Towards a Holistic Approach to Developing the Language Proficiency of Vietnamese Primary Teachers of English

Ngoc Khoi Mai

(khoi.maingoc@uqconnect.edu.au)
University of Languages and International Studies, VNU, Vietnam
The University of Queensland (UQ), Australia

Abstract

This study compared Vietnamese EFL primary teachers' self-rated language proficiency with the perceived level required for their job. Surprising gaps between the two levels regarding all five skills were reported. The teachers rated their language proficiency (on all skills, comprising reading, listening, writing and speaking) higher than what, in their opinion, was required for their job. While investigating the causes of such gaps and the participants' low self-assessed linguistic competence, semi-structured interviews revealed a paradox which the participants were experiencing during a training course and their language proficiency development process. A discussion of a matrix of interrelated challenges underlying such paradox led to the call for a holistic approach with better collaboration among different forces at different levels to resolve language proficiency related issues in order to draft meaningful and long-term supporting plans in this context.

1 Introduction

Most studies have approached the issue of non-native English speaking teachers' (NNEST) language proficiency either through a comparison and contrast with native English speaking teachers (NEST; e.g. Reves & Medgyes, 1994) or from an assessment viewpoint to document NESTs' low level of linguistic competence (e.g. Nunan, 2003). However, what is more important than the results of all NNESTs' language proficiency tests is their actual language proficiency maintenance and improvement processes, their specific needs, and the kinds of support they actually seek. Such processes are surprisingly still ignored in the literature. In the case of Vietnam, especially when a massive EFL teacher "retraining program" is currently taking place, the need for a study which enables teachers' voices to be heard and experiences to be shared is urgent.

This paper reports a part of the results of a study responding to this real-life situation and gap in the literature. The study originally aimed to compare Vietnamese NNESTs' self-assessed language proficiency (LP) with their perceived required language proficiency (RLP) to teach effectively at their working level. It ends up revealing a paradox leading to a discussion regarding much wider socio-cultural issues challenging teachers' professional development. As part of an on-going project, this paper only presents findings specifically related to primary EFL teachers. It starts with a short introduction to the context of English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam, then presents a brief review of the literature framing the research aims, the research methodology, the findings, and ends with some discussions and implications based on the findings.

2   ELT in Vietnam

Throughout her history, Vietnam has witnessed the rise and fall of different foreign languages, including Chinese, French, Russian, and English. The blooming of ELT in Vietnam started in the 1990s following the fall of Russian, the language of an old ally, the Soviet Union, and as a result of the Vietnamese government's economic reform policy. At this time, English was introduced as an optional foreign language in many primary schools, especially those in economically advantaged areas such as big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen, 2007). However, it was not until 2003 that English was officially included as an optional subject to be taught in primary education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2003). In 2008, English was officially institutionalized in the primary education system with the projection that by 2018, 100% of students should be taught English (Vietnamese Government, 2008). Also in 2008, the project "Teaching and learning foreign language in national education system," 2008-2020, or Project 2020 with an estimated budget of 5 billion USD was approved to promote the study of English and to meet the trends of globalization and international interdependency (Vietnamese Government, 2008). The project's planned outcome was to have students graduating from primary (6–10 years old), lower secondary (11–15 years old) and upper secondary (15–18 years old) schools reaching levels A1, A2, and B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), respectively. For the EFL primary teachers, they were required to reach CEFR's B2 level of English proficiency.

With efforts from the government, specifically, the Ministry of Education and Training (hereafter MOET) to promote English, the rising need for English language learning revealed a severe shortage of teachers (Le, 2011). The limited research investigating the actual situation of current EFL teaching practices at the primary school level reveals teachers' low language proficiency and inappropriate training. Nguyen (2011) conducted a case study at one private and one public primary school in Hanoi and reported a shortage of teachers with appropriate teaching skills, especially in public school. Le and Do (2012) surveyed 104 primary teachers of English in one province of Vietnam and observed 17 teachers' classroom teaching. They concluded that the teachers were not sufficiently prepared to teach English at the elementary level due to their weaknesses in pedagogical skills, vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation. These weaknesses were attributed to low-quality pre-service training, the lack of an environment for language use and practice, and isolation from the professional community. They called for intensive retraining of current in-service primary teachers regarding both language competence and language teaching methodology. Teachers need to be equipped with background knowledge of theories and methods of teaching English to young learners, while priority should be put on the improvement of teachers' pronunciation and fluency. Attempts should also be made to establish communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to promote teachers' self-engagement in the continuous development of knowledge and skills.

