper preparation and training. She also argued that while it was important to assist teachers to reach the B2 level, it was more important to help them maintain such proficiency.

> One of my colleagues did not pass the tests. There were many new words in the reading, and the listening was the most difficult. We were allowed to listen only once. I am lucky to pass the tests because I just graduated from teacher training program. For those who had been teaching for 10 or 20 years at this level, it is unsurprising that they did not qualify. In addition, I wasn't informed of the test's format or provided any time for preparation. I don't think that was fair. [N120.T47]

An reflected that the nature of her English proficiency development had not changed much over time. When she was at secondary school, her sole purpose of learning English was to get good marks. Later, her purpose was to score as high as possible in the university entrance exam. In the teacher-training program, she studied in order to graduate with a good average grade. Finally, after graduation, she studied English in order to score higher in IELTS and later to pass the B2 standard test. In short, An's main purpose of English proficiency development was exam-driven rather than to fulfil communicative needs. Her English learning activities were, therefore, mostly doing sample tests, reading books written in English, and watching movies with English subtitles. An admitted that she did not feel any immediate needs for improving her English proficiency. She, therefore, did not have any short- or long-term plan for English proficiency development. Meanwhile, she blamed the heavy workload and her teaching context for discouraging her from improving.

> People with higher English proficiency probably don't work as primary teachers of English, at least, not at a public school. Some private schools, especially the international ones, frequently offer training courses and professional development activities for their teachers. They also have NES teachers. And they offer better payment as well. In this school, there are only three of us. I have to work overnight to finish all the reports and tutor private students for some extra income. I don't have time just for language development. It is unrealistic to expect us to reach an international standard and professionalism while having a meagre salary in Vietnamese dongs. [N121.T47]

An's narrative reveals many frustrations that she was experiencing during her career including a low salary, a heavy workload, and an exam-driven language learning history and professional development.

### 8.2.4 Ly: A young and professionally-trained teacher

This narrative is about Ly, the youngest teacher of the five participants, and also the one with the highest PLP and PRLP scores (5.3 and 4.0 respectively) of the five participants. Her scores were higher than the average PLP and PRLP scores of the whole population. She is one of the youngest participants in the study, and the only one who was working fulltime at a private language centre at the time of the interviews. Previously, I had worked at this language centre for two years, so the director of the centre was eager to help with the participant recruitment. When he introduced my project to the current staff, Ly showed her interest by asking several questions and then volunteered to participate. We often met

in a small coffee shop near her house. Of all the participants, Ly was most ready to let me into her world perhaps due both to her young age and our shared knowledge of the language centre.

**Teaching career: "My personality suits the job"**

Ly was from a province next to Hanoi. She was determined to choose teaching as her career because she felt that teaching was suitable for her non-competitive nature. Her family also influenced her decision, as both her father and sister were teachers. They wanted her to take up teaching, a stable and noble job, so she would have time for her family.

Ly started learning English in the fourth grade and since then had always been fond of the language. While most students only chose their target universities in their later years (grade 11 or 12) at upper secondary school, Ly knew in the last years of her lower secondary education that she would like to enrol at a teacher training university. She started preparations for the university entrance exam at the beginning of grade 10. She joined a private tutoring class offered by a famous teacher of English in her hometown who taught her to have correct pronunciation. Thanks to Ly's hard work, she passed the university entrance exam with flying colours to enter, with a scholarship, the prestigious Fast Track program: BA in English Teacher Education offered by one of the best universities in English teacher training in Hanoi. Her achievement in this high-stakes and competitive examination was her first step in becoming a language teacher. It made her feel successful and motivated to study the language more.

> My parents were very proud of me. Not many students in my hometown passed the test and got admitted to this university, let alone the Fast Track program with a scholarship. My parents often joked that I was a paid learner now. So I felt happy. I told myself, this was the thing I was good at, and I needed to get even better. [N122.T48]

After graduation, Ly worked full-time at one of the biggest private language centres in Hanoi while studying part-time for an MA in English language teaching. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching there for two and a half years. When asked why she chose to work in a private language centre instead of a primary or secondary school, Ly provided multiple reasons behind her decision. Firstly, she wanted to prove herself by successfully getting a job without having to pay someone a "corruption fee" to get a

position at a public school. She believed an MA would increase her competitiveness in comparison with other recent graduates. The advantage of the private language centre is the flexible working schedule that makes it easier for Ly to pursue postgraduate education. Next, the private language centre gives her opportunities to experience diverse teaching programs such as English for communication, academic English, and several test preparation courses. Finally, she preferred the working context at the language centre where she could interact and co-teach with native speakers. She had always enjoyed her undergraduate education and wanted to immerse herself again in an academic and English speaking environment.

> For a country girl like me with no connections in Hanoi, it is almost impossible to get a position at a public school. I don't want to bribe anyone. Also it would be boring to teach at a public school as I have heard many complaints from my friends. They just teach the same things over and over again. There aren't many professional developments activities. I am still so young, so I want to challenge myself. [N123.T48]

Although Ly was well prepared to face the challenges, she was exhausted during the first year due to the very competitive and demanding nature of the language centre. First, she was assigned to teach young children the Foundation Academic English program (FAE) and tutored mature students for TOEIC. The two different types of students wore out the recent graduate and inexperienced teacher.

> In the morning I had to be a lively character, ready to dance, to sing and play all sorts of games with the children. Some of them were really small, so I was basically like a babysitter. In the evening, I had to put another mask on my face. I needed to appear older than my age as most of my TOEIC students were older than me. Only after class at 9pm when I arrived home, could I be myself. I was too tired by then. [N124.T48]

Still, she pushed through the first year successfully. In the second year, Ly was promoted and given the TOEFL and IELTS programs. In the first half of the third year and at the time of the interview, she started teaching writing sessions for SAT classes. With these promotions, Ly taught at least two to three sessions (two hours each) every day including the weekend. However, she enjoyed the work more and felt less stressed during working hours.

> I guess I am used to it now. I am more experienced and less worried. In hindsight, I was too anxious during the first year. My biggest mistake was to cram too much knowledge into one lesson. I have learned to teach more slowly so both my students and myself can enjoy the session. [N125.T48]

In late 2013, Ly completed her postgraduate education. With her teaching experience and qualifications, in mid-2014 she successfully applied to one of the earliest-established and most prestigious secondary schools in Hanoi. Best of all, she proudly said: "I don't have to bribe anyone a penny."

**Teaching context: A successful private language centre**

Regarding Ly's current working context at the time of the interview, it was one of the most successful private centres in the whole country. It was established only 10 years ago by a group of foreign trained graduates, but had set up different branches throughout the country. Ly's first impression of her particular branch was its well-equipped facilities and the professional manner of the staff.

> [The centre] has modern facilities. All the classrooms have air conditioning, a set of computer, speakers, and a projector. The chair and desks are movable. My university lecture hall was so shabby in comparison with it [the centre]. [N126.T48]

For the new teaching staff, the centre offered different training courses and workshops throughout the year. Most teachers started with FAE or TOEIC training courses and then gradually moved up to teach TOEFL and IELTS.

> The training department is responsible for organising experience-sharing meetings. They group teachers according to their teaching program. Each of us has to do several demo lessons. The other teachers are the students, they observe and make comments after the performance. People from the training department also attend the demos, as they will decide if we are ready to teach. [N127.T48]

Ly also praised the centre for providing excellent support for the teachers including helping with lesson planning, and preparing teaching resources. She added that the centre always provided student feedback after every course in addition to classroom observation comments from the quality control department's staff.

> A friend working at a public school told me that she didn't have to cope with such stress [from the student and staff feedback]. I think it is a beneficial kind of pressure.

> No pain, no gain. Sure, it is stressful to receive these types of teaching feedback. However, they do give me an idea of how I am as a teacher. For a new graduate like me, it is invaluable. [N128.T48]

Teaching at the private centre also gave Ly admission to a community of practice. Most of the full-time teachers were young and friendly towards Ly. There were many part-time staff with permanent positions at various universities and schools. Native speakers were also part of the teaching team. Ly, therefore, had plenty of opportunities to socialise, use English and share her teaching experience, and learn from her colleagues. Yet, she pointed out that it wasn't always a supportive environment.

> Some teachers just came to teach their classes then left. They were too busy for any socialising or perhaps they just weren't interested in being part of the community… Some teachers, especially the part-time ones, are not always willing to share materials or teaching technique. I guess they are afraid of losing their jobs. Also they are from the public school environment where there isn't a sharing culture. Here we try to share materials so students can learn from all. [N129.T48]

**Language learning history and development activities**

Ly started learning English as part of her primary education. Her only impression of the language lessons was that they were fun and different from the other school subjects. She remembered her male teacher organised games and taught them to sing songs most of the time. She didn't like studying grammar though as she could not remember the complicated rules. It was not until her secondary school that Ly started enjoying the subject more. She was taught by another male teacher who was patient with students and explained the grammatical rules both in a clearer and more interesting way. Thanks to him, Ly understood these rules well and scored good marks in all the exams. Yet the teacher tended to skip teaching speaking and listening skills. Ly did not recognise the problem though. At that time, for her, scoring high in various school tests was good enough.

It was at the beginning of grade 10 when a private language tutor started to help her develop some productive language skills. He not only helped her improve her pronunciation but more importantly introduced her to short English news broadcasts on the radio, and spoke English with her frequently. Ly then realised that English was actually a practical subject that she could use in life right away. Her interest in English was then renewed and deepened.

> Of all the subjects I liked literature and English the most as I could apply what I had learnt right away. I realised that English was everywhere, on television, in student newspapers, on the sidewalk advertising boards. I just didn't notice it before. It was no longer a dead language in the textbook. So I became more interested in studying. [N130.T48]

Still, it was not until her freshman year at teacher training university that she was totally immersed in an English language environment. The Fast Track program had many advantages in comparison with the normal program. There was only one Fast Track group of students every year. The 24 students in this group were those who had scored the highest both in the university entrance and the program entrance tests. They received a monthly scholarship, and studied with the best teachers in the university to attain a high standard of proficiency and various soft skills such as presentation, public speaking, problem solving, and group work. The teachers in the program were of a high standard, mostly trained overseas. Ly was impressed by their teaching immediately.

> … so very different from my previous learning experience. My first class was a speaking lesson. He [the teacher] let us watch a movie with English subtitles. When the movie ended, he asked us if we understood the movie, and asked us to write a review with a reflection on the movie and the language used in it. I was shocked. I had never been taught that way. Still I had to complete the exercise… He was my first teacher at university. He spoke English all the time and corrected us every time we made mistakes. He even shouted at us. One of my classmates was so scared of him that she quit and enrolled in another university. Yet gradually I became more familiar with his teaching method, then I loved it. He made me want to improve. [N131.T48]

Ly admitted that it was stressful to study in the Fast Track program, as she needed to maintain high grades. The program also helped her develop autonomy in language learning and an appreciation for the language. She made it a habit to read novels in English and watch television broadcasts in English everyday. Her classmates were also diligent and willing to help each other to improve. Many of them actually lived together either in a hostel or rented share-house near the university. Ly lived with five other classmates. They regularly used English to communicate both in and outside of the classroom. After graduation from the program, Ly felt unsettled as she was separated from her classmates and housemates. Suddenly she did not have anyone with whom to use

English except for her younger brother who had only started learning English as part of his university requirements.

> I didn't want to apply for a job at a public school partly because I feared that I would be so lonely there. They only taught for the tests at these schools. Probably there were four to five teachers of English. It would be quite isolated and mundane. I wanted to teach the language and culture. I didn't want that kind of life yet. [N132.T48]

When Ly joined the private language centre, she was satisfied to be again surrounded by young colleagues with the same interests. Yet deep inside, she coveted the time she spent at the hostel with her classmates when she could "eat, sleep, and even breathe in English".

Ly considered herself an autonomous learner of English. During her bachelor study, she had developed a daily habit of listening to English radio programs and watching television in English. She still maintained this habit up to the time of the interview. Every night, before sleep, she visited the CNN website (http://edition.cnn.com/videos) to watch their latest daily news videos. Some days of the week, she even listened to BBC news hour podcasts (http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/newshour) while riding her scooter to the workplace. At home, especially during the weekend, Ly spent time with her brother watching movies with English subtitles.

Ly noticed that her English learning activities had changed in comparison with what she used to do at university. Previously, she spent much time drilling IELTS and TOEFL sample tests, both alone and with her classmates. The reason was that she needed to score high marks in the exam to maintain her scholarship and stay in the Fast Track program. She also accompanied her classmates to the university English-speaking club where she practised public speaking skills and learned from others. After graduation, she spent more time practising English for enjoyment. One of her colleagues, a native speaker, invited her to his monthly "open house" events in which teachers and students could chat in English, watch movies or simply hang out together. Ly enjoyed the activities and was a regular guest. She said that, "my English is quite good. Yet I want to learn more about the history, culture, and values of these English-speaking countries. It is a personal interest, but can also benefit my teaching." Ly's English proficiency development was indeed aimed at improving her teaching. As she was preparing to teach the SAT writing module, Ly made plans for different reading purposes. One week she spent reading classic English

literature and writing summaries for her students. Another week she spent on history, and then art, politics, and economics. Ly commented that it was challenging to prepare for the SAT modules, but she welcomed the challenges as they broadened her mind and improved her understanding of English speaking cultures. Ly worked equally hard for other teaching courses such as TOEFL and TOEIC. She proudly said that she had accumulated quite a collection of textbooks on the two, and never stopped improving herself.

