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**Research Title:** “Teacher Perceptions of Effective English Instruction in a College of Education in Northern Vietnam: Aligning with Project 2020 Goals”

**Institution:** Seton Hall University

**Institutional Description:**

In Vietnam, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language has been widely embraced and promoted by the government since *Doi Moi*, the economic reforms initiated in 1986 (Dang, Nguyen & Le 2013). To achieve the goal of English language proficiency among its citizens, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) instituted a 2008-2020 plan aimed at improving the quality of English language teacher education at teacher training colleges and universities (Dang, T.K.A. et al). However, relatively little systematic, empirically-based information is available on teacher preparedness, the conditions under which English is taught, and the effectiveness of English instruction. Additionally, there is virtually no information available on the impact of English instruction on Vietnam’s educational policies and practices (Nunan 2003). Like many countries in the Asia Pacific region, English teaching in Vietnam is highly reliant on EFL theory and pedagogy, yet this approach, borrowed from applied linguistics, poses considerable challenges for teachers (Thuy 2008). In particular, there is insufficient emphasis on language acquisition from a critical literacy (Janks 2000) or genre (Swales 1990) perspective that attempts to integrate critical approaches to reading and writing at the various stages of English language education, from primary school to college instruction.

The proposed article includes a study conducted at Ha Nam Teacher Training College, a provincial teacher training college in Phu Ly city in northern Vietnam which the author visited in 2013 on a Fulbright Specialist grant and where she returned in 2014 and 2015 (with IRB approval) to interview English teachers who were also instructors in writing classes.

**Glossary**

**Doi Moi:** Literally meaning “new way,” the term refers to the economic reforms instituted by the Vietnamese government in the early 1980s that helped the nation transition to a market economy.

**MOET:** Ministry of Education and Training

**NFL2020:** National Foreign Language 2020 Project. The mission of NFL2020 is to build Vietnam’s foreign language (mainly English) teaching and learning capacity and to implement Government’s Decision 14001 (2008) “to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system” (Article 1.1, Decision 1400).

The stated goals of Project 2020 are:

“To achieve by the year 2015 a vivid progress on professional skills, language competency for human resources, especially at some prioritized sectors; by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth ***whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently*** (my emphasis). This will enable them to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with variety of languages. This goal also makes language as an advantage for Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country.”

* To ensure that Vietnamese college and university graduates “will be able to ***use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication***, their study and work.”
* “To ***implement a foreign language enhancement training program for undergraduate education*** (for both foreign language specialization institutions and normal institutions) which targets about 10% of students from different colleges, universities in school year 2010 – 2011, ***increases to 60% in school year 2015 –2016*** and eventually reaches 100% in school year 2019 – 2020.”
* Map outcomes to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) benchmarks
* Establish proficiency standards for English language teachers (B2 for primary and lower secondary school teachers and C1 for high school and college)
* Emphasize teacher education, curriculum revision and establishment of regional teacher education centers

**Key Theorists and Frames**

**Grounded Theory:** Glaser

**CLT:** Communicative Language Teaching

**TBLT:** Task Based Language Teaching

**Activity Theory**—Engstrom

**Socio-linguistics and literacy—**Gee

**Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogy, Critical Language Awareness**—Janks

**Genre Theory** (Systemic Functional Perspective)—Halliday, Hyland, Swales, Johns.

**Introduction**

           Although one of the primary goals of Vietnam’s 2020 project is to ensure that by the year 2020 Vietnamese college and university graduates “will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work,” and that undergraduate education focused on foreign language (English) learning will reach more than half of all enrolled students by 2015-2016, data suggests that an overwhelming majority of English teachers are under-qualified and therefore are not sufficiently prepared to teach English (Canh & Chi 2012, Kirkpatrick 2011, Nguyen 2011). Further jeopardizing the original goals of the project, recent announcements from the MOET hint at how the project “faced challenges in implementation including a lack of awareness of the role of foreign languages and the necessity for innovative methods in teaching foreign languages.” <http://vietnamnews.vn/society/345524/foreign-language-project-falling-short-of-unrealistic-goals.html#Oz0SOGVB2v7zqB83.97>. Thus as recently as November 2016, MOET officials have declared that Project 2020 was perhaps overly ambitious in that it set “unrealistic goals” and underestimated the language skills and proficiency required by teachers and students who were the main participants in the program. To explore and further investigate the factors involved in teachers’ apparent lack of preparedness, self-awareness of their English language skills, and their relationship to the cultural and material dimensions of English teaching in Vietnam, this study focuses on the existing beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward writing instruction of Vietnamese college English teachers in an EFL context where teacher preparation is critical to effective teaching and learning. The study aims to contribute to a growing understanding of teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language in the Vietnamese context during what can only be described as a moment of crisis, as evidenced by the slow implementation and multiple challenges faced by Project 2020.