Discussing the teaching of English in Vietnam in general, Le (2007) specified the lack of well-trained teachers as one of the three inherent problems accounting for the low quality of foreign language education in Vietnam. Indeed, questions have been raised concerning the ability of in-service teachers and the quality of pre-service teacher training programs. The media (Huong & Giang, 2012; Minh, 2012) reported the shocking results of a nation-wide teachers' language proficiency assessment test in which, in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, only a fifth of those tested achieved the CEFR's B2 level of language proficiency. In one particular province, Ben Tre, only one teacher out of 700 tested passed this threshold level. A more academic and recent source reported that 80,000 in-service teachers needed further training as 97%, 93%, and 98% of teachers at the primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary level, respectively, were underqualified (Nguyen & Dudzik, 2013). Criticisms were made, and plans were carried out to "standardize" teachers' language proficiency. However, what is missing from all these discouraging statistics and nationwide support programs is an account of teachers' own perception of their language proficiency and the kind of training and support they need. Do these teachers perceive that they need to improve their language proficiency? How do they maintain and develop it? What are the challenges they face? What kind of training and support do they expect? All these questions were left

unanswered. As the teachers are at the center of this language policy, it is crucial that their voices are heard so that their needs can be catered for.

3   Non-native English speaking teachers' language proficiency

The issue of NNESTs' language proficiency development is often emphasized in the literature. Farrell and Richards (2007) dedicated a whole chapter to the issue of language proficiency as the fundamental component of language teachers' professional competence. It even has been stated that NNESTs' most important professional duty is to make improvements to their English (Medgyes, 2001).

One popular theme in the literature is the presentation of a dichotomy between NNESTs and NESTs as different types of teachers. Reves and Medgyes (1994) categorized each type's teaching behaviors into three groups comprising use of English, general teaching approach and specific teaching approach. They concluded that the contrasting behaviors mostly resulted from differences in language proficiency differences. Although NNESTs have their own strengths and advantages, for example, NNESTs' success stories and their empathy towards learners (Thomas, 1999), language limitations can still hinder effective teaching, since they may influence the choice and use of teaching methods as well as the quality of input provided for students (Farrell & Richards, 2007).

Indeed, effective teaching requires successful communication with students, which requires teachers to structure their language output for maximum clarity (Fillmore & Snow, 2002). In many EFL contexts, including Vietnam, teachers' language output also serves as an important, perhaps even the only, input for students. Since rich input is fundamental to the development of high-level skills in the target language (Ellis, 2008), in a context with limited resources like Vietnam where native speakers are almost non-existent in the public high school education system, such input needs to come from local teachers with high language proficiency.

In addition, a teacher's confidence in his or her own ability to serve as a model of linguistic competence is a crucial part of maintaining a positive classroom environment (Fraga-Canadas, 2010). While NNESTs with high levels of language proficiency are success stories, and real images of what students can aspire to be, NNESTs' language limitations may hamper their ability to play such a role. Their anxiety in language performance may even discourage their students from learning and using the language. This is what Horwitz (1996) referred to as negative messages about language learning. When teachers themselves do not feel comfortable with and confident in their performance, how can they inspire and encourage their students to speak the language? Horwitz also suggests that teachers with a high level of language anxiety may choose instructional strategies to avoid using the language actively: they may tend toward linguistic interactions which are predictable and more easily controlled. Research in various English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts has linked low proficiency to teacher's lack of confidence. For example, Reves and Medgyes (1994) described NNESTs' suffering from language proficiency limitations as a vicious cycle: their constant realization of their relative English-language limitations leads to a poor self-image which means a further deterioration in their language performance. A stronger feeling of inferiority is created as the starting point of a new cycle. In the Sri Lankan context, Murdoch (1994) reported that the majority of 208 NNES teacher trainees regarded language proficiency as the foundation of their ability to fulfill their professional role. 89 percent of the participants agreed that a teacher's confidence was most dependent on his or her own actual degree of language competence. Murdoch went on to argue that since language proficiency has a role in molding the confidence of NNESTs, teacher educators should not underestimate the anxiety teachers may feel if they lack confidence in their own language performance. In order to address such core anxiety, Murdoch then argued for a 'proper status' to be given to language improvement in teacher education.