> At university, I practised mostly with IETLS materials. Now I teach TOEFL more often. There are many similarities between the two, and the study method for the exam is the same. Yet I am a teacher now. I have bought almost all the TOEFL books on the market and studied them carefully. I did all the sample tests myself and chose the suitable ones for each class. I studied all 4000 TOEFL words before I agreed to teach TOEFL. I thought I might know all of them already, but I wanted to be sure before I started teaching. [N133.T48]

Ly was quite satisfied with the opportunities for using English at the language centre. On the other hand she expressed her disappointment regarding how the MA course failed to help her further improve English proficiency. One reason for her enrolment in the program was to go back to her university, to return to the familiar English-immersion environment. Yet, she found out the focus of the program was more on teaching and research methodology while her classmates turned out to be quite distant and did not share her interest in practising the language.

> The postgraduate program is difficult in a different way. The reading materials are mostly about different research projects. I hate them. Some of the articles are too long and too complicated. They require me to read slowly and analyse them carefully in order to make some sense out of it… My classmates speak Vietnamese all the time. Many just enrol in the program for the degree, so they don't care much about the practice. In addition, the program does not offer language development courses. There are writing assignments, and presentations but the teachers pay attention more to the content rather than our English. Still, I do enjoy some courses of the program, for example the American Studies course. Most of the other courses, I think, cannot be applied much in my teaching. [N134.T48]

Of the five teachers, Ly is the one with the least experience but the highest perceived proficiency. As she was at the early stages of her professional development, Ly was highly motivated and enthusiastic about improving her professional competency. Her narrative also exposes the contrast between private

language centres and public schools with regard to professional development opportunities available to teachers.

### 8.2.5 Ngoc: A successful and contented teacher

The last narrative of this chapter features Ngoc who studied the same undergraduate program with me from 2002 to 2006. After graduation, Ngoc started teaching part-time at a private language centre, and then got a full time position at a private primary school in one of the most prosperous suburbs in Hanoi. However, we did not know each other before the time of the interview. One of my previous teachers, knowing that I was looking for participants, kindly introduced me to Ngoc and put us in contact.

#### Teaching career: "So far I still enjoy doing my job"

Ngoc became a teacher only through her parents' decision. Her actual plan was to enrol in an interpreter-training program at a university close to her grandparents' house. In her own words, the reason was rather "childish."

> Once in a while, my parents would take me to visit my grandparents. They lived next to that university. I saw the older students hanging around having a lot of fun. I thought if I were admitted to that university, I would be one of them plus I could even stay with my grandparents. [N135.T49]

Despite her wish, her parents did not support her choice since they believed that it would be hard work for a girl to become an interpreter. Her father was a teacher, and wanted her to have the same "simple life with no trouble and more time for the family". Her parents then secretly revised her application and submitted it to the teacher-training program. Ngoc only found out when she received the result of the matriculation test. She was disappointed at first, but did not want to retake the exam.

> I was sad for a little bit, just a few days. It was a childish wish anyway. I knew nothing about being either an interpreter or a teacher. Many of my friends failed the test and wasted the whole year waiting for the next examination, so I thought I should not complain as I could go to Hanoi and study. At this teacher-training university, I didn't have to pay the tuition fee, so it was actually really good. [N136.T49]

Ngoc was dissatisfied with the training program, as she considered it lacked practicality and did not allow her to build up strong background knowledge and essential soft skills

such as time management, conflict resolution, and group working skills. Meanwhile, she was happy that the program did help her improve her English, enabling her to practise speaking English with her classmates, and even with a NES teacher. She, however, regretted that the teacher only taught her for one semester as she was “rotated” to teach another class. “There was only one native English speaker in the faculty at that time,” Ngoc explained. Her interest in teaching was not kindled until her first job at a private language centre.

This centre was a famous and long-established centre for young children. At first, Ngoc was admitted only as a teacher assistant for native speaking teachers. For six months, she was trained to manage students during class, put students in groups and monitor their performance. She also attended various workshops about teaching methods and practical techniques while observing other teachers’ teaching, and preparing lesson plans. Finally, after Ngoc had conducted several demonstration lessons, and had proved that she could manage the students, she was given her first class. Ngoc considered this six-month experience an important milestone in her career.

> I shared with my mother that I valued those six months much more than the whole four years in the teacher-training program. It was during that time when I, through first-hand experience, realised the joyfulness and challenges of teaching. I was taught **about** teaching at the university, and went to the practicum to observe **how** teaching was conducted. The centre taught me **how** to teach. I could try out different teaching techniques, and used English in real life to work with native speakers. [N137.T49]

Ngoc worked full-time for the centre for four years, and then switched to part-time as she successfully applied for a position in a private primary school. This school was an international collaboration between Vietnam and a foreign country. The main reason for switching to this school was the better pay and welfare. Also important was the fact that she was offered a long-term contract that gave her a sense of security and a stable income. In addition, the school was located just a few blocks from her house while the private language centre was located on the other side of the city. Ngoc considered this change of job the second milestone in her career, as it challenged her to modify her teaching approach from organising fun activities in the classroom to following the various formal procedures of the lesson as required by the new school management board.

> At the private language centre, my style was to have fun, to inspire students to learn. There were no fixed or required steps for each lesson. I just did what I thought would work and learned from trial and error. At this primary school, the teaching needed to be more formal. I could still use games and activities to attract students, yet I had to obey the formal structure of a lesson as required by MOET. For example, I needed to follow the 3P model [Presentation- Practice- Production]. Also there was a fixed amount of knowledge to cover in each lesson, so there was less room for flexibility and creativity. There were also more classroom observations, teacher competitions, and various kinds of reports to complete. On top of that, I had to fulfil various non-teaching-related responsibilities. [N138.T49]

After one year of working in the primary school, Ngoc had to quit the private language centre because of the mounting workload. She sometimes missed the experience at the centre but added that her health and time for family were more important. At the time of the interview, Ngoc had no plan to switch to another job. She reflected that the more she taught, the more she liked the job.

> Probably I will be a teacher until the day I retire, maybe even after I retire. At first, I did not like the idea of teaching at all. It is perhaps my destiny. My parents pushed me into the training program, and my first job at the language centre somehow piqued my interest. Perhaps that experience transformed me. I can't say I love teaching. Once in a while, especially during the first few years, I sometimes did consider quitting the profession, but I just cannot. The more I teach, the more I enjoy it. Up till now, I still enjoy teaching. Perhaps that will not change in the near future. [N140.T49]

### Teaching context: A small but modern private school

At the time of the interview, Ngoc was only teaching at the private primary school where she had been working for about two years. The school was located in one of the new but most prosperous suburbs of Hanoi. As an international collaboration between Vietnam and a foreign country, the school was of a small size but had excellent infrastructure and modern teaching facilities. In comparison with other public and private schools, this international school charged a much higher annual fee, but it boasted an integrated curriculum that brought an overseas learning quality and experience to the Vietnamese context.

There were only about 300 students, just a fifth of the average enrolments in other schools. These students registered in either the Enhanced Quality or the International programs. While a normal school has four to five periods of English a week, this international school had eight to nine. The Enhanced Quality program offered six periods a week taught by a Vietnamese teacher plus two periods instructed by a native speaker. The International program offered six periods a week with a native English teacher plus three periods taught by a Vietnamese teacher. There were four Vietnamese teachers of English and three native English teachers. The native speakers were on yearly contracts while the Vietnamese teachers had permanent positions.

Ngoc was satisfied with the working environment as she had the opportunity to work closely with both native English speakers from England, America or Australia and non-native English teachers from other countries such as Singapore, and the Philippines. Another advantage was that the school offered regular professional development activities. Every year, the school hired experts from a teacher training university to introduce teaching techniques and help them revise and improve their English proficiency.

> The school management board was very supportive. If there are some workshops or conferences related to teaching, they will let us know and arrange for us to participate. They often invite experts in teacher training to help us develop professionally. Last year we participated in a short course about phonetics and pronunciation. The native English teachers also joined the workshop. The expert explained the differences between American, British and Australian pronunciation and many different accents. Then we practised together. Some of us had trouble getting the pronunciation right, but it was still very helpful. Not many schools can offer such kinds of training. [N141.T49]

In contrast to other schools, English teachers in this international school were not assigned the role of a form teacher. However, they were still required to be present at the school throughout the school day. Ngoc taught 17 periods weekly, and spent the rest of her working hours on preparing lesson plans, marking students' assignments, writing comments for their parents, and finishing other paperwork. The school hired a retired expert in teacher training to check lesson plans almost monthly. She observed the teaching sessions, commented on lesson plans, and even checked the suitability of the assigned homework for students. Ngoc also had to prepare all the other notebooks and records as required by MOET. She was mostly happy with the current working experience but annoyed with these “meaningless duties”.

My mother-in-law was often confused as she saw me bringing the job home. She sarcastically asked me why a primary teacher had that many reports to compose. She just could not understand, and I could only tell her that was the school's and MOET's policy. [N142.T49]

### Language learning history and development activities

The narrative now turns to Ngoc's English learning history. She was born and grew up in a poor rural province where she completed her primary and secondary education. English was introduced into the curriculum only at the end of her lower secondary school. Her English teacher was trained as a teacher of Russian, and her class was his first time teaching English. Ngoc did not recall much of his teaching, and she remembered she did not like the subject. At upper secondary school, during her preparation for the university entrance examinations, Ngoc started to seriously consider learning English, mainly because she did not excel at Chemistry and Physics.[1] At the end of grade 11, Ngoc enrolled in a private language class offered by a good teacher at her school. Most of the time in this class was spent on sample tests from the previous matriculation exams. There were no speaking or listening activities. Three months before the exam, Ngoc travelled to Hanoi alone and stayed with her grandparents while attending a preparation course offered by a famous university lecturer of English to prepare for the most high-stakes test in her life. The lecturer had the same approach as her previous tutor, but there were many more students in the class, and she started to feel stressed.

There were nearly a hundred students in a small room with just two overhead fans. We were sitting shoulder to shoulder. It was scorching hot. The teacher rushed into the classroom just to give us handfuls of copies of sample tests and handouts. We were left alone for the next hour and a half to do them, and then she would come back and read aloud the answers. Sometimes she stopped to explain the difficult structures or new words. She would then quickly leave the classroom, perhaps to teach a different class. [N143.T49]

Ngoc successfully passed the test that year, and was admitted into the university's hostel where she shared a room with eight other students from different northern provinces. Together they developed productive skills of English. At first, Ngoc found the new

[1] There are different streams for the national university entrance exams, each with three subjects. Two popular options are Group A with Mathematics, Chemistry, and Physics, and Group D with English, Mathematics, and Literature.

experience challenging but at the same time, she was fascinated by being able to use the language to communicate.

> [At secondary school] I studied to get all the answers right. At university, I was taught to express myself in English, to communicate with other people. We listened to the news together, and practised delivering presentations. I liked the group work discussion, the debating team, and especially the role-play activities. We had so much fun. English became so lively, and fun to study. [N144.T49]

After graduation, Ngoc did not spend much time working on her English. She got more involved in managing students' affairs and taking care of her small child. She admitted that teaching English at the primary level did not require her to have a higher proficiency of English than her current level. She no longer practised IELTS or TOEFL tests as she often used to do during her bachelor study. Yet, thanks to her working environment, Ngoc had plenty of opportunities to use English with native speakers. Perhaps the frequent communication with these teachers explained her high score for speaking and listening in the MOET's B2 standard tests.

Although she satisfies MOET's requirements of teachers' English proficiency, Ngoc commented that the standard perhaps should only be applied for those teachers in large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh.

> For Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh [cities], I agree that teachers must meet this standard. Both teachers and students have more opportunities to use English here [Hanoi]. Just a few kilometres out of the city, it is a completely different situation. Last week, I participated in a professional development workshop with a group of teachers from some schools in Ha Tay. Most teachers had difficulties making themselves understood during the group discussion. [N145.T49]

At the time of the interview, Ngoc did not have any plans for language development. She praised both her previous and current work places as they successfully created friendly and supportive environments for her language development. She claimed that in such environments, she did not need to be too conscious about her language learning.

> I don't have to make plans to practise as I use English daily. We [native English and Vietnamese teachers] are all required to be here throughout the day, so I have plenty of time with them. We chat about almost everything. There are cultural differences, but we get along just fine. [N146.T49]

For Ngoc, it was also through teaching that she recognised her weaknesses and felt the need to improve. She recalled that she sometimes could not find the right words or phrases to explain things for the students. Yet she considered that was a normal experience of a non-native teacher, and she referred to these times as “hiccups” during her lesson. As she was aware of them and dealt with them immediately, the “hiccups” would be cured and disappeared.

> I was teaching students how to order food in a restaurant. They asked about some dishes for which I couldn’t recall the English equivalent. There were also new words for me. I had to use the dictionary on my phone, and tried to learn them right away. Next lesson, I wouldn’t have the same problem. [N147.T49]

Despite these “hiccups”, Ngoc did not have any routine or fixed time allocated for English proficiency development. She attributed this to the lack of time and the heavy workload.

> At university I studied English semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, but they are not of much use for my daily teaching. I have forgotten most of them by now. On the other hand, I also have bettered my speaking and listening skills in comparison with the time I was in the [teacher-training] program. I am too busy now, so I can’t set aside time just for practicing reading and writing. It would be weird to sit down and practise writing now. At university, I was forced to use English on a regular basis, so I practised. Now, on a beautiful day, it is hard to sit still and do the exercises. I prefer to have some rest. I have too much work, so it is tiring. Some people are determined and have plans for language practice. Most people, I think, are just like me. [N148.T49]

While Ngoc did not feel the need to improve her English proficiency, she was considering enrolling in a MA program. Despite her dissatisfaction with the pre-service training program, she considered it was important to be connected to the experts in the university and to learn more of the “theoretical side of teaching”. Plus, with a MA, she might even get a better job.