The article first describes the institutional setting, subject demographics, and MOET-mandated curricular, instructional, and assessment goals for English instruction at the institution. It then describes current institutional and pedagogical approaches to writing instruction at the site of research, examines instructors’ attitudes about teaching writing, beliefs about the effectiveness of writing instruction, and perception of their preparedness to teach writing in English. Data, collected in the form of hour-long semi-structured interviews with 9 teachers, is coded and analyzed according to qualitative research protocols. By closely examining the experience of teachers, and their representation of the material conditions under which they work, the study highlights the unique personal, pedagogical, and institutional challenges faced by English teachers at a small province in Vietnam. The study’s findings will be useful for assessing the current state of English writing instruction at the college; for making recommendations to consider current theoretical approaches to second language writing instruction, critical literacy, and genre studies as possible frameworks for writing instruction; and for pedagogical, instructional, and curricular reform that would have a positive impact on the quality of teaching. Finally, in Vietnam there is a dire need for extensive and continued research on English teaching and teacher education on a national scale that has the potential of affecting educational policies and practices related to English writing instruction. This study hopes to contribute to that process.

**Research Questions:**

* What beliefs and assumptions about English instruction do HTTC teachers hold?
* What instructional and pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in English do teachers adopt?
* How do teachers’ self-perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to English language instruction affect their ability to teach English?

**Participants**

All faculty at HTTC who regularly teach English (including writing) courses were invited to participate in the study and 9 participants who represent a cross section of the college faculty in terms of age, gender, language experience, and teaching experience were selected. Participants were female native Vietnamese speakers with three to eight years of teaching experience.

**Table 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant n=9 | Degree | Discipline | Years teaching general English | Years teaching writing |
| Le Phuong | BA | English | 8 | 7 |
| Thao | BA | English Teaching Methodology | 3 | 1 |
| Hong | BA | English Teaching Methodology | 6 | 2 |
| Huyen | BA | English Teaching Methodology | 3 | 1 |
| Chung | BA | English Teaching Methodology | 6 | 0 |
| Huong | MA | Applied Linguistics | 7 | 4 |
| Dao Phuong | MA | English Teaching Methodology | 6 | 4 |
| Hanh | MA | English Teaching Methodology | 8 | 0 |
| Hue | MA | English Teaching Methodology | 6 | 0 |

**Historical Background**

As with many non-English speaking countries around the world that are experiencing the effects of globalization and the resultant spread of English, Vietnam is in the midst of developing a cohesive national literacy program that advances English language proficiency among the younger generation. In Vietnam the concept of literacy resonates with rich historical meaning but it is, at the same time, in need of continued attention and review as the nation proceeds on the path of economic liberalization that began several decades ago. Since 1986, when reforms known as *Doi Moi* were launched and the country shifted toward a market-oriented economy, English has gained immense popularity.

Since any detailed consideration of Vietnam’s current educational policies on English language teaching and teacher development would have to take into account the historical and political conditions that shaped these policies, the article will include a brief analysis of Vietnam’s linguistic and literacy practices since the late 80’s to explore how sociopolitical forces have affected English language learning throughout Vietnam. It will trace Vietnam’s efforts to engage in transformative mass literacy campaigns (Phan, Bilgin, et.al, Aikman and Pridmore) and their effect on actual learning and literacy activities in English. There is no denying that Vietnam has been fundamentally reshaped by processes that have enabled the integration of English into its existing language landscape and the implications and outcomes of this linguistic shift is critical to understanding current English teaching practices.

