

# Improving school teachers' capacity: Insiders' perceptions

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## I. Introduction

The development of Vietnam in the globalised world requires a comprehensive change in the teaching and learning of English in the country. Toward this goal, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has launched a long-term project, informally referred to as "National Project in Foreign Language Teaching 2020", which is aimed to equip most Vietnamese staff with an appropriate level of English competence for communication and work purposes in multicultural and multilingual environments.

As part of this project, teachers of English nationwide are required to take an exam (i.e. IELTS, TOEFL or FCE) to identify their levels on the basis of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as in the Appendix. Those who do not achieve the required levels (B1 for primary school teachers, B2 for junior high school teachers and C1 for high school teachers) receive further English training to help them achieve the set standards.

In this context, it is considered useful to explore the teachers' needs, plans and aspirations regarding their English and professional development. Ultimately, recommendations are provided in an attempt to improve the capacity of English teachers so that they can effectively contribute to the globalization process of Vietnam.

## II. The study

### 2.1 Research questions

A set of six questions were raised to explore the teachers' perceptions about issues related to their professional capacity, specifically as follows.

- (1) What are teachers' self assessment of their own **expertise** and **difficulties**?
- (2) What are their **self improvement strategies**?
- (3) What do they think about the **English test** taken?
- (4) What do they think about the **English training course**?
- (5) What do they **suggest** for their capacity improvement?

### 2.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire of five parts was designed to find data about the five researched issues. A summary of questionnaire contents was presented in the Table below. Part I (7 questions) was their self assessment of their expertise in relation to their job requirements, and the professional difficulties they faced while Part II (4 questions) studied their strategies for self capacity development. Part III (6 questions) explored their perceptions about the English proficiency test they took before the course and Part IV (5 questions) examined their experience with the English course they were taking. Part V dealt with their suggestions for capacity enhancement. This survey was conducted separately with two different groups of English teachers in various junior high schools in two central provinces in Vietnam. Results of a proficiency exam previously organized by an institution acknowledged by MOET showed that these teachers had achieved B1 level (i.e. a score of 4 -4.5 in IELTS).

**Table: Contents of questionnaire**

Part		Questions	Contents
I	Professional expertise	1	Overall language proficiency
		2,3,4 &5	Language skills & knowledge
		6 & 7	Difficulties
II	Self improvement strategies	1 & 2	Current activities
		3 & 4	Future activities
III	Proficiency Test	1 & 2	Test difficulty
		3	Test timing
		4 , 5 & 6	Test values
IV	English course	1	Course benefits
		2	Contents
		3	Teaching methods
		4	Trainers
		5	Course organization
V	Recommendations		Schools, Services or Department of Education, Ministry of Education

### 2.3 Respondents

At the time of the study in 2013, these teachers were participating in a 100-hour English course which was organized in their own province by the above mentioned institution to upgrade their English to B2 level (i.e. an IELTS equivalent of 5 or 6). In classes of approximately 30 members, these teachers worked with a group of over 10 native and non native teachers of English, including the researcher.

Toward the end of the course, copies of this questionnaire were given to all teachers in class (100 for Group A and 60 for Group B). A return rate of 85% (Group A) and 100% (Group B) questionnaires was received the next day for former group and at the end of class for the latter. Quantitative findings were calculated on the 145 returned questionnaires mentioned.

### III. Results and Discussion

There were overwhelmingly more females (92% in group A and 76% in Group B) than males (8% and 24% respectively) among the respondents whose ages varied from 25 to 53, with over half of them (56% and 55% respectively) from 30 to 39. The older group, from 40 to 53, was significantly bigger (37% and 28% respectively) than younger teachers, under 29 years of age (8% and 10% respectively).

Most of them were experienced teachers, with 16 to 30 years of teaching (34% and 23% respectively) or 10 to 15 years of teaching (43% and 48% respectively). Only some had fewer years (2 to 9) in the job (22% and 24% respectively). A small group (7% for both groups) specified neither their ages nor their teaching experience. The responses were checked for validity and were individually coded before they were grouped and statistically calculated for the six issues researched. The data were presented in percentages with the first one for Group A and the second one for Group B)

### 3.1 Self assessment of expertise and difficulties

Measured via a five-point Likert scale (5 = *very good*, 4 = *good*, 3 = *fairly good*, 2 = *not good*, and 1 = *not good at all*), the English competence in group A was rated as satisfactory (*'fairly good'* and *'good'*) by a bigger half (53%) and unsatisfactory by a smaller half (45% for *'not good'* and 2% for *'not good at all'*). This satisfaction tended to be much lower in Group B, with most ranking it *'not good'* (52%) or *'not good at all'* (17%) while only a third considered it satisfactory (30% for *'good'* or *'fairly good'*).