This last narrative of this chapter portrays Ngoc who also became a language teacher by accident. She turned out to be a successful teacher thanks to the training she received at the private language centre where she got her first job. Her narrative discloses the limits of her pre-service teacher education in contrast to the practical and effective training at the international school where she was working at the time of the interview.

### 8.3 Emergent themes from the narratives

The narratives so far have revealed how the five participants became teachers, their English learning histories, and English proficiency development activities. These teachers had different initial reasons to join the profession. Kim's career choice was pushed by family-related influences. She had been trained and had worked as an interpreter, but then chose teaching as a fall-back career after her marriage. Hoa was directed toward the profession due to her failure in the university entrance exam. Teaching was a temporary job for her at first. Yet, during the practicum she found the joy of teaching and since then, was passionate about her job. An was influenced by her parents who not only guided her into the teacher training program but also found her a job. Ly's career choice was driven by intrinsic motivations and self-perceptions regarding her personality and teaching abilities. Ngoc pursued the profession mainly due to the task return, or the benefits of teaching as a secure job with a stable income, and a high social status.

The first two narratives about Kim and Hoa demonstrate that intrinsic motivations for professional development including English learning can be generated and strengthened by career achievements, colleagues' approval and respect, and the profession's social values (e.g., teaching for the children). The third narrative, about An, confirms the various frustrations and difficulties challenging teachers' English proficiency development including a low salary, a heavy workload, and an exam-driven language learning history and professional development. These challenges have been found during the semi-structured interviews (see chapter 7). The last two narratives, about Ly and Ngoc, disclose the limitations of pre-service teacher education and portray the contrast between different teaching contexts namely public, international schools, and a private language centre.

The narratives agree with the findings of the survey and semi-structured interviews that were presented in previous chapters. The five participants doubted the practicality and appropriateness of MOET's B2 standard. Four of five participants lacked a specific routine or plan just for language development. They claimed that it was mainly through teaching and preparation for teaching that they practised and improved their English proficiency. Only Ly, the youngest participant, also the only one working full-time in a private language centre, maintained a regular habit of English practice that she had developed during her pre-service training. The narratives provide new perspectives to the findings with three emergent themes, namely the various motivations driving English proficiency developments, the differences between teaching contexts, and the interaction among

numerous factors influencing teachers' English practice. The following sections discuss these three themes in more detail.

### 8.3.1 Motivations for English proficiency development

The first theme that emerged from the narratives is that the five participants had different motivations for English proficiency development. These reasons concur with the three main motivational factors driving teachers' English proficiency development as identified through the semi-structured interviews (see section 7.2.3): to satisfy personal interests, to maintain face and meet MOET's requirements, and to improve teaching. Ly's narrative shows that an important reason for her English proficiency development was to satisfy her thirst for knowledge of the language and culture. She valued the opportunities to use English with her classmates during pre-service education and with her colleagues at the private language centre. An's motivations for English learning were driven by high-stakes tests including the national university entrance exam and MOET's B2 standard test. For Kim, Hoa and Ngoc, their English proficiency development was to further improve their teaching. In addition to the three main motivations, the narratives show that these five teachers had other reasons for English proficiency development. While Ly studied hard so as to satisfy her personal interest in the English-speaking cultures, she also wanted to be better prepared for her SAT courses and future job hunting. Kim was practising TOEFL and IELTS materials so as to open her own language centre, and Hoa was aiming at bettering her role as the organiser of the student exchange program. An was desperate to find a job with higher pay and a more supportive work environment while Ngoc hoped to get a better position after finishing her MA program despite her satisfaction with the current working context.

Of the various motivational causes, the five narratives reveal that test wash-back is an important factor driving participants' English learning. All five participants' English learning at secondary schools and in pre-service teacher education programs were exam-driven. For An and Kim, this phenomenon continued to be true during their in-service training. An needed to pass the MOET's B2 standard assessment and score higher in IELTS while Kim's goal was to become more familiar with TOEFL and IELTS tests.

The five participants' motivations for English improvement also changed over time according to the different stages in their career (see section 3.3.2). At the beginning of their careers, both Kim and Hoa strived to excel in their teaching contexts. Both successfully completed their postgraduate education and were acknowledged by their

colleagues and students. At that stage, their main motivation to improve was to attain and then maintain their status as successful language teachers. After a decade of teaching, their motivations changed. As Kim was preparing to offer new courses (TOEFL and IELTS) at her private language centre, she honed her language skills, spending more time and effort to familiarise herself with the two tests. Meanwhile, Hoa was trying to advance her career in order to be included in the school management board. As she became more involved in organising student exchange programs, she practised productive skills for better communication with colleagues in foreign schools. Ly, the youngest participant, was in the early stages of her career; therefore, it was unsurprising that she had a very positive attitude towards professional development. Ly's motivation to improve was to advance her teaching ability and satisfy her interest in the English speaking cultures. She practised her English so as to be able to teach different courses (e.g., TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, SAT), and to be recognised as a good language teacher. She strived to prove herself capable of teaching and longed for recognition from her colleagues. Then, as she became better and gained more experience, her motivation started to be more pragmatic as she prepared herself for career advancement (i.e., to get a long-term contract position at a good school or university). To be well prepared for that goal, she enrolled in the postgraduate program.

### 8.3.2 Differences between teaching contexts

The second theme that emerged from the narratives was that there were differences between teaching contexts regarding the amount and kinds of support and training programs for professional development and the availability and type of community of practice. The narratives show that the public schools provided less support in comparison with the private, international school and private language centre. An directly expressed her clear disappointment with the minimal level of support provided by the public school where she was working. She complained that there was no orientation training for new teachers. While Hoa was satisfied with her colleagues and the public school's training and support, she was clearly in favour of the private language centre's working environment and support programs. She described the centre as a friendlier and more encouraging language learning community. Ngoc and Ly both praised the private language centres for having native English teachers and offering regular professional development programs. The private international school where Ngoc worked also provided better and more diversified types of support than the public institutions.

The public, international schools and private language centre also generated different

communities of practice, or communities for language learning. The differences could be seen most clearly in Hoa's and Ngoc's narratives. Hoa preferred and praised the community at the language centre in which she did not have to worry about competition or losing face. Ngoc described the support and training she received at the language centre as essential to her professional development. She considered them more useful than her pre-service teacher education. The narratives illustrate how the participants enjoyed participating in communities for language learning regardless of whether they were formed during or after their university study. Hoa, for example, recalled fondly how she went to English speaking clubs to meet people with the same interest in learning English. An and Ly both spoke highly of their university classmates who helped each other to progress with their English proficiency. While An was disappointed that her English learning group was broken up as her classmates were separated after graduation, Ly found herself in a new community formed at her work place. Ngoc, perhaps, was the luckiest participant, as she never found herself without an English-speaking environment. Right after graduation, she was admitted into another language learning community at the private language centre where she worked. After quitting the centre to work full time at the international primary school, she was surrounded again by NES colleagues. The narratives also illustrated the benefits of having native speakers in the communities for language learning. Ngoc proudly specified that her work context allowed her to converse daily with native speakers. Therefore, for her, English proficiency development was natural as an implicit part of her teaching practice. Other teachers, Ly and Hoa, also acknowledged the benefits of having native English teachers in their teaching team.

### 8.3.3 Close interactions among factors influencing teachers' English proficiency development

The final theme relates to the close interactions among factors influencing the participants' English proficiency development. Section 7.2.4 reported four main challenges to participants' English learning. These challenges were the lack of available time, the exam-driven EFL learning culture, participants' lack of self-study skills and career commitment, and the limited encouragements and support available for English proficiency development. The narratives concur with the semi-structured interview findings, and further that these challenges were made up of several interrelated factors. These factors can be grouped into three categories, namely the personal, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges to participants' English proficiency development.

The personal challenges refer to those difficulties most directly originating from the participants' personal perceptions of language learning, attitudes towards language proficiency development, language learning history, personality, and other individual or family-related factors. The institutional challenges refer to those difficulties mainly shaped by the participants' working context, such as the staff structure and schools' available resources, the curriculum, teacher training policy, and test wash-back. Finally, the socio-cultural factors refer to the wider social context of Vietnam that the participants had almost no influence over. These factors comprise the lack of environments for using English and English learning communities, in addition to the desire for exaggerated achievements.

The so-called desire for exaggerated achievements pervades all Vietnamese society, including the educational system. Here the term refers to the phenomenon whereby every school and every teacher is under pressure to attain excellent achievements in order to fulfil students', parents', MOET's, and society's expectations. In its worst manifestation, academic misconducts are easily tolerated and records of schools and students may even be embellished with false statistics that are often very far from reality. One apparent consequence of this phenomenon is that examination results are of great importance to schools, teachers, students and their families. Good schools are expected to have highly-qualified teachers and competent students, which means students are expected to do well in examinations to maintain their families', teachers', schools' and their own face. As paper-based assessments, designed to test only grammatical knowledge, are still popular, as clearly manifested in the lack of listening and speaking components in most examinations, including the high-stakes university entrance and graduation examinations, teachers are forced to drill students for these tests and neglect the development of communicative competence. In addition, as teachers are assessed based on students' performance, in order to keep their jobs and maintain their reputation, they must use the time that they should spend on professional development to manage student behaviour and participation in different school and public non-academic activities. This was discussed in the previous chapter as the responsibilities of the form teacher. For example, teachers are normally assigned to class-management tasks involving being responsible for student behaviour, class discipline and academic performance: classes are rated and ranked, praised or criticised at the beginning of every week of a semester.

The desire for exaggerated achievements in the Vietnamese educational context leads to extra efforts put into preparing impressive documentation including lesson plans and student records, organising large scale but impractical or useless activities. Hence, it puts

extra pressure on the teachers, and additional and otherwise meaningless tasks on their schedule as reflected in the following quotes:

> As a primary teacher, and as my school is in the process of being assessed as a national standardised school, not only do I have to draft many records and reports for this year but also need to rework those from previous years. All these must be compiled by hand, in writing. I must say that sometimes I am very annoyed having to endure this pile of paperwork plus organising useless extra-curricular activities. …. Every time I am being assessed, I have to lug around all these reports, even have to bring these home and have no time left for family. [N149.T28]

> Just in August alone, I have counted 16 kinds of schedule and meeting books. … I could not remember the number of schedules I have drafted. [N150.T19]

These quotes illustrate the overlap between all three categories of challenges. The desire for exaggerated achievements from the socio-cultural category can result in negative wash-back effects and an unbearable amount of unnecessary administrative paperwork at the institutional category. These, in turn, also partly cause teachers' lack of available time documented in the personal category. As the borderlines between these three categories are unclear as the challenges are inextricably interwoven and overlapped, the following model, figure 8.3, is proposed to illustrate the interconnectedness of the factors encumbering teachers' English proficiency development.

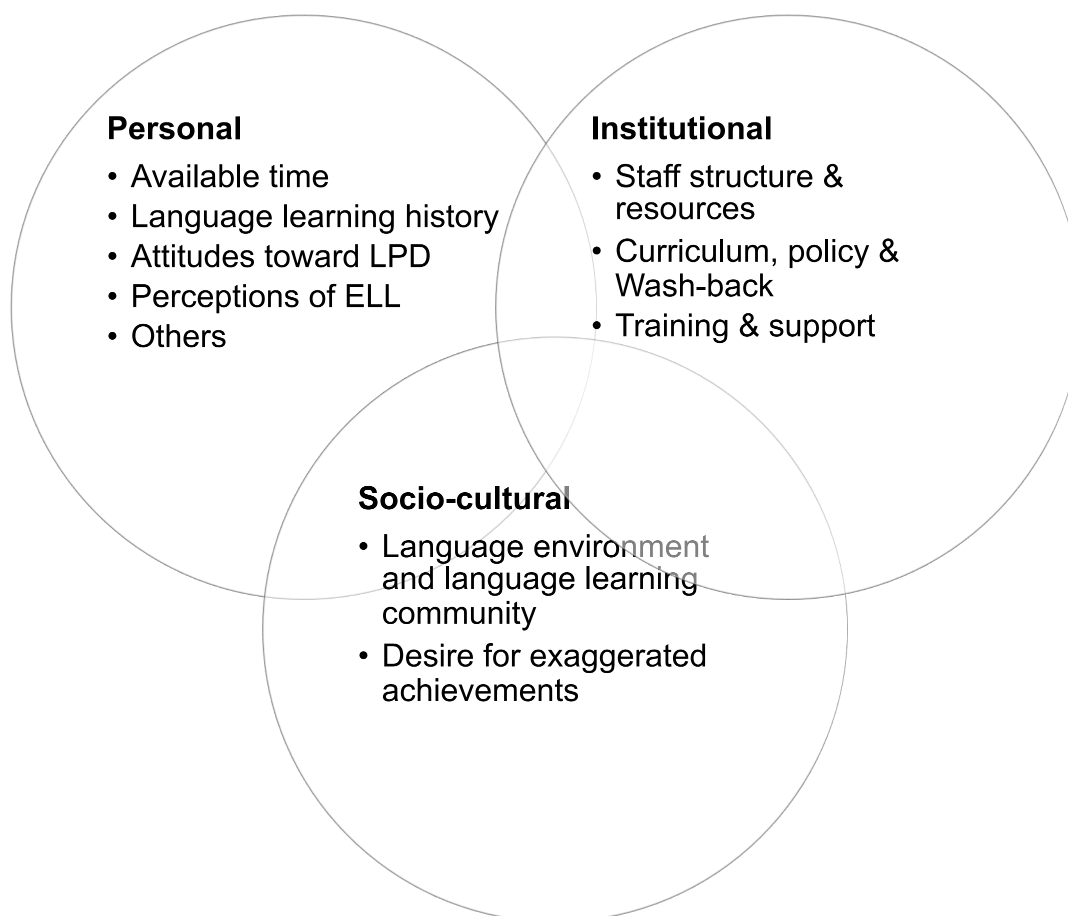



***Figure 8.3.*** **Interrelated challenges to teachers' English proficiency development**

The five narratives provide vivid illustrations regarding how some factors permeate all three circles of challenges. For example, Kim's narrative reveals that at in the beginning of her career, she was struggling financially to make ends meet. Consequently, she had to have a second job: running an online business selling clothes. However, managing the business was time-consuming, and it took away her time for professional development. An similarly complained that she lacked time for language practice and attributed that to her low salary and heavy workload that comprised both teaching and non-teaching-related responsibilities. In addition, she criticised the lack of support and guidance available at her workplace. Kim's and An's narratives are not unique as financial difficulty is common in the Vietnamese context. Many participants complained about their low salary (see chapter 7). Hence, an inadequate salary policy at the socio-cultural level can negatively influence the

building and maintaining of professional community at the institutional level, and teachers' limited time for professional development at the personal level. As the Vietnamese proverb goes, "đói thì đầu gối phải bò" [When hungry, even the knees have to start crawling], it is unsurprising that poorly paid teachers like Kim and An diverted their attention and dedication to feed their empty stomachs.

