

# Exploring Vietnamese EFL Teacher Cognition of Innovation in L2 writing teaching: Findings from flexibility of learner focuses

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## Abstract

*Although recent innovations in English language teaching have certain impacts on teaching practices, there is a considerably limited literature addressing the issue of what may hinder or promote the process of implementation and change in teaching practices. With an attempt to address this gap in the context of L2 writing teaching, the study presents a qualitative exploration into predominant teaching practices of six Vietnamese EFL teachers coming from three emphases of L2 writing teaching instruction: L2 writing teaching with an emphasis on (1) language skills development, (2) reading text comprehension, and (3) focused textual features. Employing constant comparative analysis into finding interpretations, the study focuses on exploring the dimension of how flexibility of learner focuses has an influence on Vietnamese EFL teachers' implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices. Further implications are discussed in line with the concern of identifying contextual variables which have an impact on teacher willingness to innovate their L2 writing teaching practices.*

## I-Introduction

The present study reports findings from a qualitative study to explore teacher cognition of innovation in L2 writing teaching. What is emphasized in teacher cognition involves the concerns “with understanding what teachers know, think, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom” (Borg, 2003:81). A link with the concept of *innovation* is formed with an aim to expand the theoretical, practical, and attitudinal aspects of teacher cognition. Choosing to work on the area of L2 writing teaching, the study addresses an expansion to limited studies about teacher cognition on various areas of L2 teaching curriculum (Borg, 2009: 168) from the implementation of “integrated and contextualized teaching of multiple language skills” (Hinkel, 2006:109).

## II-The present study

### 1. Participants

Purposive sampling was employed as a technique to recruit participants for two reasons. First, choosing participants purposefully would be most effective for gathering information from limited resources (Patton, 2002). Second, also known as judgmental sampling (Hagan, 2006), this strategy required the researcher to use “special knowledge or expertise” about the group “to select subjects who represent this population” (Berg & Lune, 2014:52).

Email invitations were sent to 10 potential Vietnamese EFL teachers from the Department of English at a local university in Ho Chi Minh City. After one week from the day the invitations were sent (from March 19 to March 26), 6 out of 10 participants approved to participate in the study. Details of participants in the study were in Table 1.

### 2. Procedure

A cross-sectional survey was distributed via email internet interview. Email internet interview was administered due to limits in time duration for data collection and limits in distance with participants. In consideration for ethical issues, the survey included

notes about researcher's responsibility for participant's profile protection and for primary data usage for research purpose. It was scheduled that participants sent their replies approximately for one month (from April 1 to 30, 2015).

	Ms. Han	Mr. Lee	Ms. Vanna	Mr. Ken	Ms. Kim	Ms. Thu
L2 writing Teaching Emphasis	Language skills development		Reading text comprehension		Focuses textual features	
Teaching Courses	ESL writing course	ESL writing course	Reading course	Reading course	ESL writing course	Grammar
Position of L2 writing	Combining with reading and speaking	Enhanced & supported by other language skills	Combining with reading	Checking reading comprehension	Writing skill only	Combining with grammar teaching

**Table 1**-Details of participants in the study

4 open-ended survey questions were designed regarding predominant teaching practices. Group of questions on predominant teaching practices was outlined with reference to the following aspects of writing assignments: (1) methods/ instruments to assign & (2) encountered difficulties in writing drafts. I assumed that the concentration on writing assignments would reveal hints regarding predominant focuses on learners & on writing quality; presumably, teachers would establish from these bases their corresponding preferable teaching practices in classroom.

I adapted the Dynamic Assessment from Warford (2011)'s Zone of Proximal Teaching Development to design the survey questions. In the first pair of survey questions, participants were asked to specify method(s) and/or instrument(s) which is (are) used to assign writing assignments (Q1) before they evaluated the effectiveness & drawbacks of method(s) and/or instrument(s) being used (Q2). In the following pair of the survey questions, an identification to difficulties encountered from writing drafts of students (Q3) proceeded an explanation of how to assist students with the encountered difficulties identified from their writing drafts (Q4).

### 3. Data analysis

Considering the qualitative design of the study, data was analyzed following the steps mentioned in Creswell (2009). Raw data was initially arranged into three corresponding groups: (1) L2 writing-language skills development, (2) L2 writing-reading text comprehension, (3) L2 writing-focused textual features and was subsequently read several times. After a thorough skimming and scanning of data was conducted to obtain a general sense of the data, conventional content analysis was chosen as the approach to conduct analysis for the data content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Through coding process, emerging themes and patterns were identified and data was then organized into the main and sub-sections of themes and patterns. Constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser, 1965) was chosen as the approach to present and interpret data for the study.

