Teacher agency in enacting English language curriculum: The case of primary school EFL teachers in Vietnam

Thi Loan Vu
Hong Duc University, Vietnam

Teacher agency in Vietnam is an under-researched area, to the cost of recognising teacher professionalism, the role of teachers in curriculum reform and, consequently, the success of important curriculum improvements. This paper reports on a multiple-case study investigating teacher agency in primary schools implementing the national EFL curriculum reform. Four teachers from different primary schools in one province in Vietnam were interviewed and observed in their classrooms. To give voice to these teachers, the findings are presented as storylines, revealing that they took differing paths of agency, which resulted in various curriculum outcomes. Working in low-resourced, policy-constraining contexts, the teachers revealed that they were exercising agency for the benefit of students and their own well-being. They mobilised available resources to act upon their beliefs and capacity. We argue that failing to recognise the presence and importance of teacher agency impacts on the quality of teaching and learning of EFL.

Introduction

Teacher agency has been an important construct in educational research, particularly when it provides a lens through which to make connections between curriculum policy and teacher practice (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Priestley et al., 2013). Teacher agency refers to teachers exercising power to act, to influence, and to make choices and decisions about their work (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The focus of this paper is on agency among under-researched Vietnamese primary-school teachers, how they make choices about enacting the curriculum, and with what effect.

In several middle-income, South-East Asian countries, such as Vietnam, the issue of teacher agency is problematic and often not recognised. First, Vietnamese teachers are civil/public servants and are expected to carry out all schooling policy, including curriculum, faithfully. As Kennedy and Lee (2010, p. 90) put it: "Different Asian societies have tended to use curriculum documents as key policy tools to indicate directions in the form of objectives, goals, standards or expected outcomes." Second, and strongly related to this, curriculum design and development in Vietnam is "highly centralized" (Kennedy & Lee, 2010, p. 91), with teachers playing little part in those processes. Implementation of the curriculum documents is simply part of a top-down policy process. Teachers are positioned as 'mere' policy implementers (Le et al., 2020). Indicators in OECD data (OECD, 2018) appear to reflect these points, reporting that teachers in Vietnam exercise very low levels of autonomy in determining course content and selecting learning materials.

Teacher agency in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam adds a further dimension to the issue (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017). Vietnamese English language teachers play a vital role in realising the government's English language education policy, which is

important for the country's integration and development. Reflecting this, English is now a mandatory subject in school graduation examinations, with Vietnamese and mathematics. As such, curriculum, teaching, and learning of English in public schools is a major concern for the country's political and educational leaders; yet, despite its importance, there remains a lack of research into EFL teacher agency to determine its impact on teaching and learning.

In the light of this lack of recognition of, and research into, teacher agency in Vietnam, especially in English language teaching, this paper reports on original research into the exercise of English language teacher agency at primary school level in Vietnam. The research question driving the study was: How do primary school EFL teachers in Vietnam exercise agency within the mandated curriculum, and with what outcomes?

Teacher agency: theory and practice

Theorising teacher agency

Teacher agency remains an emergent concept despite its prevalence in educational research (Chisholm et al, 2019; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Definitions vary according to the theoretical perspectives from which it has been explored (Toom et al., 2015). From a traditional sociological view of human action, agency is seen as individual capacity or a personal attribute: it is the desire to act or not to act (Davies, 1990). However, others consider this view of agency as incomplete. Zembylas (2003) argued that agency should be considered in its cultural and political contexts, as it "cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power from which it is constructed" (p. 221).

In considering the influence of contextual conditions, researchers taking an ecological perspective have defined agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement. There are two aspects of this definition: engagement and temporality. Engagement means that agency is positioned within the contingencies of the contexts in which agents act (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This notion emphasises that the contextual conditions in which teachers work are fundamental to the exercise of agency and cannot be dismissed in any analysis of teacher capacity to act. The second aspect is the temporal and dynamic nature of teacher agency: agency encompasses the dynamic interplay between three dimensions: iterative (past), projective (future), and practical-evaluative (present) (Priestley et al., 2015). This means that agency builds upon past achievements (iterative); it is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past (projective); and it is acted out in the present (practical-evaluative).

A more recent subject-centred, socio-cultural approach to agency also sees individuals as embodied and agentic human actors who possess a unique life history and personal goals, which are fundamental resources for action and shape their actions in the present. Here, agency centres on the individual and is framed by the individual's personal goals. However, agency is also constrained and supported by broader social and institutional working contexts (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hilferty, 2008).

In the context of educational reform, where teachers have played little part in policy development, their involvement in the reform process only becomes prominent in the implementation stage, and includes the choices and decisions made by the teachers about the reform, manifested in two aspects: in taking a position towards the reform; and, in engaging with the reform. Thus, teacher agency can be studied by examining how teachers are involved in these two aspects, through their conscious stances and their deliberate activities taken while enacting the reform (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

My study takes the concept of agency as something that individuals do. Teacher agency was investigated by examining individual teachers' choices, decisions, and actions in implementing curricular reforms in EFL, taking into account their life history and personal goals, as well as the socio-cultural contexts of their workplace. Teachers as agents are seen as whole persons with unique past experiences, emotions, commitments, and concerns for their own well-being.

Research on teacher agency in Vietnamese primary schools

Attention to teacher agency and curriculum reform has increased significantly in recent decades (Dinh & Sannino, 2024). However, In Vietnam teacher agency remains an under-investigated research area across schools and subject areas (Le et al., 2020; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Vu, 2021). Several studies examining teacher agency in Vietnamese EFL contexts have been identified (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Dang et al., 2023; Hoang & Le, 2017; Le et al., 2020; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Huyen Pham & Hamid, 2017; Phyak & Bui, 2014; Tran, 2019; Thi Tran et al., 2023). Of these, three (Hoang & Le, 2017; Le et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2023) investigated teacher agency among primary school teachers of EFL.