Another factor permeating all circles is the lack of environments for English use that can demotivate participants to spend time developing English proficiency. Ngoc admitted that she spent less time working on her English after graduating from her pre-service training program. An also disclosed that she did not feel an immediate need to improve English proficiency after she passed the B2 test. She therefore did not have a specific plan for English proficiency development. Ngoc's and An's behaviours match the semi-structured interviewed participants' responses. As English was mainly used in class, and the success of English teaching was solely measured through students' written test scores, these participants were reluctant to improve their communicative skills that were regarded as impractical for their teaching.

Another factor that has powerful influence across three circles of challenges is the desire for exaggerated achievements at the socio-cultural level. This phenomenon results in negative wash-back effects at the institutional level that in turn influenced teachers' language learning history and their teaching practice at the personal circle. All five participants' language learning histories were characterised by a strong emphasis on grammar and reading. This was the consequence of the deeply rooted importance of high-stakes exams. As grammar-based examinations were popular as clearly manifested in the high-stakes university entrance and secondary graduation examinations, Kim, Hoa, An and Ngoc were forced to drill students the same way they were drilled for these tests while neglecting the development of communicative competence.

### 8.4 Overall summary

This chapter focuses on five Vietnamese EFL teachers working in different contexts. Each teacher was portrayed via a narrative that comprised three main parts relating to their career, teaching context, and language learning history. The narratives agree with the findings of the survey and semi-structured interviews that there are various personal and contextual factors influencing participants' English proficiency development. Three themes emerged across the narratives, namely the different motivations driving English proficiency developments, the differences between teaching contexts, and the interaction among

factors influencing participants' English practice. These themes call for a holistic approach to address the challenging problem of improving Vietnamese teachers' English proficiency. The next chapter will further discuss such an approach.

# Chapter 9: Moving toward a holistic approach to the issue of EFL teachers' English proficiency

The current project examines Vietnamese primary and secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions of their English language proficiency (PLP) in comparison with the level they perceived as required for their teaching (PRLP) and the CEFR's B2 standard mandated by MOET. The research also documents teachers' English learning via their narratives and identifies the challenges hindering and the opportunities facilitating their English proficiency development. The project employs a mixed-methods design that combines a self-rated English proficiency survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry. The results and discussion are presented in chapters 6-8. The study finds interesting and partly unexpected answers to the two research questions. This chapter discusses and locates these findings within the field of assessing and developing EFL teachers' English proficiency.

## 9.1 Major findings

### 9.1.1 What are the Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their English proficiency and responses towards MOET's English policy? (RQ 1)

The results show that in-service EFL teachers were aware of their low English proficiency. As reported in section 6.2, the average rating of PLP is 2.76 (*SD* = .23), lower than the CEFR's B2 level mandated by MOET for primary and lower secondary EFL teachers. This finding supports the results of MOET's assessment of EFL teachers' English proficiency (see section 2.5), and resonates with previous studies and the warnings that most teachers of English in Vietnam failed to meet MOET's requirements of English proficiency (e.g., Le & Do, 2012; N. H. Nguyen & Dudzik, 2013). It also concurs with the low English proficiency of NNES teachers in similar contexts in Asia (Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009; Nunan, 2003; T. Tang, 2007; Woo, 2000).

Despite participants' low PLP, it is encouraging for educators, EFL teacher trainers, and policy makers that many of these EFL teachers continuously strived to improve despite the various challenges hindering their English proficiency development. All participants had a positive attitude towards English proficiency development and considered English learning as a life-long process (see section 7.2.1). One noteworthy finding is how the interviews and narratives render teachers' attitudes toward English proficiency development as dynamic and changing according to the different episodes in their teaching career and

language learning history. Attitudinal changes seem to accord with purposes of learning the language and types of language learning environment: at secondary school, during pre-service teacher training, after graduation and as part of professional development programs. Some participants were less fond of learning English at secondary school, or even during their university learning. Yet, it is possible to discover, maintain and even strengthen positive attitudes toward English proficiency development if participants experienced success, felt motivated by their practicum or first job experience, or found the purpose of their teaching (see chapter 8).

The study also uncovers a tension between participants' two identities, as a language learner and language teacher (see section 7.2.1). As teachers, they consider their English proficiency as adequate for their teaching practice. Meanwhile, as learners, they wish to further improve as part of their life-long learning. This dual identity plays a role in shaping participants' rating of PLP and PRLP.

**Is there a gap between the two levels, PLP and PRLP?**

The majority of participants rated their PLP higher than PRLP in all language skills (see section 6.2). This result is unexpected as it starkly contrasts with previous studies conducted in apparently similar EFL contexts (e.g., Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009; Tang, 2007, and Woo, 2000). EFL teachers in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China believed that they needed a higher level of English proficiency in order to teach effectively; hence, it was argued that these teachers' perceptions fuelled their motivation to improve. In addition, EFL teachers in these contexts rated their PLP of receptive skills (reading and listening) higher than productive skills (writing and speaking) (Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009; Park, 2006; T. Tang, 2007; Woo, 2000). The current study's participants rated their reading skills the highest, followed by writing, speaking, and listening respectively.

The similarly low rating of speaking PLP in Vietnam and the countries mentioned above can be explained by the nature of their contexts where English is not used in everyday life. Due to the exam-driven EFL learning culture (see section 7.2.4), both teachers' and students' primary concern is to score highly in English exams rather than to develop communicative ability. Students who do not plan to sit for an English test as part of the university entrance examination are not keen to learn and use English as they concentrate on studying subjects for their prospective university. However, in comparison with these apparently similar EFL contexts, opportunities to use English and access to English learning materials in Vietnam are more limited as the country only began its international

integration in the late 1980s. Especially in rural areas, both EFL teachers and students have limited exposure to English and lack access to English learning materials such as CD players and online resources (see sections 7.2.2 and 7.2.3). It is therefore reasonable that participants rated their PLP for listening (rather than speaking as in more developed EFL contexts) the lowest of the four language skills.

The unexpected nature of the gap between participants' PLP and PRLP reflects participants' belief that their currently low English proficiency did not impair their teaching practice. This belief results from participants' teaching of English as a content subject, and as preparation for examinations rather than communication (see section 7.2.2). Many participants, especially primary level teachers, did not believe that high or advanced language proficiency would be needed for teaching elementary EFL. Participants believed that there were other equal and even more important factors than EFL teachers' English proficiency. These are teachers' familiarity with language teaching methods, passion for teaching, empathy for students, and efforts in preparation for teaching. These factors were acknowledged by EFL teachers in previous studies conducted in Vietnam and similar contexts (e.g., Kang, Son, & Lee, 2006; Lee, 2009).

**What are the participants' opinions of the CEFR's B2 standard prescribed by MOET?**

The present study provides evidence regarding a mismatch between MOET and participants as to what levels of proficiency are necessary for teaching English in Vietnam. The overall PRLP (*M* = 2.38, *SD* = .32) was found to be lower than the level mandated by MOET (CEFR's B2 or 4.0- see section 6.2.3). This result concurs with the views held by Vietnamese EFL teachers in previous studies by Le (2015) and Vu (2013).

The present study also identifies a mismatch between the choice of CEFR, a communication-based framework, and the Vietnamese exam-driven EFL learning culture with a grammar-, reading- and writing- based approach. The participants expressed their wishes that the NFL Project 2020 should explain more clearly their application of the CEFR framework in Vietnam while taking into consideration the social, cultural and economic differences across regions of the country (see section 7.2.2). The participants' voices concur with Vu's (2013) suggestion that MOET's requirements should be set with reference to contextual differences. The study also supports what Le (2015) pointed out regarding a large gap between the economically developed and less developed areas in Vietnam. In the former, schools, especially private and international ones, might have

state-of-the-art multimedia language labs and audio-visual facilities while most schools in the latter have to make do with basic furniture and a simple blackboard. It is therefore advisable that MOET's language policy be more flexible and context-sensitive so as not to impose unattainable goals for EFL teachers in rural areas with limited resources. This suggestion is in line with what O'Sullivan (2002) has argued, that failure of policy makers to consider the realities of teaching can lead to unpractical requirements beyond teachers' capacity.

To sum up, participants rated their PLP higher than PRLP and MOET's mandated level of English proficiency. Despite the gap between PLP and PRLP, participants were found to have a positive attitude toward English proficiency development. They embraced MOET's training course as an opportunity to join a language learning community and improve English proficiency. Thus, despite the differences in comparison with similar studies in other Asian contexts, the present study findings lead to the same conclusion as Butler (2004) who called for more systemic support so teachers can address their need to improve English language proficiency. The study however emphasises the need to justify the adoption of CEFR in the Vietnamese context and calls for more flexible implementation of the mandated levels with regard to different contextual differences throughout the country.

### 9.1.2 How do the participants describe their English proficiency development? (RQ 2)

**What are the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency development?**

The present study suggests that in-service EFL teachers' English proficiency development can be conceptualised as a model with four continua. These continua can cater for the differences between participants and also allow shifting movements on these axes as participants' English proficiency development activities and motivations change over time (see sections 8.2-8.3.1).

Spontaneous ------------------------------------------ Well-planned
Self-initiated ------------------------------------------ Externally-imposed
Traditional ------------------------------------------ Internet-mediated
Individual ------------------------------------------ Collaborative

***Figure 9.1.*** **Characteristics of teachers' English proficiency development**

The first continuum describes two types of English proficiency development, namely spontaneous and well-planned English proficiency development. As discussed in section 7.2.3, most participants did not have specific plans to continuously improve their English proficiency, and very few devoted a fixed amount of time in their weekly schedule for language development. This spontaneous nature of English proficiency development is due to participants' lack of self-study skills, heavy workload, and perceptions of English learning as a natural process as part of everyday life activities including teaching (see sections 7.2.3- 7.2.4). The nature of participants' English proficiency development shifts along this continuum according to the different stages in their English learning history. For instance, during pre-service education, Ngoc actively used English with her roommates but after graduation she did not believe in the need to be too conscious about her language learning (see section 8.2.5). She claimed to learn new things as she came across them either during teaching or in everyday life. Hence, the nature of her English proficiency development shifted from the well-planned to the spontaneous end of the continuum. Meanwhile, it is evident that some participants, to a varying degree, took initiatives to plan and regulate their own learning. Ly's and Hoa's narratives provide inspiring examples of in-service EFL teachers striving to improve English proficiency so as to become better for the good of their students. They were both active in seeking and participating in English-using environments, and making plans to pursue postgraduate education.

The second continuum describes participants' motivations for English learning, which can be self-initiated or externally imposed, or both. English proficiency development is self-initiated when participants' English learning is driven by their intrinsic motivations such as personal interests and the need to improve teaching. Participants' English proficiency development can also be imposed by external forces including MOET's English proficiency requirements and professional development programs. Throughout a teacher's English learning history and professional career, his/her English proficiency development can shift from the self-initiated to the externally imposed ends of the continuum, and sometimes take the middle position. An, one of the narrative inquiry participants, reflected on her English learning and described it as mostly externally imposed. Her purpose of English proficiency development was exam-driven rather than to fulfil communicative needs or satisfy personal interest (see section 8.2.3).

The third and fourth continua refer to participants' English learning activities. As previously discussed in sections 7.2.3-7.2.4, the lack of resources, environments for English use, and language learning communities results in the dominance of traditional and individual

learning activities over online and collaborative learning activities. Some examples of the traditional and individual activities are doing sample tests, reading English newspapers and magazines, listening to English songs, and learning new words. Collaborative learning activities involve using the language with students in class, or with colleagues during professional development activities, and pursuing further education related to language teaching or training workshops offered by MOET and DOET.

To sum up, throughout the participants' language learning history and teaching career, the nature of their English proficiency development and the dominant learning activities can shift along the four continua. For the majority of participants, their English learning is characterised as spontaneous with traditional and individual language learning activities. It is therefore located on the left end of each continuum in figure 9.1. Their motivations for English proficiency development, however, take the middle position and shift along the second continuum as they learn English to satisfy personal interests, improve teaching, and meet MOET's requirements.