The presentation and interpretation of findings in this study demonstrates two key aspects of teacher cognition of innovation in L2 writing teaching. First, considering the dimension of teacher cognition in L2 writing teaching, I clarify how 4 identified factors (1) *positioning of L2 writing*, (2) *teaching implementations*, (3) *nature of the course*, and (4) *student concern* interact with each other in teacher cognitive considerations for predominant L2 writing teaching practices. The exploration of these 4 factors generalizes how flexibility of learner focuses has an influence on Vietnamese EFL teachers' implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices. Second, regarding the dimension of innovation in L2 writing teaching, findings on the theme of flexibility of learner focuses provide further insights of what may hinder or promote the process of implementation and change in L2 writing teaching practices through an identification of contextual variables which have an impact on teacher willingness to innovate their L2 writing teaching practices. Considering two key aspects of teacher cognition of innovation in L2 writing teaching, the main research question for the present study is formed as such: ***How does flexibility in learner focuses have an influence on Vietnamese EFL teachers' implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices?***

#### **4. Findings**

This section briefly reports findings of flexibility of learner focuses from the first key aspect of teacher cognition of innovation in L2 writing teaching (see Section II. 3. Data analysis). Findings in this section clarify how 4 identified factors in teacher cognitive considerations (1) *positioning of L2 writing*, (2) *teaching implementations*, (3) *nature of the course*, and (4) *student concern* have an influence on Vietnamese EFL teachers implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices

##### **4.1. Group of L2 writing-language skills development: form & content**

In response to prior experience in assigning writing assignments (Q1), Mr. Lee revealed in his response the view of "writing as digital literacies" (Bailey & Ribble, 2007) by stating wikispaces, blog, and emails as the instruments. Ms. Han's response, on the other hand, involved the combination of process teaching approaches with collaborative learning in her practice of giving students writing assignments. More concerns on student learning progress in L2 writing consistently identified with her withdrawal from digital literacies and her efforts to promote the transition from assisted to self-assisted performance (Vygotsky, 1978) for her students.

The learner focuses on form and content appeared evident in their responses to reveal prior teaching experience in encountering difficulties in student's writing drafts (Q3). Han and Lee consistently addressed their major concerns with grammar & vocabulary and idea expression as the common problems identified from student's writing drafts. The major shift to form was noticed in the way they assisted students with the encountered difficulties in writing (Q4). Lee provided students with the check list of common errors as an instrument to help students autonomously correct themselves; meanwhile, Han constantly reminded students to have more grammar practice and proofread carefully before submitting.

##### **4.2. Group of L2 writing-reading text comprehension: elaboration & identification**

Ms. Vanna and Mr. Ken presented cases where the position of L2 writing in their reading courses had an impact on their recognition of learner focuses. It can be argued that Ken and Vanna similarly took the content of reading lessons into their consideration; however, they differentiated in analysing learner focuses in their teaching practices. In the evaluation of the effectiveness of writing tasks (Q2), Ken defined his attention to student elaboration for their viewpoints and student discovery about the author. He faced the challenge of strengthening student motivation because L2 writing was only

a supplementary part in reading course. Meanwhile no evaluation on drawbacks was recognized from Vanna's response. She mainly shared her concern in identifying student's strengths and weaknesses in writing; from there, she could find ways to improve student writing.

As noticed from the responses in dealing with the encountered difficulties in student's writing drafts (Q4), consistency with details on the position of L2 writing was claimed (see Table 1). Ken's position of L2 writing as a means to check reading text comprehension diminished in importance of mastering writing skill; instead, he more appreciated the content generation in student's reflections for reading texts. It is assumed that the aim to develop analytical skill for students in reading text comprehension accounted for his avoidance to correct student writing. Meanwhile, the focus on accuracy in L2 writing had possible effects on Vanna's choice to tell students how to get rid of common errors.

#### **4.3. Group of L2 writing-focused textual features: modelling & suggesting**

Findings from Ms. Thu and Ms. Kim responses considerably imply an interrelationship between student concerns and implementation of teaching practices. Reports on the encountered difficulties in student's writing drafts (Q3) suggested a counterargument to Ferris's (1994) finding on a diverse usage of lexical and syntactic choices. Kim insisted on problems with the organization of a paragraph and essay when "the thesis statement and topic sentences are not clear or appropriate" before she went on to list "incorrect use of vocabulary and sentence structures" as the causes for difficulties in understanding student meaning-making. Thu further elaborated Kim's concern on vocabulary and sentence structures by pointing out that probable influences of L1 (Vietnamese) grammar into the unnatural construction of writing style in L2 (English). In Thu's opinion, the main problem with lexical choices in student writing was inappropriate usage in different writing contexts.

In contrast, the suggestions from Kim and Thu on how to deal with student with the encountered difficulties in their writing drafts (Q4) demonstrate congruence with Ferris's (1994) offer to provide students with modelling and effective suggestions. Considering the teaching context of grammar courses, Thu offered the procedure of modelling in the following steps: provide a model text of native English writers, let student read, and analyse the differences in vocabulary, grammar, and writing style between L1 and L2. On the other hand, in ESL writing courses, Kim followed the philosophy of suggesting ways of improving errors as follows. After reading and marking students' paper, Kim would collect and show most typical and serious errors in organization, vocabulary and grammar to the whole class and ask them to suggest ways to correct themselves. Kim would also spend 30 minutes going around and explaining feedbacks to her students after giving back their writing papers.