All three studies examined teacher agency in reform implementation, and each was a very small-scale study in a limited, singular context. Hoang and Le (2017) investigated how one EFL teacher in a remote rural school in the south of the country responded to primary school English language policy change. They found that the new curriculum, which had been passed on through top-down practice with little cognisance of teachers as active thinkers, made the teacher feel disempowered and deprived of agency. In the other study, Le et al. (2020) explored how primary EFL teachers in one offshore, island school in northern Vietnam exhibited their agency in response to policy change. Their findings showed that teachers adapted policy to their interpretation and preference even though they were positioned by policy makers and education managers as 'mere' policy implementers. Tran et el. (2023) examined the ways in which teachers enacted the mandated teaching methods into practice. They found that teachers either accepted or resisted the curriculum's prescribed methods. Their responses were influenced by factors such as prior knowledge, professional experience, insights gained from professional development, the curriculum framework, the school's available resources, and the characteristics of their students.

However, these studies failed to depict the divergence in teachers' responses to reform and how the lack of infrastructure impacts on the nature of Vietnamese EFL teacher

agency. The shortcomings in previous studies led to the current research to theorise teacher agency in more representative Vietnamese EFL contexts.

Teachers' responses to CLT curriculum

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a core feature of the national EFL curricula in Vietnam. Developed in Western contexts in the early 1970s, CLT's key principle is the promotion of authentic interaction in the target language (Ellis et al., 2019). It rejected "methods which stressed the teaching of grammatical forms and paid little or no attention to the way that language is used in everyday situations" (Crystal, 2006, p. 439). Instead, it focuses on creating multiple opportunities for learners to try out their language knowledge; encouraging them to develop both accuracy and fluency; and linking different language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Richards, 2006). In a CLT classroom, students engage in different oral and written second language (L2) communicative activities or tasks (Butler, 2011), such as role-plays, simulations, storytelling, picture descriptions, and language games (Kayi, 2006). Pair and group work are also strongly encouraged to create opportunities for interaction and negotiation among students (Butler, 2011).

Many Asian jurisdictions have mandated CLT as the core pedagogy in their EFL programs (Butler, 2011). However, teachers have often found it challenging to apply CLT in their classrooms due to various constraints (Copland et al., 2014). First, the core principles of CLT, which promote a student-centred and interactive pedagogy, clash with traditional educational practices in many Asian countries (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Jin & Yoo, 2019). Second, local classroom conditions, characterised by large classes and limited facilties, make CLT implementation difficult (Butler, 2011; Jin & Yoo, 2019). Third, Asian teachers often receive only basic training in the underpinning theory of CLT and its practical applications (Copland et al., 2014).

Therefore, previous research has found that teachers in Asian EFL contexts, beyond Vietnam, exercise considerable agency when implementing CLT in their classrooms: either by taking agentic actions to bridge the gaps between policy expectations and local contingency (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Hoang & Le, 2017; Le et al., 2020); or by either covertly or overtly resisting policy mandates (Choi, 2015; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Li & Baldauf, 2011).

Methods

To address the research question, my study aimed to explore, in depth, how different primary school teachers exercised agency when enacting the EFL curriculum in their specific classrooms. A multiple-case study design using qualitative research methods was deemed most appropriate because exploring teacher agency invariably involves in-depth, in-context, research. Its complexities demand protracted, careful observation, ongoing dialogue, and detailed analysis with a limited number of participants (Babbie, 2016).

The cases selected were four primary EFL teachers at different public schools in one urban district in North Central Vietnam. After distributing research information letters, approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), and conducting selective interviews, four participants were finally drawn up. The four case study teachers selected, all female but not by design, had different experiences of teaching at the primary level and were willing to participate fully in the study. Each participant was given a pseudonym: Dao, Cuc, Sen and Mai. Table 1 presents their profiles.

Table 1: Participant teachers' profiles

Teacher	Teaching experience	Teaching experience at primary level	Year level	Qualifications	Self-reported English proficiency
Dao	15 years	7 years	Year 3 and 4	Bachelor	B2
Cuc	18 years	15 years	Year 5	Bachelor	B1
Sen	14 years	1 years	Year 4 and 5	Bachelor	B2
Mai	19 years	15 years	Year 3 and 4	Bachelor	B2

Note: The teachers' English proficiency levels are based on the 6-level *English Competencies Framework* for Vietnam, which is compatible with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2024). The six levels are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2.

All four participants had a Bachelor of Teaching qualification and 14 or more years of teaching experience. All four taught across Years 3, 4 and 5, the grades where the national primary English curriculum was mandated.

Data collection

The data for the current study is drawn from the data pool used in Vu's (2021) study. Data collection involved interviewing the teachers and observing their classroom practices. In line with the University's HREC's permission, access to the schools, teachers, and classrooms involved informed consent from school principals.

Data were collected over six weeks, from March to April 2018, and involved: (i) an in-depth, semi-structured interview with each teacher at the outset; (ii) four classroom observations of each teacher; and (iii) follow-up interviews (Vu, 2021, pp. 282-294). The initial interview was to discover the teachers' previous experiences, their understandings of the curriculum, and their interpretations of CLT and 'child-friendly' pedagogy. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Four semi-structured observations of each teacher in their classrooms were conducted, with each lesson video recorded. Each observation was one full teaching lesson of 45 minutes. Observation protocols were also used to record CLT and non-CLT activities. Follow-up interviews occurred after each lesson in the form of informal converstaion, each lasted between 20 to 30 minutes, to ask teachers questions about their practices observed, and to allow teachers to discuss their classroom activities and actions. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.

Data analysis

First, interviews were transcribed verbatim and were returned to participants for checking, to ensure their approval of the accuracy of their statements. Observation notes and field notes were re-written and re-organised to make full observation data. Each teacher's data set was analysed separately, before conducting a cross-case analysis.