The respondents felt more confident with their Reading, Speaking and Writing skills than with Listening skill. As can be found, the rates for *'good'* and *'fairly good'* were in decreasing order for Reading (63% and 58% respectively), Speaking (57% and 47% respectively) and Writing (37% and 48% respectively). By comparison, these figures for Listening skill were very small (22% and 7% respectively). This also means that Listening was regarded as the most unsatisfactory (*'not good'* or *'not good at all'*) skill by an overwhelming majority (78% and 92% respectively), in particular the figures for *'not good at all'* were significant (19% and 42% respectively). These undesirable rates were comparatively smaller for Reading (32% and 38% respectively), Speaking (35% and 38% respectively) and Writing skills (59% and 47% respectively).

Their language knowledge was assessed more positively than their language skills. For example, most participants (76% and 82% respectively) scored their Grammar *'fairly good'* (3/5) or higher on a five-point Likert scale while these percentages were smaller for Pronunciation (66% and 67% respectively) and Vocabulary (59% and 55% respectively). However, many teachers thought their knowledge inadequate (*'not good'* or *'not good at all'*), as evidenced in the data for Vocabulary (41% and 45% respectively), Pronunciation (34% and 33% respectively) and Grammar (24% and 18% respectively).

It is worth noting that despite the weaknesses in their English in their self assessment, a hefty number of respondents (92% and 90%) confirmed that their English responded satisfactorily (*'fairly good'* and above) to the needs of their teaching, with 33% and 34% respectively stating it *'good'*.

Similarly, their methods of teaching were considered satisfactory by an overwhelming majority (92% and 87% respectively). In particular, this efficiency was clarified as success in motivating students (91% and 87% respectively) and making lessons understandable (96% and 88% respectively). They admitted to be more effective with exam preparation (81% and 85% respectively) than in helping students to use English for communication (51% and 37% respectively). Only 14% claimed to have difficulties in teaching and these teachers blamed their weaknesses in teaching methods (78% and 57% respectively) for this, rather than a lack of environment to use English (6% and 8% respectively). Specifically, in Group A, the difficulties were more serious in helping students to communicate (53%) or to understand lessons (49%) than in preparing them for exams (46%) or motivating them to learn (45%). The causes were specified as lack of time to teach lessons (52%) and insufficient teaching methodology materials (44%). Though Group B also found helping students to communicate (45%) more challenging than preparing them for exams (32%), they regarded motivating their learners (40%) a harder task than making them understand the lessons (30%). Limited time in class was their major complaint (42%) in this situation. Other difficulties came from students (limited interest or language skills), schools (insufficient teaching equipment, large classes, heavy syllabus, unsuitable textbooks, inadequate assessment, crave for achievements and inadequate learning environment for teachers).

Though none of these respondents currently met MOET requirements in language proficiency (B2), half of them thought their language competence was satisfactory and this assessment must have been based on their daily teaching experience which made them believe that their English language was adequate for their current job. Of the four skills, Listening and Writing skills were assessed as worse than the other two and this may have resulted from their lack of practice in school settings where there seemed to be no need for them to improve these skills; therefore, these skills had gradually deteriorated over the years. Even their Reading and Speaking skills which might have been used relatively more often, were possibly constrained to classroom use for basic instructions and some occasional explanations in English. Thus, the lack of frequent communication might have been a major reason for limited language competence among these teachers.

Another point to note was that their English knowledge was better than their English skills and this imbalance seemed to reflect the teachers' background with more focus on theory than practice. Interestingly, while up to 20% and 40% respectively considered their language knowledge (grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary) inadequate, none of them mentioned any language difficulty in their job, which might have suggested that their teaching did not require much language competence. A further comment was that the responses showed that teachers were able to motivate students and prepare them well for school exams but they found it a big challenging to help students to communicate effectively (49% in both groups). The big classes, insufficient equipment and teaching/learning materials were pointed out as major causes for this difficulty.