The literature has plenty of evidence concerning NNESTs' alarmingly low levels of proficiency. Nunan (2003) found that the English proficiency of many teachers in several EFL contexts (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam) was insufficient to provide learners with rich input needed for successful language acquisition. Butler (2004) and Tang (2007)

found that teachers in Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and China perceived their proficiency levels to be lower than the minimum levels they considered necessary to teach English. Researchers like Nunan (2003), Butler (2004) and Tang (2007) all argued for urgent improvements to NNSTs' language proficiency. While native-like pronunciation or intonation might not be necessary, NNESTs need a sufficient mastery of English to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals (Crystal, 1998; Davies, 1991). In order for such mastery to be achieved, it is of utmost importance that language practice and learning are considered part of a continuing process throughout an NNEST's career (Braine, 2010, 1999; Medgyes, 1994, 2001; Peyton, 1997). Once language learning is accepted as never complete, NNESTs should be considered lifelong learners with all the difficulties, anxiety and needs typical of language learners.

Unfortunately, the current literature suggests that in-service foreign language teacher education programs do not offer many opportunities for language teachers to maintain or improve their language skills but instead often focus more on pedagogical knowledge. In other words, the language proficiency development of these NNESTs is often taken for granted. Undergraduate and post graduate TESOL programs often do not formally teach speaking and listening, since they tend to assume that their teacher trainees already have a satisfactory proficiency level (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). Medgyes (1999) commented that language training is ignored in many TESOL programs and gave the example of his own Center for English Teacher Training at the Evotvos Lorand University in Budapest. Medgyes is not the only one who has emphasized the importance of language training for language teachers. Further researchers have documented in-service teachers' difficulties in maintaining their language proficiency when confined to teaching lower-level classes for a long period of time, and teachers' discontent with their teacher training programs (e.g. Cooper, 2004; Fraga-Canadas, 2010; Schulz, 2000).

To sum up, studies concerning NNESTs' language proficiency often reveal teachers' less-than-desirable levels of language proficiency and their wish to improve their current levels, but fail to document the actual strategies employed and the difficulties encountered. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the participants' (Vietnamese primary teachers of English) perceptions of their own language proficiency and attitudes towards language proficiency development, including the difficulties they encounter during this process. This study adopts Llurda's (2000) definition of language proficiency as the capacity to make use of knowledge about the language in practice. It also subscribes to Pasternak and Bailey's (2004) view of language proficiency as a continuum implying a continuing process of language development. For NNESTs, language learning is a process of which language proficiency is a product at a given time. Language proficiency, therefore, is an ability that needs to be continuously maintained and developed with regard to a particular teaching context at a particular period in the language teacher's career. The research questions therefore are as follows:

1) What are the participants' perceptions of their own language proficiency?
2) What are the participants' attitudes towards language proficiency development as part of professional development?

4   Research methods

The present study employed a language proficiency self-assessment survey and semi-structured interviews with in-service teachers. It aimed at comparing the language teachers' perceived language proficiency (LP) and perceived level of language proficiency required for their job (RLP). The survey data were not used as indicative of participants' actual language proficiency, but only provided information to test the hypothesis that a gap existed between the self-assessed and the perceived required level of English proficiency with RLP being higher than LP. Such a gap might fuel language learning, as it would reveal participants' perceived strengths and weaknesses in language proficiency. This hypothesis was based on Butler's research (2004) conducted in other Asian countries (Korea, Taiwan, and Japan) where such gaps were reported. Another aim, achieved through the interviews, was to investigate participants' difficulties during language maintenance and improvement.

139 teachers completed the self-assessed language proficiency survey. These in-service primary teachers were working in four Northern provinces in Vietnam (namely Hanoi, Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, and Thanh Hoa). The participants were chosen to represent a homogeneous group of Northern primary teachers who were attending the same professional development course offered by the University of Languages and International Studies, Hanoi (ULIS). These teachers also experienced similar pre-service training programs offered by Northern Universities. For provinces in the Middle and South of Vietnam, other institutions were responsible for conducting the training program. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis during their participation in the training course at four training locations. This course was organized by MOET as part of the national project 2020 and was conducted by ULIS, one of the current leading forces in language-teacher training in North Vietnam. The purpose of the course was to improve teachers' language proficiency and prepare for a standardization test. The teachers were selected or nominated by their schools to participate in the training course. Some had to travel 30km daily to attend the day-long classes. Those living too far away had to rent accommodations near the training venues.