Data from the interviews and observations were analysed from the "ground up" (Yin, 2014, p. 136). The analysis of each case's dataset began by reading the transcripts several times before coding. The coding process was guided by the theory of agency as presented. Primary coding of the data (Miles et al., 2014) were conducted by attaching labels to words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that denoted the teacher's stances, choices, and actions: how they responded to the curriculum – supported or resisted it; how they decided to enact the curriculum in the classroom, and what they did. We also identified and examined the socio-cultural and personal factors influencing each teacher's stances, choices, and actions, including the school cultures, working environment, teacher's personal history and past experiences.

Primary codes were then compared and merged into second level codes. The second level codes centred on the teacher's personalities, personal history, professional background and past experiences, the socio-cultural conditions of the schools, their choices and actions were arranged on a chronological order and reorganised into a storyline to reflect a unique agency 'path' each teacher took. In this study, the term 'path' I used was derived from Vietnamese folk narratives where actors negotiate paths through rice fields, forests, or mountains on journeys towards a desired goal (Nguyen, et al, 2021). Here, paths are a metaphor to denote the individual ways of responding and enacting the curriculum, which were found to be off the prescribed CLT 'main road'. The paths of agency are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' paths of agency

Teachers	Paths of agency
Dao	Self-exertion on a path of committed fidelity
Sen	Puzzlement on a path of confused struggle
Cuc	Willingness on a path of creative compliance
Mai	Adamancy on a path of wilful resistance

On the premise that writing is a form of analysis (Stake, 2010), the teachers' storylines were written, rewritten and cross-checked to ensure that the main themes that emerged from each data set accurately reflected the views and practices of each teacher. In the final stages, evidential quotations from the interviews or observations were translated into English for purposes of illustration, and the accuracy of translations were checked by a Vietnamese PhD candidate in linguistics.

To carry out the cross-case analysis, we adopted a case-oriented approach (Miles et al., 2014). Individual cases were compared to look for underlying commonalities and

"constant associations" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 102) to form general explanations about teacher agency in reform implementation.

Case findings

Case findings are presented below in the form of storylines. In writing the storylines, the path descriptors that summarise the teachers' agency serve as the titles. The four cases presented move from the participant most faithful to the curriculum to the one most resistant to it.

Dao: Self-exertion on a path of committed fidelity

Dao was an energetic and enthusiastic teacher who had been in the profession for 15 years, seven of which were at primary level. In interviews, Dao advocated for CLT:

> I strongly support CLT. It is great that children can learn to communicate. I don't want to teach my students the way I was taught, that was learning English grammar and doing exercises. Learning that way, I am now still not confident when speaking English.

Mentioning her unpleasant learning experiences, Dao affirmed that she would implement the new curriculum to the best of her understanding for the benefit of her students: "They need to learn to communicate in English."

However, Dao also said that the school's material and technological conditions were not conducive to implementing CLT. There were "hardly any specialist facilities and resources" for English teaching and learning. Classroom furniture was "fixed", with heavy, immoveable desks and benches arranged in rows; class sizes were large, with an average of 40 students. In addition, the "achievement disease" (Nguyen & Mai, 2015, p. 215) strongly affected teaching and learning activities at her school. School leaders cultivated a competitive and achievement-focused working culture; her colleagues focused on drilling students for tests, and students were constantly learning for tests.

In addition, Dao received little support from colleagues and leaders. Other teachers complained when they heard noise from Dao's class as she conducted communicative activities. Meanwhile, her direct professional supervisor, the school principal, failed to provide any support due to their lack of expertise in the field of English teaching:

> The principal sometimes checks my lesson plans or observes my teaching. However, their comments are mostly on the format of the lesson plans, rather than on teaching activities and techniques.

In such circumstances, Dao acted to bridge the gaps between the idealised policy conditions and her local realities. She invested considerable personal, financial, time, and energy resources to apply CLT. For example, she spent her own money buying essential equipment, including a laptop, a set of portable speakers, a microphone, a Wi-Fi extender, and sets of flashcards, which she brought to school for every lesson. In addition, she sought materials from different sources to use in teaching: "I paid for access to online

courses and English teaching websites so that I could make use of their materials". She also spent much time preparing her lessons: "I often get up early to look for materials on the Internet to prepare my lessons." On top of that, she always closed the windows tightly when conducting communicative activities, to reduce the noise.

Evidence from observation showed that Dao attempted to apply CLT and a child-friendly pedagogy to the best of her understanding. Her lessons reflected her interpretation of CLT as the teaching of listening and speaking, with a strong focus on developing these oral skills. She always started the observed lessons with a little song and ended with some singing or chanting activities; she also organised many language games and pair and group work activities. In addition, she attempted to apply a child-friendly pedagogy, using activities such as total physical response (TPR), reading in chorus, memory games, spelling games and other oral activities. She used extrinsic motivation techniques to promote communicative English learning, such as giving candy rewards for students' efforts in speaking English.

In response to the lack of professional support and learning opportunities, Dao actively sought opportunities to improve her knowledge and skills by accessing more training at her personal cost: "I have attended some extra training courses on CLT where I paid for my attendance". Moreover, she initiated many strategies to develop her skills, knowledge, and profession: she joined a local 'English Teacher Club' – an unofficial professional community established by teachers, to engage in pedagogical discussions and to extend her professional contacts.

Cuc: Willingness on a path of creative compliance

Cuc was an experienced primary English teacher who had gone through two previous curriculum reforms. She was willing to conform to policy directives: "As an English teacher teaching at a public school, my responsibility is to comply with the curriculum". She expressed strong support for, and a firm commitment to, implementing the current reform to the best of her capacity. As well as aspiring to conform to policy, she believed that students currently needed, and would need, English for communication in the future.