### **3. 2 Self improvement strategies**

All participants claimed to do various activities for language improvement and most focused on reading textbooks (60% and 63% respectively). Other authentic activities like listening to radio/TV (44% and 33%), reading stories (40% and 18% respectively), talking to colleagues (32% and 18% respectively) and reading newspapers (27% and 25% respectively) were less common. Regarding professional enhancement, most teachers (84% and 88% respectively) reported to do classroom observation, to share experiences with colleagues (80% and 69% respectively) or friends (78% and 58% respectively) or to talk to their trainers/mentors (51% and 47% respectively). Most respondents (80% and 78% respectively) stated to have future plans to improve their language competence (listening or reading skills) while 1/3 of groups mentioned preparation for the required proficiency exam after the course. Possible difficulties in implementing these plans were identified as a lack of time, books, learning equipment and big school workload.

Self improvement strategies did not seem to be a strong point of these participants. As can be noted, most participants (60%) reported to currently focus on textbooks to improve their language competence. However, this strategy may not have been an effective measure if they had read only MOET high school textbooks because these books were not relevant for teachers to improve their English. The response gave no indication whether school teachers made use of a wide variety of textbooks written by native speakers to support their teaching; therefore, it was hard to know how useful this strategy actually helped them in the process. Besides, even though other activities, using different sources (radio/TV, reference books, stories, newspapers, films) were mentioned, very few teachers reported to use these strategies. This may have explained the teachers' undesirable language at present. Another factor that may have hindered their English development was that their school teaching at present did not require them to improve their English.

For future plans, more respondents (80%) claimed to have plans to improve their listening or reading skills with radio, films, TV news, books and Internet while some (29%) chose to focus on exam preparation via doing tests. The increasing rate of participants with more intended future activities to better their English may have resulted from the government's policy to require them to take the proficiency tests.

### **3.3 Proficiency test**

A hefty majority of respondents (98% and 77% respectively) found that the proficiency exam that they had taken previously was '*difficult*' or '*very difficult*'. Specifically, Listening test (98% and 58% respectively) was considered the most challenging ('*very*' or '*extremely difficult*'), followed by Reading (89% and 57% respectively), Writing (76% and 57% respectively) and Speaking (58% and 47% respectively).

Respondents (81% and 60% respectively) also complained about the unsuitable time for the exams which happened during a very busy school time so they had no time for test preparation. Though most respondents (60% and 65% respectively) found the exam necessary and important as it informed them of their English performance and this motivated them to learn more, some (40% and 35% respectively) argued that it was a cause for pressure and it was not useful to their work. While most (80% and 62% respectively) admitted that the test results were a good reflection of their English proficiency, some (20% and 38% respectively) found these results unreliable due to the test difficulty, unfamiliar format and content, poor administration (noisy exam rooms and poor sound quality) in addition to testees' lack of preparation.

The general complaints reflected in the data can be explained by further reasons. First, this test seemed to be the first language exam that they took since their college graduation many years before so they may not have adopted adequate test taking strategies (i.e. time management, skimming, scanning skills) to do it well. On top of that, the lack of thinking skills and general knowledge about topical issues like climate change, art, culture, etc. must have made it hard for the participants to do the test whether it was Listening, Speaking, Reading or Writing skills. Second, the test could have been even more difficult because they had unfamiliar format and content so the teachers' performance was even less desirable. Third, the pressure of being evaluated constituted a huge fear for the teachers leading to limited performance in the test.

### **3.4 English training course**

Overall, the course was very positively evaluated for its contents, methods of teaching, trainers' quality and course organization. Most respondents (78% and 68% respectively) appreciated its necessity for its significant usefulness (69% and 67% respectively) which responded well to their needs (69% and 37% respectively). As a result, many were very satisfied (53% and 33% respectively) with the course while only a small proportion (13% and 15%) considered it unsatisfactory. Of note, many teachers left this question unanswered.

In addition, the trainers were highly assessed for their dedication (92% and 83% respectively) and expertise (89% and 88% respectively). By comparison, the teaching methods were less favourably perceived for efficiency (54% and 45% respectively), liveliness (49% and 33% respectively), and suitability (49% and 43% respectively). The course organization was highly appreciated mainly for adequate class size (72% and 83% respectively) and participants' learning spirit (69% and 70% respectively). Still, course timing was considered inadequate (26% and 53% respectively).

The participants' supportive attitudes for the course were manifested in their positive responses. On the positive side, the participants knew the values of the course in helping them to improve their performance in the coming test to achieve the required standards. They seemed to realize that the course not only equipped them with of test taking strategies but also language skills. This awareness contributed to their observed language and attitude improvement in the course and in their later test results. However, personal observation as a trainer in the course indicated that serious academic learning was a novelty to these participants who tended to lack necessary learning skills for language learning and this could be a serious challenge in the required life-long process of self study. Furthermore, participants' personal problems like stress, advanced age, inadequate health (eyesight, concentration capacity), family responsibilities and school workload may have added further difficulties to their learning progress.