**What are the challenges to participants' English learning?**

The semi-structured interviews uncovered four main factors responsible for participants' low English proficiency (see section 7.2.4). These factors are the lack of practice time, the strongly exam-driven EFL learning culture, lack of skills for self-study and career commitment, and the limited encouragement and support available from MOET, teacher training institutions, and their schools. Each main factor comprises sub-factors as summarised in table 9.1. These factors all have powerful influences, and many of these were identified by previous studies. Le (2002, 2011) and Hoang (2008) argued that negative test wash-back effects a deep-rooted challenge in Vietnamese education. The exam-driven EFL learning culture is also often discussed in the literature. To (2010) and T.T. Tran (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) pointed out that the typical teaching method in Vietnam remains that of the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students to prepare for examinations. This type of teaching is also often referred to as traditional form-focus instruction (Hoang, 2008), grammar-driven teaching (T. H. Nguyen, Warren, & Fehring, 2014), teaching for examination and grammar structure teaching focus (T. T. Tran, 2013a).

**Table 9.1** ***Factors hindering teachers' English proficiency development***

| Main factors | Sub-factors |
|---|---|
| Lack of available time | Amount of teaching and administration work<br>Form teacher responsibilities<br>Part-time job or extra-curricular tuition<br>Family-related responsibilities |
| Exam-driven EFL learning culture | Wash-back of high-stakes examinations<br>Participants' EFL learning histories |
| Lack of skills for self-study and career commitment | Subpar and variable quality of EFL teacher education<br>Lack of career commitment |
| Limited encouragement and support | Limited support<br>Lack of communities of practice<br>Lack of environment for English use |

One contribution of the present study is how the five participants' narratives in chapter 8 have illustrated the close interactions among these above-mentioned factors. The study proposed a model with three overlapping circles to illustrate this interconnectedness of three groups of challenges encumbering EFL teachers' English proficiency development, namely the personal, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges (see figure 8.3). The three circles overlap to illustrate the complicated interactions and to indicate that there are factors permeating all three categories. One of these is the teachers' perception of the main goal of English teaching as helping students to pass high-stakes examinations rather than developing communicative abilities (see section 7.2.2). The rigidity of the exam design and the need to have a high pass rate tie English teaching and learning to a focus on forms, facts, and rules rather than communication. This in turn explains why participants were confident to teach with their low English proficiency. It also explains why teachers often spend more time on grammar, vocabulary, and doing practice tests than on improving their speaking and listening proficiency. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they failed to attain CEFR's B2, designed to assess communicative competence.

The present study has manifold implications for teacher education and development. It speaks powerfully to the need for MOET and DOET to devise comprehensive and long-term support plans to address one of the inherent challenges to improve the quality of English teaching in Vietnam: the low English proficiency of Vietnamese EFL teachers. The

strong inter-relation between factors of the three circles of challenges (i.e., personal, institutional, and socio-cultural) demands a holistic approach based on a comprehensive understanding of teachers' English practices and the difficulties challenging their English proficiency development. This could be gained by interpreting objective assessment results in conjunction with self-assessment and reflective activities such as narrative inquiry. Meanwhile, professional development courses should complement and support this process by providing training and materials promoting teacher autonomy in professional development together with establishing an environment for language use. These issues will be discussed in the recommendation sections below.

### 9.2 Assessing and understanding EFL teachers' English proficiency

As described in chapter 2, during the first stages of NFL Project 2020, MOET mandated different standards of English language proficiency for EFL teachers at different levels and published the Vietnamese English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF). It then coordinated different universities across the nation to examine in-service EFL teachers' English proficiency. These measures are significant steps, as it is important to assess teachers' current level of English proficiency to see if they possess the mandated B2 level, and also to identify their weakness and needs in order to design a comprehensive, appropriate and feasible development plan. The present study provides three general recommendations to further enhance the current assessment policy before discussing two issues of assessing and interpreting EFL teachers' English proficiency following a holistic approach.

Firstly, transparency in setting up a language policy would be desirable. The adoption and adaptation of CEFR, a framework set up in a very communicative-based context, into the Vietnamese context with a strong exam-driven learning culture should have been better justified to educators, researchers and teachers themselves. The choice of CEFR's B2 standard as a mandated proficiency level for primary and lower secondary EFT teachers could have been more clearly explained. As shown by the survey results and interviews data, most participants expressed their disagreement with the CEFR's B2 standard (see sections 6.2.5 and 7.2.2). This response was traced back to the popular perception that the main goal of English teaching is not for communication partly due to high-stakes test wash-back. As participants were not provided clear explanations of the NFL Project 2020, it is unsurprising that they questioned its practicality and appropriateness (see excerpt

N24). NFL Project 2020 has now passed the halfway point, so it is urgent and advisable to better inform teachers of the current and any future language assessment policies.

Secondly, it is advisable that the CEFR's B2 standard assessment is implemented without putting unnecessary stresses and burdens on the already overloaded teachers. The introduction and implementation of this test are definitely beneficial, as the results provide valuable information regarding the current state of EFL teachers' English proficiency. However, much care needs to be taken when organising the tests and interpreting the results to prevent serious negative consequences. It is essential to remember that the ultimate goal of assessing teachers' English proficiency is to improve their English competency that in turn should lead to an improvement in the quality of their teaching. The goal of the assessment should not be simply to label these teachers as qualified or under-qualified, because this will demotivate them from teaching and self-improvement. Rather, such assessment needs to be part of a learning process enabling teachers to monitor their own learning.

Thirdly, it is important to address the mismatch between the English proficiency evaluation of EFL teachers and that of students. While the former is based on a communicative framework, the latter still focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and reading. This mismatch partly explains why participants perceived a difference between what they considered as required for teaching and what they saw as important for communication. It also leads to the dual identity tension as EFL teacher and learner (see section 7.2.1). The present study concurs with previous studies (e.g., Hoang, 2008; Le, 2002, 2011; H. H. Pham, 2007) as it presents teachers' constant stress to cope with negative wash-back effects of high-stakes tests (see sections 7.2.4 and 8.2.3). As MOET is determined to improve teachers' and students' communicative abilities as specified in NFL Project 2020, it is high time more radical measures were implemented to change both the curricula and assessment types to be more communicative.

The present study has shown that a combination of self-rated English proficiency survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry can contribute valuable insights from different perspectives that are not available from a single objective English proficiency test conducted by MOET. Teachers should not be represented merely by the statistics of one standardised assessment. They are individuals with different personalities, histories, attitudes, needs, and working contexts. These individual teachers, the main protagonists in educational reforms, should not be left ignored. Rather their voices need to be heard so

that their needs can be catered for in long-term and meaningful support programs. If the ultimate goal of assessment is for learning and if differences between individual teachers are to be considered, it is crucial that MOET, teacher training institutions, and individual researchers join hands to move towards a holistic approach to assess and understand EFL teachers' English proficiency. This study suggests that such an approach entails a combination of different modes of assessment while ensuring that the results are interpreted with regard to the local differences.

### 9.2.1 Assessing EFL teachers' English proficiency

It is important to clarify the purpose of assessing EFL teachers' English proficiency. If assessment is for learning, it is vital that the results are not used to create career barriers or unnecessary burdens but to encourage participants to improve. The ultimate purpose of assessment, in this case, is to better understand participants' English proficiency so as to provide relevant training programs.

From MOET's perspective, it is necessary to implement large-scale standardised tests to survey the English proficiency of the teaching workforce. Currently, MOET is conducting their own objective assessment based on internationally standardised tests (e.g., IELTS and TOEFL). Five regional foreign language centres (RFLC) across the country are responsible for designing and conducting the assessment nation-wide. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, there is no publication either by MOET or these RFLCs introducing and justifying an agreed format of such self-developed tests. This lack of transparency potentially causes inconsistency in test structure, management, and results. Given that the ETCF has been published to bring consistency to teacher education, it is imperative MOET release more information regarding the current and future implemented tests.

As discussed in chapter 3, EFL teachers' English proficiency is an ability that needs to be continuously maintained and developed. Perhaps assessment of teachers' English proficiency should be conducted more frequently to provide teachers with regular feedback on their English proficiency development. This continuous assessment will increase the tests' reliability and validity as it minimises the factors influencing test outcomes such as the health, mood, motivation, test-taking skills of test takers, distracting conditions and interruptions during test administration, biases of the observer, errors on the scoring sheets, or even bad luck (Smith, Teemant, & Pinnegar, 2004), variations in the way tests are designed, rated, and administered (Wigglesworth, 2000), vocabulary, speech rate,

clarity of instructions, prior background knowledge of test takers (Brindley, 1998; Brindley & Slatyer, 2002; Buck, 2001; Dunkel, Henning, & Chaudron, 1993; Flowerdew, 1994).

Standardised tests can offer indications of EFL teachers' general English competency but not specifically their proficiency for teaching (Nakata, 2010). It is beneficial to investigate EFL teacher's English ability for teaching, including classroom language competency, and the capacity to communicate with students in class so that more relevant training can be provided to pre- and in-service teachers. A more appropriate assessment might comprise both general English language proficiency and the language proficiency for teaching. The latter might cover the 12 aspects of English proficiency proposed by Richards (2010) that a language teacher is expected to master in order to teach effectively (see section 3.2.1). Of the five RFLCs in Vietnam, at least one has started developing tests and training programs focusing on classroom English (H. H. Vu, 2014). However, MOET needs to orchestrate a more concerted plan for such tests and programs to be developed, piloted and then implemented on a nation-wide scale.

If MOET's goal is just to discover if the in-service teachers possess the CEFR's B2 mandated level, their current implementation of large-scale standardised tests is enough. If the assessment is for understanding and improving teachers' English proficiency, then a more comprehensive approach is needed. The present study suggests that in addition to frequent standardised tests assessing EFL teachers' English proficiency in general and English proficiency for teaching in particular, it is beneficial to investigate participants' perceptions of their own English proficiency via self-assessment tools. Despite the controversies around the reliability and validity of self-assessment, it is agreed to have many benefits. Some of these are the frequent and relevant feedback provided to learners (Sulivan & Hall, 1997), the ability to motivate and promote learner autonomy (Blanche & Merino, 1989; Gardner, 2000), and the power to involve learners more in the testing and learning process (Shohamy, 2000). It is advantageous to train teachers with self-assessment skills and help them acquire a habit of reflecting on their English practice. These should be an important part of any teacher professional development program. In this way, MOET can engage teachers more in the assessment process while encouraging their autonomy and responsibility in developing their own English proficiency. Thus, self-assessment can contribute to address teachers' lack of skills for self-initiated life-long learning, which has been identified as a cause of teachers' current low English proficiency (see section 7.2.4).

So far, recommendations have been proposed with regard to MOET's large-scale approach to the assessment of teachers' English proficiency. I now argue that teacher training institutions and independent researchers can contribute towards a holistic approach to English proficiency assessment by conducting research on a smaller scale in their local contexts. Teachers' working contexts and accessibility to training and development activities vary considerably throughout the country due to its geographical, social, and economic complexities. Therefore, it is urgent and beneficial that future studies allow a detailed understanding of these contexts so that MOET's policy can be flexibly adapted according to the locality. Future research should analyse qualitative data generated from classroom observations of EFL teachers' language use in class, students' feedback on teachers' English performance, teachers' reflection on their teaching and English learning history and so on.

The combination of MOET's large-scale assessment and smaller-scale research conducted by teacher training institutions and individual researchers is a holistic approach to assess EFL teachers' English proficiency. This approach requires the combination of multiple methods, measures, researchers, theories and perspectives to strengthen research rigor through the triangulation technique (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1979; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The current study illustrates that the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry can strengthen the validity of the interpretation of the data while adding richness and new perspectives (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003). Its unique design, using semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry to supplement the self-rated language proficiency survey, successfully exemplifies how a holistic approach can offer deeper insights into teachers' English proficiency development. The self-assessment results provide an overview of participants' self-rated English competency in comparison with MOET's standardised test. The semi-structured interviews allow participants to justify their responses, reveal their attitudes towards English proficiency development, motivations to practice English, typical language learning activities, and difficulties in English proficiency development. The narratives portray the differences between five individual participants regarding how their language learning histories, motivations to join and stay in the profession, and how their working contexts have influenced their English proficiency development. These three types of data supplement each other, and generate a comprehensive view of the issue of EFL teachers' English proficiency.

In short, the goal of the holistic approach is to acquire a comprehensive understanding in order to arrive at appropriate solutions to improve teachers' language ability. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for MOET, teacher training institutions, and individual researchers to collaborate so that multiple research methods can be used to collect data on a nation-wide scale and also in more localised settings. They also need to dig deeper than the one-off standardised assessment's scores, to trace back to teachers' histories of language learning, to document their language practice, to identify the motivations driving their professional development, and the difficulties they are facing.

### 9.2.2 Interpreting the assessment results

A holistic assessment of teachers' English proficiency can have a powerful influence on their teaching and also English use outside the classroom as it can provide teachers with meaningful feedback for improvement. However it is important to locate and interpret the assessment results with regard to the teachers' working contexts and backgrounds. The results of the current study suggest that the different economic and geographical contexts, and working contexts including public, private schools and private language centres can affect opportunities for English use, attitudes towards English proficiency development, and access to professional development activities. Teachers' English proficiency development activities also can vary according to the stages of career and professional development (see section 8.3). This finding concurs with recent studies relating to NFL Project 2020 such as Le (2015) and Vu (2013).

As there are clear disparities between the conditions within which English is taught across Vietnam (see section 8.3.2), the assessment results should be interpreted while considering the social, cultural, and economic differences across regions. It is crucial to consider these differences while mandating a standard of English proficiency. It is not desirable to compromise by setting a lower standard, but it is perhaps advisable to allow teachers working in rural areas more time to reach the required standard and provide them with more support for professional development.