However, there were many contextual constraints to CLT application at her school, including large classes of over 40 students, inflexible classroom arrangement, where desks and benches were arranged in fixed rows, and limited time allocation for English teaching - only two periods of English per week. In response, Cuc chose to adapt her practices to meet the curricular demands: "I have to make sure that my teaching meets the requirements of the curriculum".

She made use of the school's projectors, speakers, and cassette players to provide her students with more visual and audio input. However, due to the limited time allocation for English teaching, she chose to focus on vocabulary and sentence structures. She reinforced students' knowledge using songs and simple games that students could participate in without moving around. She also used pair and group work activities, role-play, and games in every lesson. She explained: "The textbook content is too heavy and

strongly grammar based. We teachers have to cover all the content. However, I always try my best to develop communicative skills for students". As Cuc understood CLT to mean teachers speaking more English in class, she always spoke English when teaching in class; she also encouraged her students to speak English by initiating conversations with them. Her actions saw Cuc refining the curriculum's requirements within her understanding of them to make them workable in practice.

Sen: Puzzlement on a path of confused struggle

A secondary school English teacher for 15 years, Sen was new to the current reformed curriculum at the primary level. She had only been transferred to her current primary school one year previous to this study. In preparation for the transfer, she attended a one-day training workshop provided by the Provincial Department of Education and Training.

From the outset, Sen expressed ambivalent attitudes toward the curriculum's pedagogical requirements, stating that she should conform to policy but also saying that it was impossible to implement CLT in her context. She referred to constraints such as the lack of resources and facilities, students' low motivation, and the lack of opportunities for students to use English outside the classroom.

In follow-up interviews, Sen admitted that she did not understand CLT and knew little about how to teach English to young learners, attributing this to her inadequate training and limited professional learning opportunities. When probing her understandings of CLT, she replied: "I have heard about it at some training workshops, but I don't really understand what it is and how it works." For her, CLT meant providing students with opportunities to practise oral skills. In addition, Sen also confessed to having little knowledge about the curriculum. She did not have a curriculum document to hand; instead, she only referred to the textbook, the accompanying syllabi, and the teacher's manuals, considering these as reliable curriculum statements.

In all lessons observed, Sen used the single textbook as her sole teaching material. Each lesson followed the same pattern: she started with a little game, then students completed exercises on the required parts in the textbook and finally finished with a song. She always singled out key vocabulary and sentence patterns and spent most of the class time teaching these. She used repetition, oral drilling, and controlled practice as her main teaching techniques to reinforce students' memorisation. She selectively omitted certain sections of the textbook, especially those with more communicative activities, explaining that: "There was nothing new in those sections because no new vocabulary or sentence patterns were introduced."

To comply with the guidelines, Sen included some interactive activities such as games, songs, and chants in her lessons. However, she mainly used songs and chants as warm-ups or extra activities, not as authentic teaching techniques. Any pair or group work activities in the observed lessons simply involved individual students or groups of students taking turns reading language samples from the textbooks. Despite these activities, Sen struggled

to deliver the textbook content employing her traditional methods, leading to the curriculum being enacted in ways very different from its original intentions.

Mai: Adamancy on a path of wilful resistance

Mai was the most experienced and well-prepared primary English teacher of the four. A teacher of primary-level English for 15 years, she was recognised as a key regional EFL teacher. In recognition of this role, she received extensive training in preparation for implementing the new English curriculum. As a result, her interpretation of the curriculum's key pedagogy was accurate: "CLT is a language teaching method that uses communication as a means of teaching to build up learners' communicative skills."

Despite these advantages, Mai demonstrated strong resistance to the curriculum's requirements. From the outset, she stated that CLT was inappropriate for her primary English classrooms, for four main reasons: (i) the backwash effect of the old-fashioned testing system; (ii) the lack of opportunities for using English outside classrooms; (iii) mixed-ability classes and large class sizes; and (iv) the disconnection between English at primary and secondary school levels. Elaborating on these, Mai said she could not prioritise communicative English over preparation for tests because "exams of all types are still designed in the form of discrete-point test items with a heavy focus on grammatical knowledge and vocabulary... We, teachers, have no other choice but to teach to the tests." She added that students had little motivation to learn English for communication as they had no opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Moreover, a large class of mixed-level students made it impossible to apply CLT: "There are too many students in one class… Many don't understand when I speak English, and they don't want to participate in communicative activities." Finally, elaborating on the disconnection between primary and secondary English education, she explained:

> English teachers at the secondary level still have a form-focused teaching approach. For example, if I focus on developing communication skills for my students, then later, secondary school teachers would complain that my students lack basic grammar knowledge and that we primary school teachers do not do our job well.

Given her perceived constraints, Mai took an overtly resistant stance toward the curriculum and adopted a 'practical' grammar-based teaching method. She was adamant that she would not adopt CLT to conform to the curriculum requirements if there was no overall change to facilitate learning English for communication. Even though Mai could perform a CLT lesson when required to please school leaders and educational officers viewing her class, she chose to teach to the test in everyday practice. In all the observed lessons, she focused intently on teaching vocabulary and grammar, using oral drilling and memorisation techniques. When teaching sentence patterns, she drew students' attention to language forms and grammar rules and strongly stressed the importance of these. Her practice reflected a mechanical delivery of textbook content, which was in complete opposition to the intention of the curriculum writers and policymakers.

Post-data collection developments

Data for the study was collected in early 2018. Later that year, Vietnam introduced an educational reform with the release of the *New Curriculum 2018*, which was implemented starting in the 2020-2021 school year. This curriculum emphasises increased local decision-making and greater teacher autonomy. Teachers are now expected to collaborate with colleagues to select textbooks and develop school-based curricula, marking a shift from previous practices. The long-standing tradition of using a single, government-prescribed textbook has been discontinued. Instead, teachers now have more control over their teaching materials, instructional methods, and assessment formats, provided they align with the national core curriculum (Dinh & Sannino, 2024).