### **3. 5 Teachers' suggestions**

The participants raised various suggestions to their schools, Department/ Service of Education and Training (DOET & SOET) and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to enhance their language and professional capacity.

To enhance teaching efficiency, they suggested to favourable working resources with adequate equipment, reference materials, reduced syllabus contents and smaller classes. They thought it was important to provide more adequate syllabi, textbooks and exams (with all four skills tested). Also, they hoped that schools could reduce the teachers' administrative workload (i.e. paper work, meetings) so that they could have more time for teaching improvement. For capacity development, they wished to have regular methodology courses and English clubs for English teachers. Further recommendations included opportunities to communicate with native speakers and availability of software and reference materials for language learning.

For an immediate future, they wished to receive adequate preparation for the required proficiency tests and proper exam administration (proper rooms and good sound quality for listening tests) even though many wished that they did not have to participate in language exams.

The participants' suggestions to the educational authorities showed that they were interested in professional development and they needed support for reference materials and equipment, and organized activities from SOET, DOET or MOET, rather than relying on themselves. Their recommendations also implied that better language teaching and learning necessitated lots of changes and improvements in textbooks, exams, syllabi, teaching equipment and class size.

## **IV. Conclusions**

The findings may shed some useful insights into current teachers' perceptions about various capacity building issues for English school teachers in Vietnam, regarding their needs, levels, suggestions, as well as their attitudes towards the government policies toward standardization of English teachers' capacity. Based on the findings, a number of considerations and recommendations to support the government policies are outlined in the following.

To help teachers achieve the required language standards, it is important to make teachers understand the value of the standardization for teachers in the globalised world. This understanding would help them to develop measures and initiatives in implementing

government policies. One option is for the teachers to take responsibility of their own language improvement and show a language certificate of the proficiency as required after about a year and the government can give them some financial support in the process.

For the regular and long-term language and professional development, there are several activities that can be carried out. First, different self managed English clubs could be organized by the teachers for the teachers in each community, depending on the facilities and the size of the teacher population in the area. These clubs can organize monthly gatherings for its members whereby teachers can have relevant activities depending on their needs, interests and abilities. Activities may include discussions on teaching problems, sharing teaching materials and activities, presentations/seminars on professional issues in addition to films and songs. Attendance can be voluntary for local teachers at the beginning in the pilot period, but later monthly attendance is required for the teachers. Guidance, support and monitoring can come from schools and local educational authorities and acknowledgement of their work should be given. These clubs could provide a nonthreatening atmosphere for the life long professional improvement for the teachers and they could serve as the starting point for teachers to gradually take over the workshops/training activities at district or provincial levels.

Second, regional and national conferences, workshops and seminars can be organized to promote teachers' involvement in research activities. Second, a teaching resource centre in the form of a 'bookshelf' for each community could be organized where possible so that teachers can share materials/tapes to improve their language and teaching expertise. A similar online system can be shared among teachers with Internet connection. Networking is important so that teachers can share useful teaching activities for their students. Third, SOET/DOET can organize yearly workshops or training on focused relevant topics with related reading materials provided in advance so that teachers can concentrate on these topics during the year and teachers are expected to be in charge of presentations to share the experience and to increase their involvement.

Fourth, facilities such as basic reference materials and equipment need to be given to help the teachers in their teaching. Class size of 30 to 35 would be considered essential as it could be highly challenging to work in mixed ability classes where many students are not very keen on learning. Flexibility in using the textbooks should be granted so that teachers integrate useful materials and activities from various sources to meet the needs and abilities of their students.

Capacity building is a long term process; therefore, it is necessary to promote ideas and investigations to find out suitable models and effective measures for professional development for the teachers and capacity building to gain maximum cooperation between teachers and the government to achieve the desired goals together.

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Appendix : **Common European Framework of References**

CEFR level	<u>Cambridge exam</u>	<u>IELTS</u>	<u>TOEIC</u>	<u>TOEFL(IBT)</u>
C2	<u>CPE</u> / <u>CAE</u> grade A	IELTS 8.5-9.0	-	-
C1	<u>CAE</u> , <u>FCE</u> grade A	IELTS 6.5-8.0	490 - 495 points	110-120
B2	<u>FCE</u>	IELTS 5.0-6.0	785 - 990 points	87-109
B1	<u>PET</u>	IELTS 4.0-4.5	550 - 780 points	57-86
<b>A2</b>	KET		225 - 545 points	-
<b>A1</b>	no scored		120 - 220 points	-