Participants were asked to fill out a background information sheet (age, educational background, teaching experience, and level of teaching), then to self-assess their current LP, and state their RLP. The survey was based on the self-assessment grid from the CEFR, which MOET had adopted. The six levels (from A1 to C2) of the CEFR were converted to a six-point scale (Level A1 was given 1 point, A2 2 points and so on). It was also possible for the participants to rate their proficiency between levels (e.g. between B1 and B2 at 3.5 or between B2 and C1 at 4.5). It was clearly explained to participants that the 6-point scale corresponded to the six levels of the CEFR.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 24 participants recruited on a voluntary basis. The interview questions concerned the teachers' teaching contexts (institution, workload, colleagues, students, professional development activities), attitudes towards and strategies related to language proficiency maintenance, personal and professional difficulties which hindered language proficiency development, attitudes towards MOET's training courses and standardized levels of language proficiency, opinions regarding the practicality of the courses and suggestions for improving pre- and in-service teacher training courses. Participants' responses were then analyzed for common themes with regard to the research aims. The results of this analysis are presented below.

5 Results and discussion

5.1 Participants' perceptions of their own language proficiency

The survey results revealed that Vietnamese primary school teachers rated their LP (on all skills) higher than that which, in their opinion, was required for their job (RLP). The average self-rated LP was 2.50 (less than B1 or 3 points), higher than their average perceived RLP of 2.07. This was much lower than the B2 (or 4 points) standard set by MOET. In fact, the perceived RLP was consistently low across all skills with the lowest (Listening) being 1.90 (less than A2 at 2 points). The following table summarizes the results of the survey.

Table 1. Primary English teachers' perception of their language proficiency and required language proficiency

	LP	RLP
Listening	2.16	1.90
Reading	2.82	2.19
Speaking Interaction	2.36	2.04
Speaking Production	2.54	2.20
Writing	2.66	2.15
Total	2.50	2.07

The results are in stark contrast with those reported in similar contexts by Butler (2004). She surveyed elementary teachers in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan to compare their perceived oral proficiency, reading comprehension, and writing ability with the perceived level of proficiency required for successful English teaching at primary level. She found that elementary teachers in all three countries self-assessed their English language proficiency substantially lower than the required level (LPs were lower than RLPs) and argued that such gaps constitute teachers' motivation for language improvement. The results of this current study in the Vietnamese context also found a gap between LPs and RLPs, but LPs were higher than RLPs in all five categories of language proficiency.

This finding reveals two things: firstly, the participants' confidence to teach despite their low language proficiency; and secondly, their disagreement with the standard set by MOET (B2 level). While the gap between LPs and RLPs suggest teachers' confidence to teach, this should not be interpreted as meaning teachers lack motivation for language proficiency improvement. In fact, the interview revealed teachers' thirst for knowledge and longing for support to improve language proficiency. The following section will discuss the participants' attitudes towards their language proficiency, strategies to maintain and develop it, and their need of support and training.

5.2 Participants' attitudes towards language proficiency development as part of professional development

5.2.1 Participants' dissatisfaction with their low level of language proficiency

Despite the participants' general confidence that their language proficiency was enough for their job, many participants voiced discontent at their low level of language proficiency, as expressed in the following quotes (all translations from Vietnamese are the author's):

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

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

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

It is worth pointing out that in Vietnam, for many primary teachers, maintaining their language proficiency, let alone improving it, after graduating from teacher training program is already a huge challenge. This is especially true, if the teachers have been required to teach at primary level for a long time. Teachers in Vietnam often work at one school, and teach at one level for a long time, even for their whole career, as there is no policy of teacher rotation. Job-hopping is generally not encouraged, especially as teaching is long considered a stable and secure job. Participants often use the metaphors of "getting lost" or "rusting away" to describe the weakening of their language proficiency after teaching at primary level for some years.

> Primary teachers teach little students little things. After 10 years of teaching, most of what we have learned at [teacher training] university has rusted away. The more we teach, the more we forget.

So far a question can be raised regarding why the teachers feel confident to teach, but they still feel the hunger to improve their English proficiency level. The interview revealed that the participants were confident to teach with a low level of language proficiency, since they perceive teaching English at elementary level to be undemanding.