Of the four case study teachers, two—Dao and Sen—have transferred to secondary schools (in 2021), feeling better suited to teaching older students. They found it difficult to teach students at the primary level and sought to develop their professional identities as English teachers within a more specialised community. They preferred working alongside other English teachers rather than being grouped with classroom teachers based on grade level.

Cuc and Mai chose to remain at the primary level. In her comments on the manuscript, Cuc noted positive changes in English teaching and learning at her school. The shift toward communicative language teaching has become more pronounced, with a greater focus on communicative activities and the increased use of technology in classrooms. Interactive boards have been installed in some classrooms, and more stable Wi-Fi now enables her to access pre-designed resources on-site. She can even deliver competitive online games to engage and motivate students.

Mai admitted that, despite the changes, she still finds it challenging to focus on developing students' communicative competence. However, she observed that teachers are now more open to adopting new methods and are increasingly proactive in adjusting their teaching to meet the curriculum requirements as effectively as possible.

Cross-case findings

We adopted a case-oriented approach to analyse the findings across the cases. The results are summarised in Figure 1.

Contrasting the cases produced deeper insights into each case. Each teacher had a unique personality, experiences, commitment, and future projection, bringing these to develop their own perspective on the reform. Their personal attributes influenced each teacher's choices and actions about implementing the curriculum, choices and actions in their teaching practices, and choices and actions in response to the constraints and difficulties they faced at work. Choices and decisions about reform implementation manifested as the stances the teachers took on the curriculum mandates, that is, whether to support the curriculum requirements and implement them in the classroom, or not. These choices and

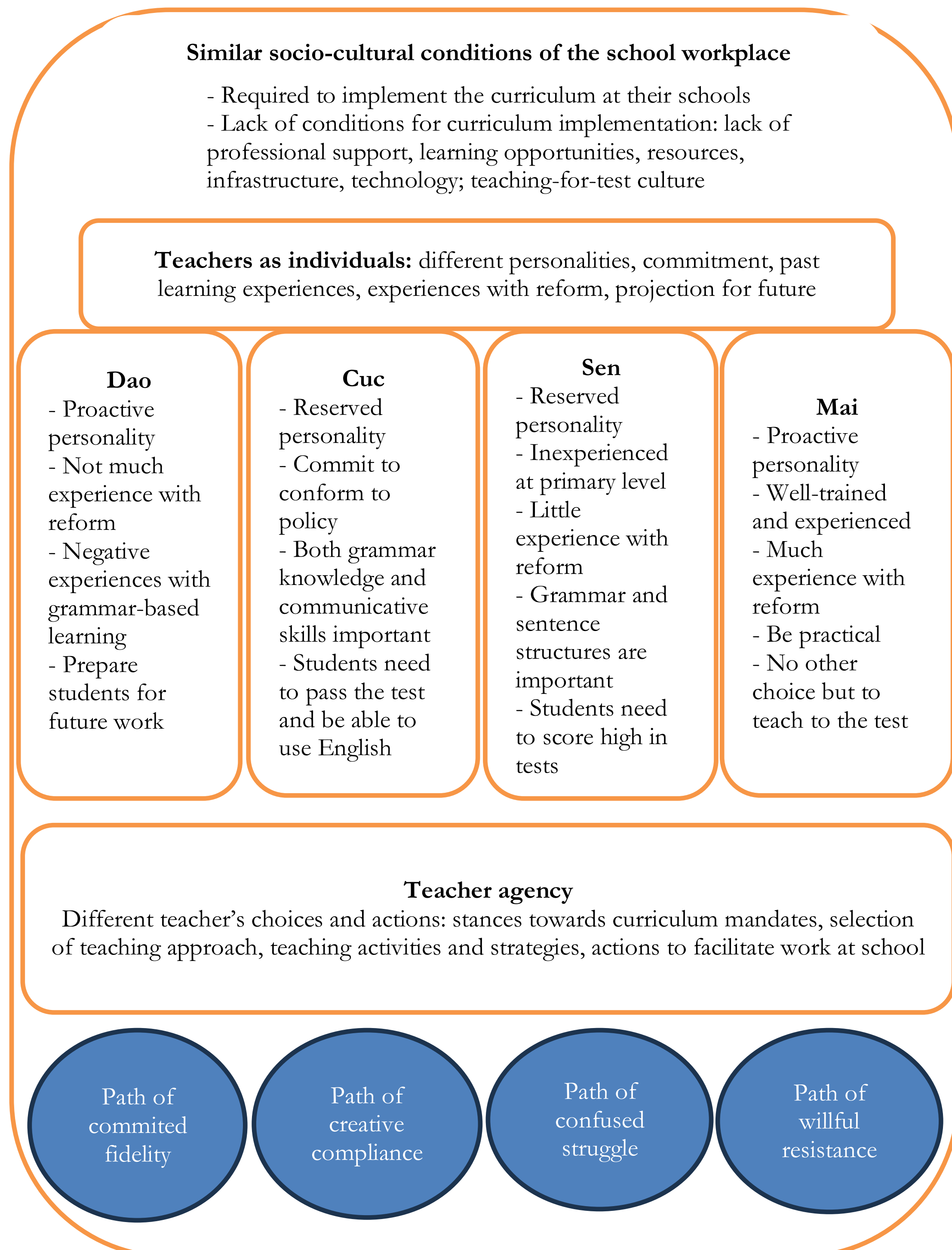

Figure 1: Summary of cross-case findings

decisions ranged from wholehearted fidelity towards the curriculum requirements (Dao) to strong resistance against them (Mai). Choices in teaching practices were manifested by the teachers' decisions on pedagogical approaches. In their classrooms, these choices were realised through actions as to how the teachers taught in class, time allocated for a specific area, their teaching activities and strategies, and classroom discourses and management. Finally, choices and actions in response to constraints and difficulties at work refer to teachers' other professional actions to facilitate their work at school.