### **III- Implications of the study**

In this section, an attempt is made to reflect findings of flexibility of learner focuses from the second key aspect of teacher cognition of innovation in L2 writing teaching (see Section II. 3. Data analysis). This section generates contextual variables that have an impact on teacher willingness to innovate their L2 writing teaching practices. In particular, this section evaluates how these contextual variables may play a role in hindering or promoting the process of implementation and change in L2 writing teaching practices with reference to previous findings about Vietnamese EFL teachers' implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices based on their learner focuses.

Findings about how flexibility of learner focuses have an influence on Vietnamese EFL teacher's implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices are

categorized into 3 groups of participants with different emphasis of L2 writing teaching in their teaching courses: language skills development, reading text comprehension, and focused textual features. The learner focuses on form-content, elaboration-identification, modelling-suggesting were found to correspond with Hinkel's (2006) claim on the decline of methods where the recognition of teachers and students and the need to situate language pedagogy were in place of prescriptive philosophies and specific classroom procedures. Considering the recognition of teachers and students, the 4 factors (1) *positioning of L2 writing*, (2) *teaching implementations*, (3) *nature of the course*, and (4) *student concern* analysed in teacher cognitive considerations for predominant L2 writing teaching practices can be further theoretically addressed with reference to sociolinguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions that may limit Vietnamese EFL learners in L2 writing skill development and theoretically grounded as contextual variables that have an impact on teacher willingness to innovate their L2 writing teaching practices.

In terms of sociolinguistic dimension in L2 writing skill development, responses from 6 Vietnamese EFL teachers of the study to some extent reflect issues on motivation and identity for Vietnamese EFL learners emerging within L2 writing classroom (Tran, 2007). Although differentiated in their emphasis for L2 writing teaching practices, Lee and Ken demonstrated their concerns for raising student motivation in self error-correction and completion for writing assignments. Motivation becomes a critical issue when L2 writing teaching methodology might lower the importance of context as the “crucial determiner of the success or failure of the learner” (Bax, 2003: 281). To amend the gap with motivation, understandings about characteristics of L2 writing learners should be addressed. For instance, some highlights about L2 writing learners as mentioned in Hyland (2003: 36) are listed as follows:

- (1) L2 writers have more difficulty setting goals and generating material.
- (2) L2 writers revise more but reflect less on their writing.
- (3) L2 writers are less fluent, and produce less accurate and effective texts.
- (4) L2 writers are less inhibited by teacher-editing and feedback.

These characteristics may prohibit the construction of writer identity beyond the construction of written text especially when the focus on form and accuracy becomes the major concern in L2 writing teaching practices. Responses from Han and Vanna on their focus on form and accuracy may be challenged by the emphasis on cultural dimension in L2 writing skill development. Hoa (2011), for example, claimed that the development of intercultural communicative competence was crucial because the trend of English as an International Language increased more opportunities for Vietnamese EFL learners to get involved in intercultural communication.

An emphasis on the pragmatic dimension in L2 writing skill development would further enhance the ability to facilitate intercultural communication. Responses from Thu and Kim demonstrated limitations of Vietnamese EFL learners on diversifying the usage of lexical and syntactic choices. Their responses characterize certain limitations of “limited L2 linguistic competence and lack of fluency, which seemed to load their processing capability under communicative pressure, their lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge, and the influence of L1 pragmatics” (Nguyen, 2008). To amend the gap with communication pressure resulting from the lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge and the influence of L1 pragmatic, modelling and suggesting are understandably deemed as effective teaching acts to raise self-efficacy for the performance of L2 writing learner (Lavelle, 2009). In line with the focus of form and content recognized from the group of L2 writing teaching-language skills development, the main purpose of reformulating language usage and textual organization should consider William's (2003) critics about

feedback on form as the means for learners to copy for subsequent drafts and feedback on content identified with vagueness, contradict, and inconsistency. To avoid the critics of feedback on form and content, a more consistent feedback system should be theoretically constructed from the grounds of (1) *positioning of L2 writing*, (2) *teaching implementations*, (3) *nature of the course*, and (4) *student concern*.

#### IV-Conclusion

With the motivation to explore the cognitive dimension of innovation in L2 writing teaching from Vietnamese EFL teachers, the study was conducted in qualitative research design to examine how flexibility of learner focuses has an influence on teachers' implementation of predominant L2 writing teaching practices. Findings of the study suggest that teacher willingness to innovate their L2 writing teaching practices are contextually bounded by variables that reflect two insights: (1) the standards which constitute characteristics of good writing and (2) the patterns of thinking which are formulated by knowledge about characteristics of L2 writing learners. Future studies on the topic of innovation in ELT should address further explorations for teacher cognition in the teaching of language skills to adapt and enhance our understanding about teaching innovation in relevant teaching contexts.

#### V-References

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