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

What is distressing is that some participants associated teaching at this level with just introducing vocabulary and grammatical structures. Although communicative language teaching has been introduced and adapted in Vietnam, it mainly prevails in areas with economic advantages. In rural areas, with limited facilities and staff, it is much harder to follow this approach, especially with teachers' low level of language proficiency, the still popular paper-based assessments, and the lack of an available environment for language use and practice. More alarmingly, many teachers seemed to be teaching English as a content subject rather than a communicative language. This partly explains why both LP and RLP for listening and speaking (communication) were rated the lowest, while reading and speaking (structure) were ranked the highest. Instead of teaching students to use English for communicating purposes, many interviewees only presented to their students a certain body of information, or knowledge about the language. The lack of an environment for using English might have contributed to this wrong practice. It is, therefore, important to have future studies investigating teachers' perceived goals of primary ELT in this context.

5.2.2 *Strategies to develop language proficiency*

The interviewed teachers employed different strategies to develop language proficiency which can be categorized in two major groups, namely individual and social strategies. The individual strategies consist of practicing reading and listening skills through the Internet or 3G mobile network or by watching TV and radio programs, using more traditional learning aids such as books and sample tests, and highly individual methods of language practice, including reciting monologues while commuting to work or in front of a mirror. Interestingly, although Web 2.0 technologies have allowed and encouraged collaboration and interaction among Internet users, none of the participants mentioned such interactive features. They seem to make use of the Internet only as a source of materials rather than a virtual environment which could facilitate language use. Frequently cited websites such as http://www.britishcouncil.vn/ and http://www.tienganh123.com/ were highly appreciated for their resources rather than as a means to connect with colleagues or experts in ELT. From the data, it is not clear whether this is due to the participants' lack of awareness of such features or their unwillingness to employ them. Still, the result is teachers' isolation from the professional community as reported by Le and Do (2012).

The social strategies comprise practicing the language via teaching, participating in professional development activities such as teaching competitions, classroom observation and teacher group discussion, and doing part-time language-related jobs or pursuing further education for degrees or certificates related to language teaching. Some social strategies were officially required by the school, while others were initiated by the teachers themselves. Interestingly, most participants admitted that compulsory strategies (participating in teaching competitions, classroom observation and teacher group discussion) only generated limited help for their language proficiency development despite being highly time-consuming. The participants, therefore, turned to other strategies, namely practicing using the language through teaching, doing part-time jobs which required using English, and pursuing further education taught in English.

What is worth noticing is participants' heavy dependency on individual strategies to maintain and develop language proficiency. In order to create professional communities both online and offline, which are friendlier and more approachable to more teachers, it is essential that changes be made to promote the use of social strategies and improve their effectiveness.

5.2.3   *The need for appropriate support and training programs.*

As described previously, despite the participants' seeming confidence that they are qualified to teach, the semi-structured interview data revealed their thirst for knowledge and long-term supporting programs. Participants often expressed their happiness at getting a chance to join the training course. The following quotes illustrate such positive feelings:

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

> I myself really want to improve. After this training course, I really like studying. I always want to study.

> For me, as my life is stable and secure now, I really want to study to improve my English. I mean grammatical knowledge alone is not enough. I want to be able to speak English well and listen well. I want to study further. Yet few opportunities are available.

The participants' thirst for knowledge and yearning for support explain their enthusiasm to join the training course. This kind of training with a focus on language proficiency is the first of its kind, as it was organized after the teachers' poor performance on the standard test as reported earlier. Previously, training was often organized with a focus on language teaching methodology. Yet even such training was infrequent and unreachable for most teachers, as documented in the literature (see Grassick, 2006; Hayes, 2008; Moon, 2009; Nguyen, 2011).

A contrasting theme emerges from the interview data. While the interviewed teachers expressed their excitement while joining the course as a chance to review what they had studied long ago, very often they were let down by its potential for practical application in their everyday teaching. According to the teachers, the course failed to provide what they actually needed for their job. While the interviews revealed that improving pronunciation was what the participants most expected, only limited time was spent on this skill. Rather, the training put what they saw as excessive focus on preparation to pass the CEFR's B2 level test and drills with materials taken from IETLS and TOEFL despite Le & Do's (2012) suggestion that, in primary teacher training programs, priority should be given to improving pronunciation and fluency in classroom English. Similarly to Nguyen's participants' description of the workshops primary teachers attended as "not context specific" (2011, p. 238), the participants revealed their discontent with the course's appropriateness for their current work, as expressed in the following quotes:

> [The course] teaches us to make foreign delicacies but every day we just eat regular meat and rice.