In general, the case study teachers' choices, decisions and actions were made with intent, arising from their professional beliefs, interests, and capacity. Rather than instinctive responses to contextual conditions, their professional choices, decisions, and actions were manifestations of teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2013).

Discussion

At the outset of the paper, we described teacher agency as something teachers do within their work contexts (Goller & Harteis, 2017), manifested when teachers make choices and act upon these choices (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen 2015). Teacher agency was investigated by researching in depth the teachers' choices and actions when enacting the mandated curriculum within the socio-cultural and material conditions of the school workplace. The study revealed that workplace contextual conditions were largely similar across the four schools. Each teacher worked in a low-resourced environment where necessary material and technical requirements were not met. Also, there was a lack of professional support and accountability measures. On the one hand, the teachers were forced to exercise agency to get their job done. On the other hand, they took advantage of the inadvertent 'opportunity' to act as they wished in the school environment. In other words, the teachers not only acted in their environment but also acted by means of their environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). While this is in line with findings from previous studies, the ways the case study teachers acted in their school environment has not been discussed in the literature.

In addition, the findings revealed that contextual conditions might provide resources for, or constraints on, teacher agency; they did not shape teacher agency. Instead, the personal attributes and attitudes of the individual teachers led to the path of agency that each teacher took. The four teachers possessed different capacities, knowledge, and awareness of their responsibility and how they could contribute to the reform (Maclellan, 2017). Also, they had varied experiences with reforms, as they reflected on their own teaching and learning experiences (the iterative aspect). They indicated future perspectives, such as the importance of preparing students for future work and study, or of teaching to the test (the projective aspect). These factors combined to shape the teachers' choices and actions in the present (the practical-evaluative aspect) (Priestley et al., 2013). These findings reaffirm that teachers' individual qualities shape their agency (Buchanan, 2015).

Dao took self-exerted actions as she was a proactive personality willing to act, even beyond the policy expectations (Goller & Harteis, 2017), to implement the curriculum as

faithfully as possible. Similarly, Cuc was willing to comply with the curriculum requirements, in the light of the constraints at her school. Rather than buying additional items to use in class, she exploited the limited available resources and facilities and adjusted her teaching to meet the requirements and make the requirements fit her context. The two paths of committed fidelity and creative compliance taken by Dao and Cuc were seen as different ways to reach the prescribed goals. In extreme contrast, Mai rejected CLT as the appropriate approach, and deliberately resisted it. She went down a path in the opposite direction to the predetermined goal. Between Cuc and Mai, Sen's path of struggle was the result of much confusion, and her puzzlement saw her stuck in a maze and unable to reach the required destination.

The four paths of agency, as found in this study, reflect the rich differences in how teachers were involved in reform implementation. The path of committed fidelity is desirable, reflecting a strong commitment to the reform (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The path of creative compliance carries two meanings: assimilating the change into existing practices and adjusting existing practices to fit the new reform (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The path of struggle means that the teachers are ambivalent in implementing changes due to their limited knowledge and lack of capacity to implement the change in their context. Finally, the path of resistance means that the teachers refuse to adopt the innovation and explicitly reject the change. These four paths of agency are new findings of the current study. However, somehow such agency paths also reflect the different forms of curriculum implementation as discussed in Adamson and Davison (2003): accommodation (Dao), compliance (Cuc), pseudo-compliance (Sen) and resistance (Mai).

The exercise of teacher agency in the four cases reported here reflects positively on the teachers in several respects. The first two cases reveal authoritative professionalism that many stakeholders would find worthy. However, in terms of addressing the goals of the curriculum and the projected needs of the students as intended by the curriculum writers, in the latter three of the four cases, the learning outcomes of their students were and would be, well wide and short of the intended mark. That raises deep concerns about the nature and extent of teacher agency revealed in this study.

Finally, the research findings challenge assertions about compliant, docile, civil servant teachers in Vietnam, who simply do what they are told and implement curricula as government curricular policy writers intend. The findings reveal teachers with strong views on the meaning of the curriculum statements, and their underlying philosophies. They go about selecting or rejecting pedagogies, resources and techniques that fit their personal perspectives, beliefs and attitudes. Whether their outcomes are beneficial or negative, the teachers reveal themselves to be determined and committed professionals willing to take stances on the justices or injustices of the curriculum, with an eye on the future prospects for their students.

Conclusions and implications

There are important implications from the research outcomes revealed in the study. We argue that Vietnamese primary EFL teachers exercise a high level of agency when enacting the curriculum; thus, failing to recognise the centrality of teacher agency has led, and will continue to lead to, necessary reforms not being implemented as intended. Therefore, we propose several implications for curriculum policy making and implementation arising from these findings, especially in the Vietnamese context, where centralised curriculum design development and 'top-down' implementation continue to be part of the educational culture. The following factors influencing teacher agency need to be considered when making policy as they are crucial to policy implementation: teachers' aspirations to comply with policy, teachers' policy knowledge, and teachers' professional repertoires.

First, it is vital to promote teachers' aspirations to conform to a policy as teachers can vary in their obligations and willingness to comply with a policy. To promote teachers' aspirations for reform implementation, teachers, especially the experienced and knowledgeable, like Mai, could be involved more in policy making, in the least at the regional level. Through greater active involvement, these teachers can match their pedagogical expertise and experience with the spirit and direction of the reform from the outset. As such, they own and become leaders of reform rather than mere implementers, or resisters. Moreover, they can make an invaluable contribution to the reform process through their authoritative voice, which derives from their intimate knowledge of their students, available resources, and the obdurate practicalities of their work (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001). If this can be done, it is more likely that teachers, who tend to resist, will exercise positive agency in ways consistent with the policy aims (Jennings, 1996).