As argued previously, it is advisable to have a transparent language assessment policy. Teachers should be clearly informed that the purpose of mandating CEFR's B2 standard, and implementing the current assessment is foremost to aid them in developing English proficiency and not to discriminate against them. The ramifications of failing to do so might be devastating as teachers might harbor negative feelings and dismissive attitudes

towards what they believe to be unnecessarily challenging barriers to their teaching practice and an extra source of anxieties (see section 7.2.2).

If self-assessment is to be included as a frequently-used means of assessment, it is desirable to help teachers develop skills in self-analysing and interpreting results. Teachers can better understand their own weaknesses and strengths if they are encouraged in self-reflection, examining their difficulties and needs via activities such as narrative inquiry, preferably in a learning or professional community. As teachers need feedback for their development, their colleagues and researchers can serve as the critical ‘others’ to direct their attention to certain issues like language proficiency development, and facilitate their reflection by providing appropriate feedback. The challenge is to create and sustain learning or professional communities in which teachers and researchers can collaborate freely and without risks (see section 9.3.3).

In summary, this section calls for careful consideration when interpreting assessment results. It is critical to take into account the differences across regions of Vietnam and the voices of the test-takers regarding their needs and difficulties. A holistic approach to assessing and understanding teachers’ English proficiency can capture the multi-faceted influences on teachers’ English proficiency development including age, gender, experience, motivations, language learning history and working contexts. Thus, such an approach can contribute to draw the two fields of language testing and ELT closer while generating invaluable results of great benefit to policy makers, educators, researchers, and those interested in improving teachers’ competency. Only then can it fulfil one important purpose of assessment: assessment for learning.

## 9.3 A holistic approach to the development of teachers’ English proficiency

Obviously, EFL teachers’ low level of English proficiency can have a powerful influence on the quality of English teaching and learning (e.g., Farrell & Richards, 2007; Heaton, 1981). This study shows that the participants themselves were aware of their low English proficiency, and conscious of the importance of developing it. In fact, they longed to improve and welcome English language proficiency development courses (see section 7.2).

Who or what is to be blamed for the low level of English proficiency of these Vietnamese teachers? While the teachers themselves do have responsibilities as life-long learners, their self-improvement should not be taken for granted and left without support. It is

therefore essential to recognise and address the several following shortcomings of the Vietnamese teacher pre-service education and in-service development programs regarding the enhancement of teachers' English proficiency.

Firstly, Vietnamese teacher education programs need to further inspire pre- and in-service teachers with a communicative understanding and use of the language, as most current programs are dominated by a focus on effective teaching methods. As presented in section 7.2.4, most participants were dissatisfied with their pre-service education. If teacher-training and development courses have not succeeded in creating communicative needs and language practice environments for teachers, how can teachers be expected to prepare their students for using English in real life? Secondly, both pre-service and in-service training programs should give more attention to the importance of preparing future teachers to be autonomous and reflective life-long learners. This is closely related to the previously mentioned shortcoming. Together they lead to the possible consequence that after graduation teachers are disoriented in their language learning and professional development. For many participants (see section 7.2.3) including An (see section 8.2.3), after graduation from pre-service education, the nature of their language learning is spontaneous rather than well-planned. Thirdly, training and development programs are still fragmented without a long-term development program (see section 7.2.4). The NFL Project 2020 is perhaps no exception, as it has not published its vision and plan regarding the type of future training and support available after the project ends. Fourthly, development and training programs have not taken due consideration of the various interrelated factors influencing teachers' English proficiency development. Without recognising and successfully addressing the practical contextual needs of teachers, it is difficult to kindle and sustain teachers' motivation throughout the training programs and their teaching careers. Interview results have suggested that the participants perceived the current in-service programs to be ineffective particularly in developing practical English ability needed to teach English because the course content was too general and not tailored to match teachers' actual teaching (see section 7.2.2). The survey results indicate that participants perceived a higher level of English proficiency needed to teach at the secondary levels in comparison with the primary level. Thus, in-service programs need to provide level-appropriate training.

The issue of developing teachers' English proficiency is complicated due to the multiple interacted factors, as discussed in section 8.3.3. It requires a holistic approach to solve the above four current shortcomings in teacher training and development programs. It is

outside the scope of this thesis to offer a thorough solution to the problem, yet it is strongly believed that any attempt to tackle the issue needs to consider the following three key suggestions.

### 9.3.1 Recognising the interrelatedness of the personal, institutional, and socio-cultural circles

It is important for teacher educators and trainers to remember that each individual teacher brings with them their language learning history, teaching contexts, and personal life to pre-service and in-service training. Without recognising and explicitly addressing the interrelated factors challenging teachers' English proficiency development, catering to their needs and wants, teacher education might strike a wrong chord and be at odds with teachers' actual teaching practice. If programs fall short of teachers' expectations and are not practical for their everyday teaching, they are most likely to be taken superficially, and the effects of these training sessions might quickly wane. On the other hand, as the interviews revealed (see section 7.2.2 and 7.2.4), participants' perceptions of the goal of ELT and expectations of the training course did not concur with NFL Project 2020's communicative approach. Work needs to be done on gradually changing participants' perceptions and expectations. MOET can start by renovating the grammar-based curiculum and examination practice. As such work cannot be finished overnight, negotiations and transparent communication between MOET, teacher educators and teachers are of vital importance.

It is challenging but necessary to tailor professional development courses to the needs of specific groups of teachers working in various contexts, at different levels, and having different levels of English proficiency. For instance, it would be beneficial to provide classes of various levels (e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced) according to the teachers' performance in MOET standardised tests. The content of each level needs to be carefully designed so that it is first and foremost relevant to the teachers' actual teaching but also allows them to advance from a lower level to a higher level until they meet the required standards.

It is desirable to have a global plan that can cater to the various differences between individual teachers and their respective teaching contexts. This general plan should be based on the ETCF (see section 2.4) in order to outline consistent and hierarchical structures of continuous professional training available to teachers. More detailed on-going

development programs that accord with the general plan can then be more viably and flexibly offered in the local context including the school and district levels. In this way, teachers can attend the programs without having to abandon their teaching. In Vietnam, such programs perhaps should be offered during the three-month summer vacations when both students and teachers are not required to go to school. Although teachers are still involved in organising and implementing graduation exams, they have more free time for professional development. The implementation of the global plan and localised programs requires close collaboration between MOET, DOET, teacher training institutions at the higher level, and schools, and individual teachers at the lower level.

### 9.3.2 Sustaining teachers' motivation for development

One challenge to teacher education and development programs is that of maintaining teachers' motivation to develop English proficiency. The interviews and narratives show that participants were motivated to learn English to satisfy their personal interests, to improve teaching, and to meet MOET's requirements (see sections 7.2.3 and 9.1.2). What appears to be missing is the need to use English for communication. The nature of an EFL context and an exam-driven language learning culture (see sections 7.2.4 and 8.2.3) further militates against English learning for communication. As suggested before, it is critical to reform the examination system to reflect the communicative goal of NFL Project 2020.

Regarding the need to use English for communication, the interviews and narratives show that for many participants, pre-service education actually succeeded in creating an environment for English use. Yet, it seems that teacher educators and training institutions have not given due attention to the importance of promoting and sustaining such networks. Participants such as An and Ly reminisced about their language learning communities during their university study. Unfortunately, these communities were broken after participants' graduation. Consequently, many participants felt abandoned in their language development. This study therefore suggests that in order to sustain teachers' motivation for development including English learning, it is desirable for teacher training institutions to create, maintain and expand their alumni networks as a way to facilitate teachers' use of English. A website, mailgroup, or even an online forum can go a long way to establish networks of connected teachers and encourage them to develop professionally. This simple idea, however, has not been given sufficient attention in Vietnam.

The interviews and narratives reveal that in-service teachers longed for opportunities to use English. The present study suggests that work needs to be done to create opportunities for frequent English use, perhaps via establishing language learning communities at the institutional level, and language camps at the district level (see section 9.3.3).

Hargreaves and Fullan (1998, p.1) described schools and classrooms as “barren wastelands of boredom and routine” when teachers lack hope, optimism and self-belief. As teaching in Vietnam is considered a noble job, it is beneficial to further promote the love or passion for the profession so as to drive teacher professional development including English learning. This can be done by immersing the participants in practical experiences during pre-service education. As is evident in Hoa’s narrative, once she recognised her passion for teaching and working with children, she put more effort into improving herself. Thus, practicum experience can play an important role in motivating pre-service teachers to improve. In reality, pre-service EFL teacher education in Vietnam is often based on linguistics and literature and only deals with teaching practice to a limited extent (H. H. Pham, 2001). Most teacher training institutions save the practicum for the end of their training programs and only allocate a small part of the curriculum to it. For example, at one long-established teacher training university in Hanoi, pre-service teachers only have four to six weeks of professional placement throughout their four years of study, and this period is only offered during the last year of their training program. The limited time on practicum hinders pre-service teachers from developing contextual knowledge or an understanding of the realities of teaching in schools (Le, 2004; M. H. Nguyen, 2013). This study suggests that it is high time that the practicum program be reformed to better prepare pre-service teachers for the real world after graduation, kindle the teachers’ love for the profession and help them become optimistic, hopeful, and empowered. This, in turn, will motivate teachers to improve professionally, including their English proficiency, as evident in Hoa’s narrative.

Another way to motivate participants to improve is by providing them with clear rewards and encouragement. As evident in Kim’s story, success and colleagues’ approval and respect can motivate teacher professional development including English learning. While intrinsic motivations such as the love for teaching and job suitability can sustain themselves without specific external rewards, appropriate measures are still needed to keep these reasons fresh and vigorous for further professional development. Otherwise, these intrinsic reasons overtime may lose their attraction and consequently lead to loss of interest that may even trigger teachers to reconsider their career choice.

Raynor (1974) discussed the motivational foundation of pursuing a career as a path consisting of a series of consecutive steps. Successful achievement of one step is required for the opportunity to perform the next one, in order to continue in the path. There are not many steps in the career structure of a Vietnamese teacher. Some of these steps are as follows:

- Have tenure or long-term contract;
- Have periodic increase of payment;
- Become form teachers;
- Teach high-stakes classes (grade 9 or 12) or specialised classes;
- Have responsibility for training students for local, regional, or national competitions;
- Be recognised as good teacher via teaching competition;
- Be recognised as excellent teacher.

Most of these developmental steps are only implicitly acknowledged without official recognition. Teaching is a profession struggling with serious challenges (both internal and external) that overshadow the satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of the job (Dörnyei, 2000; Pennington, 1995). In order to increase teachers' work morale and encourage their development, these different developmental steps should be more officially recognised as career sub-goals in order to become powerful motivations.

As the present study finds participants' motivation changes according to the stages of professional development, it might be beneficial to explore their initial motivations to teach and on-going motivations for professional development. Based on such explorations, teacher development programs can be designed to address teachers' actual difficulties and needs and pique their interest so as to encourage them to further develop English proficiency.

### 9.3.3 Establishing and promoting communities of language learning for pre- and in-service teachers

The previous section has discussed the reminiscences and nostalgia of some participants and recommended attempting to recreate communities of language learners to sustain teachers' motivations and create environments for English use. It is reemphasised here

that one key recommendation of the present study is the establishment and promotion of professional development and learning communities, as teachers need the support of each other. Language development does not happen in isolation or without social interaction (Davies, 2002). This study shows that the participants appreciated the opportunity to meet and converse with colleagues from other schools during the MOET training course. While the inexperienced teachers longed for mentorship, the more seasoned teachers needed support during the school year for guided dialogue and discussion. Indeed, Vietnamese teachers, working in a collectivist culture, are highly affected by their colleagues as argued by Le (2011) who proposed that these teachers have developed a "collective normative pedagogy" (p.129). Yet it is ironic that many language teachers had little or insufficient communication with their colleagues (H. H. Pham, 2001). The current study confirms that Vietnamese EFL teachers are still mostly isolated in their professional development after their pre-service training. In-service training programs are largely perfunctory and intermittent. It would be infeasible to expect teachers to encourage their students to communicate with each other when they themselves rarely engaged in communication with their colleagues. As Sarason (1971) noted, teachers cannot possibly create and sustain productive learning environments for students when no such conditions exist for teachers. Thus, more efforts are needed to establish and promote language-learning communities for these Vietnamese teachers of English.

The current study finds evidence supporting the idea that EFL teachers will welcome the prospect of having communities of language learning and environments for language use. To realise this prospect, pre- and in-service teacher training programs need to help teachers improve skills needed in order to learn from one another while creating the conditions encouraging learning from colleagues or communities of practice.

The data of the present study provide evidence that individual schools can actively and successfully establish such communities while organising English proficiency development activities for their teachers such as running their own in-service development programs, creating environments for English use, and sending teachers and students abroad during exchange programs. If private language centres and private schools can engage and succeed in taking these initiatives, it is high time that public schools follow their steps for the benefit of their teachers and students.

While individual schools should provide professional development services to teachers, the provision should be supportive and sensitive as teachers are already often

overwhelmed by their workload (see section 7.2.4). Thus, it is also important to reform the administration processes in order to reduce non-teaching-related responsibilities for teachers.