> Even if I am lucky enough to pass the B2 level this time, and earn the certificate, next year I may not pass the test because my everyday work has nothing to do with it. … I am sure I won't use this knowledge during my teaching.

So far the data have revealed a paradox experienced by most participants. On the one hand, the participants were confident that they were qualified to teach English at the primary level despite their low language proficiency. This could be explained by their perception of teaching English at primary school level as simple and mainly composed of introducing simple vocabulary and structures. On the other hand, despite such confidence, the participants expressed their unease and dissatisfaction with their own language proficiency, which was revealed in their thirst for knowledge and longing for support. This explains the fact that, despite the inappropriate content of the training course which mostly could not be applied in their daily teaching, the participants still enjoyed it as a chance to revise what they had learned during their undergraduate studies, to be introduced to CEFR's B2 level materials, and to practice the language.

What is more important than such contradiction is the participants' overwhelming sense of helplessness when confronted by the various challenges to their language proficiency maintenance and improvement. It is this matrix of interrelated difficulties which inhibits teachers' language proficiency maintenance and improvement. These problems could be broadly categorized, as in the following figure, into three categories, namely personal, school-related and sociocultural challenges. It is of utmost importance to understand and resolve these problems in order to provide adequate training and support.
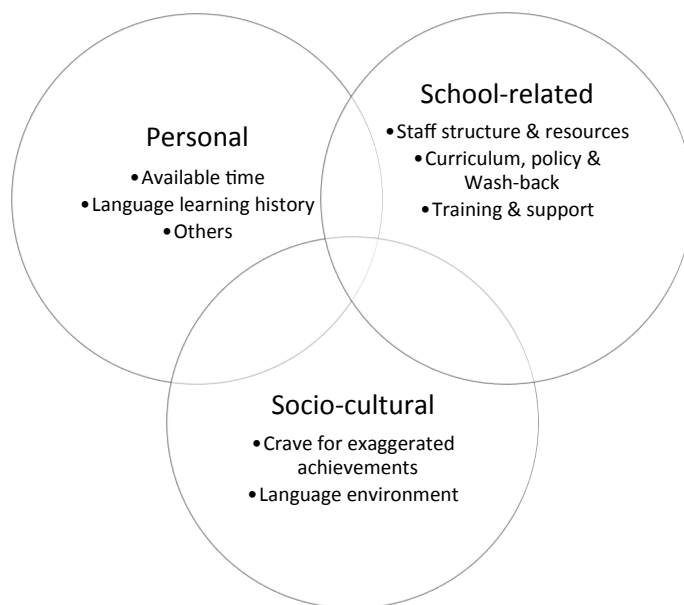
Fig. 1. Three circles of interrelated challenges.

While these three categories and their interplay will be exemplified in much greater detail in another paper, it is important to highlight that the borderline between these categories is blurry, as they are inextricably interwoven and overlap. The following part will discuss two such factors namely the consequences of the lack of English in the environment, and 'achievement and formalism diseases.'

5.2.4   The lack of an English-language environment.

At the socio-cultural level, the enormous challenge is the lack of an environment for practicing and using English due to the Vietnamese social context. Naturally, both learners and teachers have no immediate English-language needs and, therefore, lack motivation to learn English. While it is important, creating opportunities for genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations might be an unrealistic and impracticable task in this context (Le, 1999).

What is arguably worse is the current lack of communities of practice, as revealed through the interview data, as the participants were almost alone in their language proficiency maintenance and development after graduating from pre-service training programs. Especially in many rural areas, as the only English expert at the school, the teacher is stranded from the professional community and has to organize and be responsible for his/her own professional development. Training and support are not often available for individual teachers at school. Only low levels of support can be provided in terms of materials, and libraries. Professional development activities are non-existent in schools with only one teacher of English. In other schools, only intermittent meetings

are conducted to discuss teaching and class management difficulties. No participants mentioned any language proficiency related activities. These difficulties have also been reported in similar studies conducted by Le and Do (2012) and Nguyen (2011). In addition, while most participants have access to the Internet, they all seem to be unaware of Web 2.0 interactive and cooperative features. In context like rural areas with limited facilities and human resources, perhaps introducing and promoting participation in virtual communities of practices would be a meaningful solution, before more contextualized and long-lasting communities could be established.

5.2.5 *The consequences of excessive crave for exaggerated achievements*

The condition known as 'excessive crave for exaggerated achievements' permeates all of Vietnamese society, including the education system. The excessive crave for achievement in the educational context refers to the phenomenon whereby every school and teacher is under pressure to 'embellish' achievement records (of individuals and schools) in order to fulfil students', parents', MOET's, and society's expectations: these official documents are therefore often very far from reality, but marks and results in competitions are still important. As paper-based tests, designed to test only grammatical knowledge, are still popular, as clearly manifested in the lack of listening and speaking components in many examinations, including the high-stake university entrance and graduation examinations, teachers are forced to drill students for these tests and neglect the development of communicative competence. In addition, as teachers are assessed based on students' performance, in order to keep their jobs and maintain face, teachers must use the time they should spend on professional development to manage students' behaviors and participation in different school and public non-academic activities. For example, teachers are normally assigned to class management tasks, such as taking charge of students' behavior, class discipline and academic performance: classes are rated and ranked, praised or criticized at the beginning of every week of a semester.

The excessive crave for exaggerated achievement in the Vietnamese educational context leads to extra effort put in to preparing impressive documentation, including lesson plans and student records, organizing large scale but impractical or useless activities. Hence, the achievement disease puts extra pressure on the teachers with additional and meaningless tasks on their schedule, as revealed in the following quotes:

> As a primary teacher, and as my school is in the process of being assessed as a national standardized school, not only do I have to draft many records and schedule books for this year but also need to rework those from previous years. All these must be compiled by hand, in writing. I must say that sometimes I am very annoyed having to endure this pile of paperwork plus 'running' the different extra-curriculum activities. …. Every time I am being assessed, I have to lug around all these books and reports, even have to bring these home and have no time left for family. This is tiring.

> Just in August alone, I have counted 16 kinds of schedule and meeting books. … I could not remember the number of schedules having drafted.

This quote illustrates the overlap between all three circles of challenges. The excessive crave for exaggerated achievement from the socio-cultural circle resulted in negative wash-back effects and an unbearable amount of unnecessary administrative paperwork in the school-related circle. These, in turn, also partly cause teachers' lack of available time documented in the personal circle.

6 Conclusions

This paper reported some findings from an on-going project. Due to the limited time and resources available for data collection, the findings could only be based on data generated from a group of primary teachers from four provinces in Northern Vietnam. This limited number of data sites is an inevitable limitation of the study, and will be addressed by future research conducted in other parts of Vietnam for a more faithful reflection of the situation. Meanwhile, it is strongly be-

lieved that this present study's findings can still meaningfully contribute to a better understanding of primary ELT in Vietnam. Perhaps the most important finding is the teachers' discontent with their low language proficiency despite their confidence that it is good enough for their job. Such tension, on the one hand, discloses the participants' willingness to learn and improve themselves and their longing for support and training programs. On the other hand, it exposes the perception of most participants that the goals of teaching English at primary levels were still mainly teaching vocabulary and grammatical structures. Such perceptions require a more in-depth investigation and need to be changed for a better quality of language teaching and learning at primary level.

These findings also reveal the many factors challenging teachers' English proficiency development. These factors have been categorized into three overlapping circles, namely personal, school-related, and sociocultural challenges. The close interdependence of the three circles of challenges demands a holistic solution to the daunting task of maintaining and improving teachers' language proficiency in this context. Teachers should not be left alone to deal with the many obstacles confronting them when maintaining and improving their language proficiency. Successful facilitation of such a process requires efforts from the society, government, MOET, school administrators, and teachers.

When it comes to assessing the effectiveness of an education policy, it is so much easier to criticize than to meaningfully contribute. Despite the shortcomings of MOET's training course, the program is an attempt to improve the quality of primary English teaching and learning in Vietnam. It is undeniable, as in the participants' words, that training programs implemented as a result of this project provide teachers with a chance to revise what they have learned and, for many, forgotten, from their pre-service education. However, at the same time, the participants expressed their disappointment regarding the focus and applicability of the course for their everyday teaching. As what they have learned is, in their own words, not relevant to their current jobs, the supposed aim of the training program has not been achieved. A training course whose focus is on drilling teachers to pass the B2 standard test could never cure the complex problems regarding teachers' low language proficiency. MOET's attempt, therefore, could only function as a bandage solution at best, tending to soothe the surface cut without touching the deep root of the problem. In order to make a meaningful contribution to solving the matrix of challenges teachers are facing in improving their language proficiency, it is necessary to employ a more holistic approach with better collaboration among different forces at different levels. Such a holistic solution urgently requires that one considers teachers' voices regarding their difficulties and needs in addition to other factors influencing the quality of primary school EFL teachers. These factors include the economic situation of Vietnam, language policy, education management policy, pre-service primary teacher education curriculum, textbook design, and the objectives of English teaching at primary level. There must be macro-changes, including redefining the goals of ELT at primary level, reforming the traditional grammar-based testing system, eliminating the excessive crave for exaggerated achievements, promoting a supportive environment for language use and practice, reforming pre-service teacher training, and conducting more frequent and more practical training and supporting programs for in-service teachers. Yet, above all, it is of utmost importance that teachers, the main protagonists, should not be ignored during the process. Rather, their voices need to be heard so that their needs can be catered for in long-term and meaningful supporting programs.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Part A: Instruction

Please read each of the descriptive statements regarding English language proficiency. The statements represent a wide range of abilities in listening, reading, writing and speaking (interaction and production). First, choose the level that best represents your present ability in each of the five sections and write down the number in the *Self-rating level* cell. If you feel you are in between levels, please use 0.5 point (e.g. 3.5 or 4.5). Second, choose the level that you think represents the minimal level of English proficiency that teachers who teach at your levels (elementary/secondary/high schools/university) need to have. Write down the number in the *Minimal level cell*.

Listening   **Self-rating level:**   **Minimal level:**

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	6
Description	I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.

Reading   **Self-rating level:**   **Minimal level:**

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	6
Description	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues	I can understand very short, simple texts. I can find specific predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary pose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialized articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialized articles and literary work.

Spoken interaction   **Self-rating level:**   **Minimal level:**

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	6
Description	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events)	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skillfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficult so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.

Spoken production   **Self-rating level:**   **Minimal level:**

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	6
Descrip-tion	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambition. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.

Writing   **Self-rating level:**   **Minimal level:**

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	6
Descrip-tion	I can write short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms, with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interest. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of views at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

Part B: Background information

Please complete the following section by writing down the correct information or circle the appropriate choice. All information will be kept confidential.

1. Age:
2. Education background: Bachelor   Master   PhD
3. Teaching experience: Less than 5 years   5 -10 years More than 10 years
4. Which level are you teaching? Primary   Lower secondary   Upper secondary   University
5. What is the average proficiency level of your students?
                              Basic   Pre-intermediate   Intermediate   Upper Intermediate Advanced
6. Have you ever studied in an English-speaking country?   Yes   No
7. Have you ever taken IELTS/TOEFL/TOEIC?   Yes   No
    (Optional) If YES, please provide the result: ……………..
8. Please briefly describe your three main strengths in English teaching methodology:
    a.   …………………………
    b.   …………………….....
    c.   …………………………
9. For your future language training course, tick the areas you want to focus on:

English grammar	English vocabulary
English pronunciation	Communicative skills
Background knowledge regarding English speaking countries (e.g. Literature, history, culture, geography, economics, life styles)	English teaching methodology & techniques
If other please specify: …………………………	

10. If you are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview for this research, please write down your contact information.
     Name:
     Contact number/ email:
11. If you want to be informed of the results of this research, please write down your contact information.
     Contact email:

Thank you very much for your time on this questionnaire!

Appendix B: Some semi-structured interview questions

1. Please briefly describe how you become a language teacher, your teaching contexts and workload. Is teaching your only job?
2. What is your teaching philosophy? Please describe the essential characteristics of a good language teacher.
3. What do you think is the minimum level of English language proficiency needed to teach at your level (primary/ lower secondary/ upper secondary/ high school/ university)? Why do you think so?
4. How important is it for teachers to maintain and develop their language proficiency? How could teachers do so? What have you done?
5. How well does your pre-service teacher training program prepare you (in term of language proficiency) for the current teaching job? How could such a program improve?
6. Do you think it is necessary to provide in-service teachers with language improvement programs? What kind of program do you think will be effective? How could such a program help?
7. What do you think are the reasons for possible limitations of English language proficiency of Vietnamese teachers in general? And for you?
8. How does teachers' English language proficiency affect their teaching practice?
9. What do you think of this current training course (as part of the project 2020)? What have you learnt so far? How beneficial and practical are they for your current teaching? How can similar programs in the future improve?