Second, carefully developing teachers' knowledge and understandings of the new policy are essential before implementation. It becomes critical to pay adequate attention to communicating policy knowledge to the teachers, which can be done by providing adequate professional training on the key aspects and nuances of the curriculum. The specific issue of CLT in this study is a powerful example of the need to carefully prepare teachers in a pedagogy originating from a Western context that exists outside the teachers' typical ambit. The training should also focus on the expectations and meanings of the reforms to the teachers.

Third, teachers' pedagogical repertoires regarding the new reform need expanding through professional training. All the teachers in this study, which I confidently expect will reflect a large number of teachers at a larger scale, needed more professional learning on CLT. Those willing to conform, like Dao and Cuc, still revealed the need for more training on CLT principles and pedagogical implications to enhance their pedagogies to meet curricular expectations. Those who struggled, like Sen, need explicit instruction on the nature of CLT and how to apply it in practical, realistic ways in typical Vietnamese classrooms. Changing behaviours by facilitating CLT will encourage greater application of its principles, hopefully and gradually changing the resistant teachers' beliefs, choices, and actions. Ideally, training programs should provide teachers with both theoretical principles

and practical, hands-on teaching activities and techniques to apply in their specific classrooms. Training courses should also focus on how to adapt materials and design activities to suit specific teaching contexts. In addition, as the teachers' professional needs are diverse, there should be various training programs that cater for different groups of teachers.

This article has described the exercise of teacher agency in EFL curriculum implementation in Vietnam on a small scale through the description of four teachers' professional choices, decisions, and actions. In revealing a spectrum of agentic responses in one level of schooling in one subject curriculum, its importance lies in raising understandings of teacher agency and its implications for curriculum and pedagogies generally, and in EFL especially, in Vietnamese primary schools. The study has questioned and even redefined aspects of professional teacher capacities in Vietnam. The cases show how teacher agency was exercised and confirmed its significant role in curriculum enactment. From the findings, we have also provided practical implications for future policy making and implementation. However, due to the small scale of this case study, no firm generalisations are being made. This limitation opens up directions for future research; more studies conducted in different contexts are needed to generate a more comprehensive picture of teachers exercising agency in response to curriculum mandates in EFL settings.

Acknowledgements

This article is drawn from the PhD thesis submitted by Thi Loan Vu to Edith Cowan University, Australia, in 2021 (Vu, 2021). The author acknowledges gratefully the participation of the four classroom teachers who gave so much to the research.

References

Adamson, B. & Davison, C. (2003). Innovation in English language teaching in Hong Kong primary schools: One step forward, two steps sideways? *Prospect*, 18(1), 27-41.

Babbie, E. (2016). *The practice of social research* (14th ed.). Cengage Learning. [15th ed.] https://au.cengage.com/c/the-practice-of-social-research-15e-babbie/9780357360767/

Biesta, G. & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 132-149. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661545

Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 21(6), 700-719. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044329

Butler, Y. G. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 36-57. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190511000122

CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) (2024). *The CEFR levels*. Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions

Chisholm, J. S., Alford J., Halliday, L. M. & Cox, F. M. (2019). Teacher agency in English language arts teaching: A scoping review of the literature. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 18(2), 124-152. http://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-05-2019-0080

Choi, T-H. (2015). The impact of the 'Teaching English through English' policy on teachers and teaching in South Korea. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 16(3), 201-220. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2015.970727

Copland, F., Garton, S. & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(4), 738-762. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43268015

Crystal, D. (2006). *How language works*. Penguin. https://www.penguin.com.au/books/how-language-works-popular-penguins-9780141037363

Dang, T. K. A., Bohlinger, S. & Cong-Lem, N. (2024). Teachers' transformative agency in English-medium instruction in higher education in Vietnam: A cultural-historical theory perspective. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, online first. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2349803

Davies, B. (1990). Agency as a form of discursive practice. A classroom scene observed. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(3), 341-361. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569900110306

Dinh, H. & Sannino, A. (2024). Toward a diagnostic toolkit for intervention in teachers' agency during curriculum reform: Groundwork for a Change Laboratory in Vietnam. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 140, article 104494. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104494

Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N. & Lambert, C. (2019). *Task-based language teaching: Theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/au/universitypress/subjects/languages-linguistics/applied-linguistics-and-second-language-acquisition/task-based-language-teaching-theory-and-practice?format=PB

Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P. & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational Research Review*, 10, 45-65. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001

Goller, M. & Harteis, C. (2017). Human agency at work: Towards a clarification and operationalisation of the concept. In M. Goller & S. Paloniemi (Eds.), *Agency at work: An agentic perspective on professional learning and development* (pp. 85-103). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60943-0_5

Hamid, M. O. & Nguyen, H. T. M. (2016). Globalization, English language policy, and teacher agency: Focus on Asia. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 15(1), 26-43. https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/IEJ/article/view/10442/10397

Hilferty, F. (2008). Theorising teacher professionalism as an enacted discourse of power. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(2), 161-173. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701837521

Hoang, H. & Le, B. T. (2017). Teacher agency and autonomy in rural Vietnam. In P. C. L. Ng & E. F. Boucher-Yip (Eds.), *Teacher agency and policy response in English language teaching* (pp. 188-202). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315646701-14/teacher-agency-autonomy-rural-vietnam-ha-hoang-le-bach-truong

Huyen Phan, T. T. & Hamid, M. O. (2017). Learner autonomy in foreign language policies in Vietnamese universities: an exploration of teacher agency from a sociocultural perspective. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 18(1), 39-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2016.1201231

Humphries, S. & Burns, A. (2015). 'In reality it's almost impossible': CLT-oriented curriculum change. *ELT Journal*, 69(3), 239-248. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccu081