Regarding the need to create environments for English use, it is understandable that not every school, especially those in rural areas, could afford to send teachers abroad or bring the language experience to their classrooms. Perhaps a language camp could be established every summer to which native English speakers can be invited to provide EFL teachers with a good opportunity to be totally immersed in the language they are teaching. Several schools in the same region could collaborate to create shared English learning and practice environments for their teachers. In order to attain this goal, there need to be strong partnerships between different forces to provide mutual support across schools, districts, and provinces. Partnerships also need to be formed across academic levels including schools, teacher training institutions, and professional organisations. Strong and professional connections between MOET, DOET, teacher training institutions, schools, and teachers should be founded and maintained to facilitate the sharing of information, including explanations of various policies regarding plans for teachers' development or reforms of the curricula and examination system.

In short, to solve the challenging English proficiency-related issues in the Vietnamese context, it is important to start from the pre-service teacher training programs. Teacher education must shift from a focus on just pre-service development to fulfil a long-term vision that is to promote lifelong professional development. Tedick and Walker (1994, 1995) argued that pre-service teacher education courses emphasising only English linguistic features could not instil students with a communicative understanding of the language. It is important, therefore, for pre-service training to promote the communicative aspects of teaching, to focus on teaching with language rather than about language. For in-service teachers, the key to strengthening their proficiency may be professional development in their workplace together with top-down MOET-organised on-going and regular training programs. It is critical to remember that teachers need constant support through in-service training programs without which their language proficiency is likely to stagnate, especially in the case of primary teachers.

### 9.4 Conclusion

A decade ago, Vietnamese educators such as H. H. Pham (2001) and Le (2002) called for

major changes and due attention and investment in education from the government. In recent years, their calls have been heard. NFL Project 2020, a long-term project, shows the government's efforts, ambition, and its willingness to invest more in education, revising the curriculum and examination system. The government in general and MOET in particular have taken significant steps to improve the quality of English language teaching in Vietnam. However, it is important to realise that the results of such processes are not immediate, and these major changes in the education system require well-planned co-ordination and implementation by different agents. It is a challenge that the Vietnamese NFL Project 2020 needs to resolve. Perhaps more drastic measures are needed to assure high quality of pre- and in-service teacher development programs so that they can function like a springboard for teachers' future development. As the Vietnamese saying goes, *thuốc đắng dã tật* (translated as: Bitter pills have blessed effects), it is imperative to start a long-overdue reform of the pre-service teacher training curricula, create a critical and a long-term vision for in-service teacher professional development plans, and change assessment practice. It is equally importance that MOET embrace more transparency in drafting and implementing their policies. Teachers deserve to be listened to and have these policies explained to them, and training and development programs should not be formulated behind MOET's closed doors.

While waiting for these changes to take effect, each individual teacher and institution can contribute to improve the current situation. As they are at the centre of the educational reform, they play a very important role. Unless teachers recognise the need to improve their proficiency and want to change, no improvement can be made (Pham, 2001). Each teacher needs to be more active and willing to make time in their busy schedules for some English proficiency development activities. Meanwhile, the government, MOET and each individual school need to create and promote more favourable working conditions to encourage teachers to do so. It is essential for educators, policy makers, and researchers to get into individual teachers' shoes, to learn their career narratives, and to understand different teaching contexts and various difficulties hindering professional development including English proficiency development. Without this knowledge, it is hard to formulate an appropriate working plan to support teachers' practical needs.

Joyce and Showers (2002) have argued that teachers are not the only ones to benefit from professional development programs as their improvement could play a crucial role in fostering student achievement through their classroom practices. In Vietnam, improving teachers' English proficiency can benefit each individual teacher, their learners, the larger

school community, the Vietnamese EFL teacher professional community, and the whole Vietnamese society. To realise this goal, it is essential that teachers are not left alone in their struggle to improve English proficiency; rather their individual efforts deserve to be encouraged and supported by appropriate policy and development programs that are intensive, on-going and connected to practice and teacher's working contexts, and promoting strong working relationships between teachers, educators, and researchers. In order to design such effective programs, it is of utmost importance to draw from a robust theory of learning. Such a theory needs to embrace the idea of community of practice, and language learning communities while recognising the various interrelated factors influencing teachers' English proficiency development as illustrated in figure 8.3. One theory that fits these requirements is socio-cultural theory. Indeed, this perspective views knowledge as socially constructed through participation in socio-cultural practices and contexts (Brandt, 2006; K. E. Johnson, 2009b). Also from this perspective, it has been widely agreed that teachers' prior experience, knowledge, beliefs, and the socio-cultural contexts where they work are very influential in shaping and explaining how they practise (Borg, 2006, 2011; K. E. Johnson, 2006, 2009a; K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Thus, teachers' participation in pre-service and in-service programs plays an important role in shaping how they learn and teach.

In summary, for EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam to dramatically improve, this study argues for a holistic approach that allows MOET, teacher trainers, individual researchers, and teachers themselves to join hands to assess, understand, and support teachers' English proficiency development. As argued by Wedell (2009) education reforms need to begin with teachers, they should not be left ignored during the process; rather, their voices should be heard so that their needs can be catered for in long-term and meaningful support programs.

# Chapter 10: Conclusion

The current study attempted to fill a gap in the literature by investigating Vietnamese in-service EFL teachers' perceptions of their English proficiency and their responses toward MOET's English policy. The study also explored the characteristics of these EFL teachers' language learning and uncovered the personal and contextual circumstances sustaining and impeding teachers' English proficiency development. The study responded to the practical situation in Vietnam as NFL Project 2020 identified the fact that most school EFL teachers failed to attain CEFR's B2 standard. As described in chapters 1 and 4, the study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What are the participants' perceptions of their English language proficiency and responses towards MOET's English policy?
  - Is there a gap between the two levels, PLP and PRLP?
  - What are the participants' opinions of the CEFR's B2 standard prescribed by MOET?
- RQ 2: How do the participants describe their English proficiency development?
  - What are the characteristics of the participants' English proficiency development?
  - What are the challenges to participants' English learning?

The study employed a mixed methods design. Data were collected using a self-assessed English proficiency survey completed by 298 primary and secondary EFL teachers, and semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry with 42 and 5 participants respectively. The analysis of the questionnaire was conducted quantitatively while the interviews were qualitatively analysed for emerging themes. In addition, five narratives were composed about individual teachers' teaching careers and language learning experiences.

This chapter summarises the key findings, acknowledges the limitations of the project, and provides suggestions for further studies.

## 10.1 Key findings and educational implications

The study reveals that teachers' self-assessed English proficiency was significantly higher than the level they perceived as necessary to teach effectively. The gap reflects the participants' confidence to teach English mainly as a content-subject rather than as means of communication, partly due to the powerful negative wash-back effects of high-stakes

examinations. For many participants, the main goal of teaching English is to help students acquire vocabulary and grammatical structures so that they can score highly in such examinations. This needs to be changed if the end goal of English learning is communicative competence as declared by NFL Project 2020.

Despite the confidence to teach for the tests, the participants were aware that in terms of communicative competence their English proficiency was not high, and they wished to improve. The study documents how participants struggled to develop English proficiency with limited and intermittent support from MOET, DOET and the institutions in which they work. The study uncovers interrelated factors challenging participants' English proficiency development. These factors were categorised into three overlapping circles namely personal, institutional and socio-cultural challenges (see figure 8.3). Teachers should not be left alone to deal with these obstacles when maintaining and improving their English proficiency. The close interdependence of the three circles of challenges demands a holistic solution to the daunting task of maintaining and improving teachers' language proficiency in this EFL context. Successful implementation of such an approach requires efforts and collaboration of forces at different levels, including the government, MOET, teacher training institutions, school administrators, and teachers themselves.

Many factors need to be considered, including the economic situation of Vietnam, language policy, education management policy, pre-service teacher education curriculum, textbook design, and the objectives of English teaching. There must be macro-changes including redefining goals of ELT, reforming the traditional grammar-based testing system, eliminating the desire for exaggerated achievements, promoting supportive environments for language use and practice, reforming pre-service teacher training, and conducting more frequent and more practical development and support programs for in-service teachers. In-service professional development programs need to be improved so that they can provide more appropriate and frequent training and support (see section 9.3 for various practical suggestions). A course whose focus is on drilling teachers to pass the B2 standard test can never cure the complex problems regarding teachers' low level of English proficiency, and can only function as a band-aid solution at best, tending to soothe the surface cut without touching the deep root of the problem. EFL teachers need environments for language use, and motivation for language development. Professional communities of practice or language learning communities should be established and sustained so that teachers can encourage and help each other improve. To construct such communities, it is necessary to equip teachers with reflective and self-development skills.

It is also important to enhance teachers' awareness of each other both as experts who are able to help and as peers who require effective support in their turn. All the above-mentioned changes take time to be planned and implemented but are essential to make NFL Project 2020 the long-overdue and far-reaching education reform needed in Vietnam.

When it comes to assessing the effectiveness of an education policy, it is so much easier to criticise than to meaningfully contribute. Although the development of the English Teacher Competency Framework and investment in teachers' training programs are progressive measures, in order to guarantee that MOET and NFL Project 2020 are moving in the right direction, much more needs to be done. I believe that, as long as the government, MOET, and teachers themselves are determined and willing to change for the better, ELT in Vietnam will have a brighter future. To realise such a prospect, it is important to have further research similar to the present study that enables better communication and negotiation between EFL teachers and policy makers.

### 10.2 Limitations and their implications

Despite careful consideration in designing and conducting this study, there are some obvious limitations. First, due to the limited time and resources available for data collection, the findings could only be based on data generated from a group of teachers from four provinces. The participants in this research therefore are by no means representative of the whole Vietnamese in-service teacher population. This limitation can be addressed by future research conducted in other parts of the country for a more faithful reflection of the situation. Still, the findings can be insightful and informative with respect to other geographical areas in Vietnam and similar EFL contexts as long as the generalisation of these findings is made with caution.

The second limitation of the study relates to the choice of participants for the narrative inquiry interviews. Due to the limited time and modest funding, the participants were recruited partly on a convenience basis. Although the participants were selected so as to cover various lengths of teaching experience and different working contexts, they were all teachers working at one site, Hanoi. If some teachers from elsewhere, especially from those rural settings, had been included in the narrative inquiry stage, the study would have provided an additional perspective on the English proficiency development of a large group of Vietnamese teachers working under even more difficult circumstances with even less support. Meanwhile, although all participants were teaching in Hanoi at the time of data

collection, most had not spent their whole lives nor their entire English learning history and teaching careers there. Therefore, together with the semi-structured interviews, the narrative inquiry can still provide some insights into the issues confronting teachers in other geographical contexts.

Another limitation of the study is the assumption that participants were truthful in their responses to the survey and interviews, which is an inevitable limitation of any research employing similar instruments. However, for this research topic, participants have little to gain from misrepresenting the truth as they perceive it. Another limitation is that participants' responses were subjected to their understanding of NFL Project 2020 and the development programs. Even when they were trying to be truthful, they may not have the whole picture or may have a false impression. However, since these perceptions are what participants see as the circumstances in which they exercise their profession, they are still valid objects of investigation. The design of the study, with the combination of survey, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry, also contributes to reduce these limitations to a certain extent.

Despite all the above-mentioned limitations, the study can meaningfully add to a better understanding of the characteristics of EFL teachers' English proficiency development, the challenges hindering this process, and the shortcomings of in-service teacher trainings. This study, to the best of my knowledge, is the first undertaken in an EFL context focusing on individual teachers' English proficiency development, and thus can pave the way for other research on the same topic.

### 10.3 Recommendations for future research

This study raises awareness of the importance of listening to teachers' voices when drafting and implementing education policy. The mixed-methods design allows a fuller understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions of their English proficiency, and their English proficiency development process. Yet, there is still much research to be done especially from an English for specific purpose perspective. As discussed in section 3.2, there is a lack of research that identifies the types and exact levels of language proficiency that EFL teachers require to reach to teach effectively.

Further research may investigate how narrative inquiry procedures can benefit those who participate in them. Do the interviews and process of constructing narratives encourage participants to reflect on their English proficiency development? And how do such

reflective practices affect their professional development? In addition, as narrative inquiry gives voice to the individual teachers, it has the potential to play a part in improving the local conditions of language teaching and learning. This could be done through encouraging reflection on the process of teachers' language learning practices. In this way, narrative inquiry is also transformative research and "can advance a social change agenda" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 642).

Another long-overdue but still overlooked issue is the evaluation and reform of English teachers' pre-service training curriculum. As revealed in this study, the practicum experience can play an important part in motivating pre-service teachers to improve themselves and pursue the profession. Thus, research needs to be carried out to take advantage of this experience so that pre-service training programs can better prepare teachers concerning language skills and other teaching-related competences.

Another suggestion for future research direction is to explore how EFL teachers' language proficiency actually influences their teaching practice. Do teachers with different levels of proficiency teach differently? How does teachers' level of proficiency influence their choice of teaching methods, classroom activities, supplementary materials and other decisions they make during their teaching? These questions need to be answered by other studies in the future.

This study has provided insights into EFL teachers' language proficiency development. It identifies the various factors impeding their English proficiency development. The complex interaction between these factors is worth further research in order for teacher educators and policy makers to fully understand the difficulties teachers have to face. Given this information, pre- and in-service teacher training programs can offer more practical and effective training and support.