Vietnam’s political struggles are known to have had a significant influence on foreign language adoption (Lo Bianco, Wright) but the reforms since *Doi Moi* represent a new form of investment in a language that has global cache. While an array of studies has attempted to investigate varied aspects of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction in Vietnam, these mainly rely on connections between learning conditions and language development, characterized by the challenges created by culture-specific instructional norms (Phan and Le, Dat, Gorsuch and Taguchi). This is important history because models of language learning are shifting with the growing recognition of the primacy of English writing competency (Nguyen).

The study also extends second language writing research into an international context by building on the theory of genre-based writing that values writing as knowledge-making activity (Hyon). Tracing the complex relationship of location, resources, and social practices associated with English instruction, this article will not only offer recommendations for improving English teacher education in the Vietnamese context but it will also argue for a genre-oriented paradigm of language literacy, one that views writing not simply as an act of recording knowledge but as a systematic knowledge-making activity in itself (Berlin, Bazerman, Halliday). This focus thus highlights English literacy efforts in a historically significant nation such as Vietnam, allows for the rethinking of college English instruction, and proposes an alternate rhetorical and theoretical framework for English language learning that illuminates the transformative role of writing in an increasingly globalized world.

**Method**

The study focuses on the beliefs, perceptions, and practices related to college English writing instruction of teachers in Vietnam. The method of inquiry for this study was in the form of semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews a year later. The questions designed for the study explored teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and past experiences with the teaching and learning of writing for EFL purposes. Faculty participants responded to questions about the theoretical and pedagogical principals that inform their teaching, what they believe to be best practices in teaching writing, what challenges they face as writing instructors and why, and the curricular changes they might suggest and instructional practices and approaches they might adopt for improved writing outcomes. The qualitative data in the form of responses to interview questions were coded based upon standard ethnographic practices and analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser).

**Initial Findings**

DOMAINS THAT IMPACT WRITING INSTRUCTION

* Self-confidence and preparedness as writing instructors
* Perceptions of effectiveness as writing instructors and challenges in the classroom
* Understanding of features of effective writing
* Perceived gaps in writing curriculum and instruction with recommendations

**Beliefs and perceptions about self-confidence and preparedness to teach writing in English**

In a variety of ways teachers report their lack of experience and preparedness to teach English in general, and writing in particular. One notes that she is “not good at writing” and admits to her fear of teaching writing skills because she lacks proper vocabulary and has a problem with organization and identification of ideas. Several mention that their listening and speaking skills are not sufficient, that they are ‘lazy’ in terms of writing in English because although had been active writers during their college days, keeping notes in diaries or journals, they no longer have the time to practice writing. There is also a pervasive sense that despite their best attempts to teaching writing skills, they are not prepared enough and thus not very successful in teaching college level English. A senior teacher reports that “to be a teacher means that you can help your learners to learn to do what they need to do in the future but sometimes it’s impossible for me to explain or guide them to do what they need to do or just tell them what to do. I feel sometimes very like…useless.” Of the 9 study participants only one showed noticeable confidence in her teaching abilities referring to her knowledge of “background theories in teaching and learning in English” so she can help students understand the theories and then give them a chance to practice “what to learn and how to learn.” She mentions that since she was trained only in teaching general English skills, she had to rely on her own intuitive abilities to teach the individual skills. She admits that she is better at listening and speaking than in reading and writing.

Data analysis and findings on other domains that impact writing instruction to follow..

**Conclusion (work-in-progress and still to be thought through…)**

In this climate of growing linguistic diversity and the global expansion of English language learning, I argue, the introduction of a new model of genre-oriented writing in English may serve the goal articulated by Vietnam’s Prime Minister: “Making foreign languages a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country” (Nguyen Ngoc Hung). Genre, as understood in composition studies, proposes the framing of writing as a typified rhetorical act produced in the context of a recurring situation, for a specific audience, and in response to a particular exigence (see Bazerman, Bawarshi, Miller, Halliday). Developing an approach that understands the rhetorical element of writing as “lived textuality” (Devitt and Bawarshi) helps focus on how actual language use is related to ideas, beliefs, and values. Thus, the consideration of writing in English as response to a rhetorical circumstance (see Bitzer) and performed as an act of social construction, has the potential to transform Vietnam’s skills-oriented view of language learning into one where language works in meaningful connection with social and cultural contexts, a claim that has implications not only for academic but also for community and civic life.