Jennings, N. E. (1996). *Interpreting policy in real classrooms: Case studies of state reform and teacher practice*. Teachers College Press. https://archive.org/details/interpretingpoli0000jenn

Jin, Y. J. & Yoo, W. H. (2019). Why communicative language teaching has yet to work in Korea: Exploring teachers' viewpoints. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 16(4), 1332-1347. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2019.16.4.17.1332

Kayi, H. (2006). Teaching speaking: Activities to promote speaking in a second language. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 12(11). http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kayi-TeachingSpeaking.html

Kennedy, K. J. & Lee, J. C-K. (2010). *The changing role of schools in Asian societies: Schools for the knowledge society*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/The-Changing-Role-of-Schools-in-Asian-Societies-Schools-for-the-Knowledge-Society/Kennedy-Lee/p/book/9780415586887

Kirk, D. & MacDonald, D. (2001). Teacher voice and ownership of curriculum change. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 33(5), 551-567. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270010016874

Le, M. D., Nguyen, H. T. M. & Burns, A. (2020). English primary teacher agency in implementing teaching methods in response to language policy reform: A Vietnamese case study. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 22(1-2), 199-224. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2020.1741209

Canh, L. V. & Barnard, R. (2009). Curricular innovation behind closed classroom doors: A Vietnamese case study. *Prospect*, 24(2), 20-33. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/aeipt.178540 [also https://www.scribd.com/document/414660218/Canh-and-Barnard-pdf]

Li, M. & Baldauf, R. (2011). Beyond the curriculum: A Chinese example of issues constraining effective English language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(4), 793-803. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41307669

Maclellan, E. (2017). Shaping agency through theorizing and practicing teaching in teacher education. In D. J. Clandinin. & J. Husu (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of research in teacher education.* (pp. 253-268). https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/the-sage-handbook-of-research-on-teacher-education/book245642 [also https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/84915005.pdf]

Menken, K. & García, O. (2010). Introduction. In K. Menken & O. García (Eds.), *Negotiating language policies in schools: Educators as policymakers* (pp. 1-10). Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Negotiating-Language-Policies-in-Schools-Educators-as-Policymakers/Menken-Garcia/p/book/9780415802086

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M. & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications. [4th ed.] https://collegepublishing.sagepub.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-4-246128

Ng, P. C. L. & Boucher-Yip, E. F. (2017). *Teacher agency and policy response in English language teaching*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Teacher-Agency-and-Policy-Response-in-English-Language-Teaching/Ng-Boucher-Yip/p/book/9781138604544

Nguyen, C. D. & Huynh, T. N. (2021). Teacher agency in culturally responsive teaching: Learning to teach ethnic minority students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. *Educational Review,* 75(4), 719-743, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1974346

Nguyen, H. T. M. & Bui, T. (2016). Teachers' agency and the enactment of educational reform in Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 17(1), 88-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2016.1125664

Nguyen, T .K. N., Nguyen, T. T. H. & Le, V. T. (2021). Identity of the Vietnamese narrative culture: Archetypal journeys from folk narratives to fantasy short stories. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8, article 12. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00697-3

Nguyen, V. T. & Mai, N. K. (2015). Responses to a language policy: EFL teachers' voices. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences*, 13(2), 205-219. https://doi.org/10.15405/ejsbs.164

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2018). *Education GPS. Vietnam. Teachers and teaching conditions, primary to upper secondary education* (TALIS 2018). https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=VNM&treshold=5&topic=TA

Phyak, P. & Bui, T. T. N. (2014). Youth engaging language policy and planning: Ideologies and transformations from within. *Language Policy*, 13(2), 101-119. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-013-9303-x

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. & Robinson, S. (2013). Teachers as agents of change: Teacher agency and emerging models of curriculum. In M. Priestley & G. Biesta (Eds.), *Reinventing the curriculum: New trends in curriculum policy and practice* (pp. 187-206). Bloomsbury. http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/reinventing-the-curriculum-9781441134813/

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Publishing. https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/teacher-agency-9781472534668/

Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.professorjackrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/Richards-Communicative-Language.pdf

Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. Guilford Press. https://www.guilford.com/books/Qualitative-Research/Robert-Stake/9781606235454/author

Thi Tran, T., Le, T. T. T. & Nguyen, C. H. (2023). Primary school English teacher agency in enacting teaching methods in implementing the getting-to-know-English for grade 1 and grade 2 at two primary schools in Vietnam. *Education 3-13*, online first. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2258143

Toom, A., Pyhältö, K. & Rust, F. O. (2015). Teachers' professional agency in contradictory times. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 21(6), 615-623. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044334

Tran, H. (2019). Teacher agency in times of educational change: The case of transitioned teachers in Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 20(5), 544-559. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2018.1553912

Vähäsantanen, K. (2015). Professional agency in the stream of change: Understanding educational change and teachers' professional identities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 47, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.11.006

Vu, T. L. (2021). *Teacher agency and the enactment of curriculum: The case of primary school EFL teachers in Vietnam*. PhD thesis, Edith Cowan University, Australia. https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/2480

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE. [6th ed.] https://collegepublishing.sagepub.com/products/case-study-research-and-applications-6-250150

Zembylas, M. (2003). Emotions and teacher identity: A poststructural perspective. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 9(3), 213-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600309378

Dr Thi Loan Vu has worked at Hong Duc University, Vietnam, as an EFL instructor for more than 18 years. She completed her PhD in Education at Edith Cowan University, Australia, in 2021. Her research interests include TESOL teacher education, teacher professional development, language policy, and second language acquisition.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5254-0047
Email: vuthiloan@hdu.edu.vn

Please cite as: Vu, T. L. (2024). Teacher agency in enacting English language curriculum: The case of primary school EFL teachers in Vietnam. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(4), 1618-1637. http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/vu.pdf