### 10.4 Concluding remarks

I set out to understand how other Vietnamese EFL teachers perceived their current language proficiency and described their everyday English proficiency development. I was particularly interested in the individual teachers' narratives of battling contextual and personal circumstances to maintain and develop their language proficiency. Reflecting on the process of undertaking this research, I realise that it is normal for non-native teachers, including many participants of this study and myself, to be anxious about their competency and linguistic ability while operating as teachers of English. I have learned a simple but

inspiring lesson that those teachers who are determined to improve can prevail over their busy working schedules and countless other challenges encumbering their professional development. They made the most of opportunities to practise English wherever they found them (e.g., their husband's paperwork, a shared love of cinema) and found inspiration even in troublesome and unruly students. In Vietnam where the majority of teachers are working in difficult, under-resourced circumstances with inadequate payment and limited support, perhaps much still has to rely on individual teachers' initiatives, determination and self-efforts to improve. Still, it is crucial to bear in mind that teachers' voices deserve and need to be heard so that meaningful support programs can be drafted and implemented.

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## Appendix A: Self-rated language proficiency survey (English)

**Part A**
**Instruction**
Please read each of the descriptive statements regarding English language proficiency. The statements represent a wide range of abilities in listening, reading, writing and speaking (interaction and production). First, choose the level that best represents your present ability in each of the five sections and write down the number in the *Self-rated level* cell. If you feel you are in between levels, please use 0.5 point (e.g., 3.5 or 4.5).
Second, choose the level that you think represents the required level of English proficiency that teachers who teach at your levels (elementary/ lower secondary/upper secondary schools/university) need to have. Write down the number in the *Required level* cell.

**Listening** **Self-rated level:** ☐ **Required level:** ☐

| Levels | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly. | I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements. | I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when delivery is relatively slow and clear. | I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programs. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect. | I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programs and films without too much effort. | I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent. |

**Reading** **Self-rated level: ☐** **Required level: ☐**

| Levels | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues | I can understand very short, simple texts. I can find specific predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters. | I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters. | I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary pose. | I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field. | I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary work. |

**Spoken interaction** **Self-rated level: ☐** **Required level: ☐**

| Levels | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics. | I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself. | I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, work, travel and current events) | I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views. | I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers. | I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficult so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it. |

**Spoken production** **Self-rated level: ☐** **Required level: ☐**

| Levels | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know | I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job. | I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambition. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions. | I can present clear detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. | I can present clear detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. | I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. |

**Writing** **Self-rated level: ☐** **Required level: ☐**

| Levels | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | I can write short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms, with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form. | I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something. | I can write connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions. | I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interest. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences. | I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of views at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind. | I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles that present a case with an effective logical structure that helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works. |

**Part B**
**Background information**
Please complete the following section by writing down the correct information or circle the appropriate choice. All information will be kept confidential.

1. Name:
2. Current workplace:
3. Province:
4. Teaching experience: Less than 5 years | 5 -10 years | More than 10 years
5. Which level are you teaching? Primary | Lower secondary | Upper secondary | Tertiary
6. Education background: Bachelor (College) | Bachelor (University) | Master | PhD
7. Have you ever studied in an English-speaking country? Yes | No
8. Have you ever taken IELTS/TOEFL/TOEIC? Yes | No
   If yes, what is the result?
9. If you are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview for this research, please write down your contact information.
   Name:
   Contact number/ email:
10. If you want to be informed of the results of this research, please write down your contact information.
    Contact email:

**Thank you very much for your time!**

## Appendix B: Pilot study- Topics and questions for group discussion

- Participants introduce themselves (name, workplace, teaching experience, and etc.)
- Participants share about their current postgraduate study in Australia (their goals, experiences regarding living and study in Australia, difficulties, and etc.)
- Can you describe yourself as a language teacher? What are your strong points and weak points?
- What do you think are the reasons for the low English proficiency of Vietnamese teachers of English?
- How do you develop yourself to improve your teaching? Do you have a long-term or short-term professional development plan?
- What are the characteristics of a good teacher of English?
- What do you know about NFL Project 2020?
- What do you think of MOET's B2 English proficiency standard for primary and secondary school teachers?
- How important is it for teachers to develop their English proficiency? What do you often do to develop your proficiency?
- What types of support and training are available for your professional development?

## Appendix C: Sample of questions for semi-structured interviews

1. What do you think is the minimum level of English language proficiency needed to teach at your level (primary/ lower secondary/ upper secondary)? Why do you think so?
2. Is it important for teachers to maintain and develop their language proficiency? How could teachers do so? What have you done?
3. Do you think your pre-service teacher-training program has prepared you well (in term of language proficiency) for the current teaching job? If not, how could such a program improve?
4. Do you think it is necessary to provide in-service teachers with language improvement programs? What kind of program do you think will be effective? How can such a program help?
5. What do you think are the possible reasons for the limitations of English language proficiency of Vietnamese teachers in general? And for you?
6. Does teachers' English language proficiency affect their teaching practice? Why do you think so? If yes, then how?

Additional follow-up questions were asked on the basis of interviewee responses.

## Appendix D: Ethical clearance permission

**School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies**
HEAD OF SCHOOL
**Associate Professor Alfredo MARTINEZ EXPOSITO**

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**18 June 2012**

**Investigator's Name: Khoi Mai Ngoc**
**Project title: Portraits of Vietnamese Teachers of English: An Inquiry into Their Language Proficiency Development**
**Ethical Clearance Application Number: 12-07**

Dear Khoi,

I am pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance for your project has now been approved. The SLCCS Ethical Clearance Committee wishes you every success in your project. A signed, hard copy is available upon request. Otherwise, this completes the ethical clearance application process.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sol Rojas-Lizana
SLCCS Ethical Clearance Officer
i.rojaslizana@uq.edu.au
Telephone: (07) 3365 6718

## Appendix E: Participants' PLP and PRLP

Table E.1 *Participants' overall PLP and PRLP*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Hanoi | 2.76 | 2.41 | 3.25 | 2.63 | 3.04 | 2.61 | 3.01 | 2.47 | 3.04 | 2.57 | 3.03 | 2.53 |
| Nam Dinh | 2.53 | 2.26 | 2.86 | 2.49 | 2.52 | 2.25 | 2.69 | 2.24 | 2.8 | 2.53 | 2.72 | 2.39 |
| Thanh Hoa | 2.53 | 2.14 | 2.89 | 2.49 | 2.52 | 2.15 | 2.72 | 2.37 | 2.78 | 2.3 | 2.71 | 2.32 |
| Hai Phong | 2.52 | 2.25 | 2.71 | 2.39 | 2.63 | 2.26 | 2.58 | 2.33 | 2.63 | 2.33 | 2.61 | 2.31 |
| Total | 2.58 | 2.26 | 2.92 | 2.50 | 2.64 | 2.29 | 2.74 | 2.35 | 2.81 | 2.45 | 2.76 | 2.38 |

Table E.2 *Participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Listening | 2.09 | 1.81 | 2.33 | 2.04 | 2.14 | 1.93 | 2.15 | 1.88 | 2.32 | 1.99 | 2.22 | 1.93 |
| Reading | 3.24 | 2.75 | 3.76 | 2.90 | 3.44 | 2.85 | 3.51 | 2.81 | 3.52 | 2.83 | 3.51 | 2.83 |
| Sp-Interaction | 2.40 | 2.13 | 2.70 | 2.38 | 2.33 | 2.02 | 2.54 | 2.25 | 2.65 | 2.35 | 2.56 | 2.26 |
| Sp-Production | 2.49 | 2.23 | 2.82 | 2.51 | 2.60 | 2.31 | 2.67 | 2.34 | 2.69 | 2.43 | 2.67 | 2.38 |
| Writing | 2.67 | 2.37 | 2.98 | 2.65 | 2.70 | 2.34 | 2.82 | 2.48 | 2.90 | 2.62 | 2.83 | 2.52 |

Table E.3 *Participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP in Hanoi (N = 65)*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Listening | 2.38 | 2.20 | 2.66 | 2.31 | 2.79 | 2.36 | 2.52 | 2.26 | 2.48 | 2.24 | 2.53 | 2.26 |
| Reading | 3.55 | 2.73 | 4.01 | 3.06 | 4.00 | 3.29 | 3.76 | 2.81 | 3.88 | 2.91 | 3.84 | 2.91 |
| Sp-Interaction | 2.38 | 2.17 | 3.09 | 2.36 | 2.50 | 2.21 | 2.81 | 2.22 | 2.78 | 2.33 | 2.76 | 2.27 |
| Sp-Production | 2.70 | 2.42 | 3.19 | 2.63 | 3.07 | 2.57 | 2.93 | 2.48 | 2.97 | 2.57 | 2.96 | 2.53 |
| Writing | 2.80 | 2.55 | 3.24 | 2.79 | 2.86 | 2.64 | 3.02 | 2.59 | 3.10 | 2.78 | 3.04 | 2.68 |

Table E.4 *Participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP in Nam Dinh (N = 76)*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Listening | 2.06 | 1.88 | 2.38 | 1.86 | 1.95 | 1.82 | 2.24 | 1.78 | 2.33 | 1.94 | 2.24 | 1.87 |
| Reading | 3.14 | 2.56 | 3.56 | 2.99 | 3.23 | 2.68 | 3.44 | 2.60 | 3.39 | 2.98 | 3.38 | 2.81 |
| Sp-Interaction | 2.38 | 2.19 | 2.75 | 2.39 | 2.40 | 1.95 | 2.42 | 2.06 | 2.75 | 2.55 | 2.59 | 2.30 |
| Sp-Production | 2.36 | 2.22 | 2.76 | 2.48 | 2.41 | 2.36 | 2.58 | 2.24 | 2.65 | 2.45 | 2.59 | 2.37 |
| Writing | 2.73 | 2.47 | 2.85 | 2.72 | 2.59 | 2.45 | 2.76 | 2.50 | 2.89 | 2.73 | 2.80 | 2.61 |

Table E.5 *Participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP in Thanh Hoa (N = 79)*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Listening | 2.05 | 1.80 | 2.06 | 1.90 | 2.35 | 2.10 | 1.93 | 1.78 | 2.17 | 1.90 | 2.06 | 1.85 |
| Reading | 3.17 | 2.81 | 3.83 | 2.93 | 3.20 | 2.80 | 3.59 | 2.97 | 3.48 | 2.71 | 3.51 | 2.87 |
| Sp-Interaction | 2.36 | 1.94 | 2.67 | 2.45 | 2.20 | 1.95 | 2.51 | 2.30 | 2.65 | 2.10 | 2.51 | 2.20 |
| Sp-Production | 2.41 | 1.99 | 2.84 | 2.58 | 2.35 | 2.00 | 2.64 | 2.32 | 2.71 | 2.33 | 2.63 | 2.28 |
| Writing | 2.64 | 2.18 | 3.05 | 2.61 | 2.50 | 1.90 | 2.90 | 2.47 | 2.90 | 2.48 | 2.85 | 2.40 |

Table E.6 *Participants' skill-related PLP and PRLP in Hai Phong (N = 78)*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP | PLP | PRLP |
| Listening | 1.93 | 1.49 | 2.27 | 2.14 | 1.83 | 1.70 | 2.06 | 1.77 | 2.27 | 1.88 | 2.09 | 1.79 |
| Reading | 3.15 | 2.84 | 3.59 | 2.61 | 3.50 | 2.80 | 3.27 | 2.77 | 3.39 | 2.64 | 3.36 | 2.73 |
| Sp-Interaction | 2.48 | 2.26 | 2.30 | 2.31 | 2.27 | 2.03 | 2.46 | 2.36 | 2.38 | 2.32 | 2.39 | 2.53 |
| Sp-Production | 2.52 | 2.31 | 2.54 | 2.38 | 2.70 | 2.37 | 2.54 | 2.33 | 2.43 | 2.36 | 2.35 | 2.67 |
| Writing | 2.54 | 2.34 | 2.82 | 2.50 | 2.83 | 2.40 | 2.59 | 2.40 | 2.70 | 2.45 | 2.42 | 2.61 |

Table E.7 *Number of cases in the Enough and Lacking groups based on the overall PLP and PRLP*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking |
| Hanoi | 28 | 2 | 35 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 28 | 1 | 28 | 1 | 63 | 2 |
| Nam Dinh | 28 | 4 | 37 | 7 | 10 | 1 | 22 | 3 | 33 | 7 | 65 | 11 |
| Thanh Hoa | 33 | 6 | 39 | 1 | 9 | 1 | 41 | 4 | 22 | 2 | 72 | 7 |
| Hai Phong | 34 | 7 | 33 | 4 | 13 | 2 | 31 | 4 | 23 | 5 | 67 | 11 |
| Total | 144 | 12 | 123 | 19 | 39 | 4 | 123 | 12 | 105 | 15 | 267 | 31 |

Table E.8 *Number of cases in the Enough and Lacking groups based on the skill-related PLP and PRLP*

| | Level of teaching | | | | Teaching experience | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Primary | | Secondary | | <=5 years | | 5-10 years | | >10 years | | | |
| | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking | Enough | Lacking |
| Listening | 116 | 40 | 118 | 24 | 32 | 11 | 103 | 32 | 99 | 21 | 234 | 64 |
| Reading | 146 | 10 | 115 | 27 | 38 | 5 | 119 | 16 | 104 | 16 | 261 | 37 |
| Sp-Interaction | 133 | 23 | 116 | 26 | 33 | 10 | 115 | 20 | 101 | 19 | 249 | 49 |
| Sp-Production | 133 | 23 | 123 | 19 | 38 | 5 | 119 | 16 | 99 | 21 | 256 | 42 |
| Writing | 135 | 21 | 127 | 15 | 38 | 5 | 121 | 14 | 103 | 17 | 262 | 36 |

**Appendix F: CEFR common reference levels: global scale** (Council of Europe, 2001, p.24)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Proficient User | C2 | Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations. |
| | C1 | Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. |
| Independent User | B2 | Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. |
| | B1 | Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| Basic User | A2 | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| | A1 | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |