



New curriculum, existing problems: Teacher perception of the English language curriculum renewal in Vietnam

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Abstract

The emergence of English as a global lingua franca, coupled with the profound impact of globalisation and neoliberalism in language policy planning, has influenced the Vietnamese Government to embark on a national foreign language project, aiming to enhance the English capacity of school students. New English curricula and textbooks were developed, adhering to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This study is an attempt to explore teacher attitude and understanding of the new curriculum and its pedagogic underpinning. Data obtained from a teacher survey (n=347) and interviews (n=16) reveal doubts and negative attitude among teachers about the feasibility of the curriculum goal. The findings also indicate that teachers had an incomplete understanding of CLT, along with a range of local challenges to the successful enactment of the new communicative curriculum. Implications are proposed in light of these findings, including the need to adapt rather adopt CLT and the prioritisation of teacher professional development, among other structural changes.

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1 Introduction

Globalisation and the global economy have become bywords of the new millennium. English has become the linguistic vehicle for increasing international trade and commerce, and the spread, the reach, the creep of the English language has been an undeniable aspect of this phenomenon. As a result of this impact, developing countries are under the pressure to increase their numbers of competent English users so as to improve national competitiveness and take up membership in this global village. Significant efforts in numerous countries have been dedicated to large-scale, heavily-invested reform projects aiming to bring about radical change in English language curricula, materials and pedagogies (Butler, 2011; Kam, 2002; Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003; Spolsky & Sung, 2015). Common to such reform efforts has been a move towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has generally been accepted as the approach to teaching and learning most likely to produce the communicative users of the language.

Vietnam has recently taken the path of English language reform at the school level and this initiative provided the context and data for this study. Project 2020 was announced in 2008 with specific English language achievement targets to be met by 2020. As part of the reform, the curriculum content was provided within a new textbook series and CLT was prescribed as the pedagogy to deliver the curriculum. Planned, developed and implemented in the socio-culturally normalised top-down manner, the new curriculum for school aimed at Level B1 in English proficiency, calibrated in relation to the European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning and Assessment, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). Via the adoption of CLT with the intimation of a student-centred approach, the new curriculum was expected to bring about radical changes in classroom practice, shifting from traditional, grammar-based, teacher-fronted processes towards an interactive, learner-centred classroom.

It is salient to note that implementing a new curriculum and pedagogy at a national level brings enormous challenges. Multiple inter-related factors including different stakeholder perspectives, human and material resource needs, national and local requirements are all actively in play (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2001). Beyond these, there are potentially more deep-seated issues, including teacher attitude and understanding of the new curriculum, which are essential for the desired change to be attained (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Kennedy, 1987). In fact, little is known about what Vietnamese teachers actually think and know about the new curriculum, its pedagogic principles and premises. This paper, located within a larger study aiming to explore the processes and practices of the new English language curriculum for upper-secondary schools in Vietnam, attempts to inform this gap in existing knowledge.

2 Literature review

2.1 The global uptake of CLT in school curricula

CLT, a forty-plus-year-old approach to language teaching, and its ‘spin-off’ - Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Nunan, 2004), have emerged as the default approach to language instruction globally. From its original base in Europe and North America, CLT has been “quickly exported” to countries with a pressing need for English proficiency (Littlewood, 2014, p. 352). Particularly in the Asia Pacific region, CLT even becomes a ‘slogan’, and communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) has been adopted as a central component of government rhetoric (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2014; Nunan, 2003). Bax (2003) reported that many English language teachers, trainers and curriculum designers were operating with and adhering to the so-called “CLT attitude”, assuming and insisting that “CLT is the whole complete solution to language learning” (p. 280).

Due to its popularity, CLT is undoubtedly the most researched approach in the history of language teaching education. There are an extending list of reports from a range of countries attempting to gain insights into communicative-based curriculum reform and to understand “to what extent such efforts will help change the rigid teaching of English” (Spolsky & Sung, 2015, p. 5). However, the outcome to date has often has been described as “not pleasant” (Fullan, 2007, p. 13) or even “disappointing” (Wedell, 2011, p. 3). Reports from various contexts have indicated that the move to communicative-based curricula rarely has been as successful as planned (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Littlewood, 2014; Nunan, 2003). There is evidence of a complicated and substantial gap between what was intended in the curriculum policy and what happened inside the classroom (Abe, 2013; de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014; Le & Barnard, 2009). These studies have discussed at length the barriers hindering the CLT classroom both at the theoretical level and on practical grounds. These barriers include the conceptual vagueness of CLT itself as its laudable flexibility has resulted in various (mis)conceptions among teachers about what CLT really is (Bax, 2003; Spada, 2007; Thompson, 1996). Practical constraints at the classroom level, including a lack of facilities, low-motivated students and lack of qualified teaching staff, have been reported to be major impediments to the communicative classroom (Butler, 2011; Humphries & Burns, 2015; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; W. Wang, 2014). Another deep-seated

issue is the cultural barrier, the mismatch between the Western educational values inherent in the principles underlying CLT and those in the local non-Western contexts (Fotos, 2005; Hu, 2002; Rao, 2002). Several of these studies questioned whether CLT was practical in settings where teachers were likely to adhere to an educational philosophy which was radically different to that underlying the communicative approach.

Curriculum change, as remarked by Fullan (2015), is a dynamic, non-linear and multi-dimensional process. What makes this process exceedingly complex is that when it comes to implementation, multiple factors and realities of different stakeholders are actively in play. Among these stakeholders, the teacher, who has legitimate power in the classroom, is a critical figure in this reform process.

2.2 Teacher agency in curriculum reform

Studies on educational reforms have reinforced the view that the teacher is the decisive agent in the successful implementation of any pedagogical change (Datnow, 2012; Gregory & Noto, 2018; Macfarlane & Woolfson, 2013). As remarked by Richards and Renandya (2002), the teachers

do not simply implement the curriculum. They define and refine the curriculum; they interpret and transform the curriculum in a way that makes learning more manageable for the learners. In other words, it is what teachers think and do at the classroom level that eventually determines what learners learn in the classroom" (p. 385).

Curriculum reform necessarily entails real changes in attitudes and behaviours of the teachers (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2002). If there are incompatibilities between teacher attitudes and the philosophy underlying the innovative curriculum, teachers are more likely to reject the changes and adhere to their routine practice, leading to zero change at the classroom level (Humphries & Burns, 2015). In the case of CLT curriculum reforms, studies uniformly revealed that teacher attitudes were not always congruent with the communicative curriculum in terms of its feasibility in their local contexts (Ching-Ching & Kuo-Hung, 2018; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996). Li (1998) reported that many teachers in South Korea disregarded CLT as they believed that this pedagogy could not prepare their students for the written, grammar-based examinations. As commented by Hu (2002), CLT failed to achieve the expected outcomes in China partly as a result of clashes between the principles underpinning CLT and Chinese traditional classrooms, with teacher resistance to employing CLT as the outcome. CLT also caused substantial confusion at the classroom level, wherein teachers held different views with regards to 'how to teach' the communicative curriculum, leading to limited success of the implementation at the classroom level (H. Wang, 2008; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Therefore, Karavas-Doukas (1996) suggested that substantial efforts were required to make sure that teachers "revise, refine, or change attitudes which may not be compatible with the principles of that approach" (p. 188).

Effective and sustained innovation also requires the capacity of teachers to understand the change to which they are conforming. As commented by Morris (1995), the degree to which teachers adopt and implement change depends upon the extent to which they acquire an informed understanding of the educational theories underpinning the reform. Teachers need to understand what the changes look like in both theory and practice, so that they can develop new skills and gauge what it means for their own teaching (Hargreaves et al., 2002). The literature on CLT curriculum reform highlighted the fact that many teachers did not have a solid understanding of the CLT principles. In Turkey, a study by Kırkgöz (2008) revealed that some of the teachers either did not understand or were unable to see the practical implications of CLT. Studies by Hardman and A-Rahman (2014) in Malaysia and de Segovia and Hardison (2009) in Thailand offered evidence that some teachers were confused about how to apply CLT in the classroom. Similarly, in an attempt to explore teachers' understandings of CLT in Bangladesh, Rahman (2015) found that the teachers who claimed to be practising CLT in their classrooms did not have a clear idea of what it entailed.

As explained by Bridwell-Mitchell (2015), the primary reason for this situation is that teachers are usually not theoretical beings. Their teaching practices are often “deeply ingrained, taken-for-granted, value-laden” and based on pragmatic trial-and-error grounds (p. 141). The lack of solid understandings of CLT among many teachers is not to lay the blame for failure at their feet but to point to the critical role of professional preparation for teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to enact CLT in their local classrooms (Hargreaves et al., 2002; Steele & Zhang, 2016).

2.3 Communicative language teaching in Vietnam

CLT was introduced in Vietnamese schools in the national curriculum reform of 2006. However, Le and Barnard (2009) found that the expected communicative lesson was not implemented in the way it was outlined. Classroom pedagogies remained largely “textbook-based, test-oriented, and teacher-fronted” (Le & Barnard, 2009, p. 22). The paper-and-pencil format of testing remained largely grammar-based, and its washback effect demotivated students from becoming orally active and competent in the spoken language. Large class sizes with mixed levels of proficiency, under-motivated students, and a lack of qualified teachers presented major challenges to communicative English teaching and learning in Vietnamese schools (Le, 2007, 2015; H. Nguyen & Bui, 2016; L. Nguyen, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2016; Pham, 2007). The picture became even less positive when the qualities, distribution and accessibility remained uneven across regions and in different sectors of the population (London, 2011). Ethnic minority students, who were encouraged to speak and maintain their own languages, were not proficient in Vietnamese, the language of instruction at school, and had very little, sometimes zero, motivation to be proficient in English (Le, 2015; H. Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2018).

2.4 The National Foreign Language Project 2020

CLT was introduced in Vietnamese schools in the national curriculum reform of 2006. However, Le and Barnard (2009) found that the expected communicative lesson was not implemented in the way it was outlined. Classroom pedagogies remained largely “textbook-based, test-oriented, and teacher-fronted” (Le & Barnard, 2009, p. 22). The paper-and-pencil format of testing remained largely grammar-based, and its washback effect demotivated students from becoming orally active and competent in the spoken language. Large class sizes with mixed levels of proficiency, under-motivated students, and a lack of qualified teachers presented major challenges to communicative English teaching and learning in Vietnamese schools (Le, 2007, 2015; H. Nguyen & Bui, 2016; L. Nguyen, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2016; Pham, 2007). The picture became even less positive when the qualities, distribution and accessibility remained uneven across regions and in different sectors of the population (London, 2011). Ethnic minority students, who were encouraged to speak and maintain their own languages, were not proficient in Vietnamese, the language of instruction at school, and had very little, sometimes zero, motivation to be proficient in English (Le, 2015; H. Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2018).

Improving the standard of English teaching and learning has become critically important, as young Vietnamese people are now required to be equipped with English proficiency for both personal and national participation in the global economy. At the national level, English is seen as synonymous with economic growth and prosperity. At the community level, families associate their children learning English with better employment prospects and socio-economic mobility. Vietnamese politicians and parents reify English as “inherently useful and essential” for both personal and national success (Le, 2019, p. 9). This pragmatic motivation, couched in the neoliberal discourse of economic development, has become an “economic imperative” (Sayer, 2015, p. 50) for the Vietnamese government to embark on the National Foreign Language Project 2020. The overall goal of Project 2020 is:

By 2020, Vietnamese young people graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily life, study and work in a multicultural and multilingual environment, making foreign languages a competitive advantage of Vietnamese people to serve the cause of industrialisation and modernisation of the country. (The Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, 2008, Decision 1400, Article 1.1).

With a “more & earlier” approach (Hamid, 2010; Sayer, 2015) being adopted, English is to be introduced to younger aged students as a compulsory school subject from Year 3 to Year 12, targeting Proficiency Level B1 on the CEFR. As part of the initiative, more than 80,000 Vietnamese teachers are expected to be confident and competent users of English. However, in 2011-2012, a nationwide review of teacher proficiency levels showed over 80% of teachers failed to meet the mandated level and were underqualified to teach the new curriculum (N. H. Nguyen, 2013). In response, in-service teacher training courses and workshops have been organised across the country, aiming to enhance teacher capacity to teach English communicatively.

Since its inception, Project 2020 has been the topic of vigorous public and scholarly debate. There has been scepticism from both international and domestic researchers (Hayes, 2008; Le, 2008, 2015; Le & Do, 2012; T. Nguyen, 2017; Parks, 2011; T. P. A. Vu, 2013) who have expressed concerns about the feasibility of its goals. However, teacher competence has remained a major issue when H. Nguyen (2011) and H. Nguyen et al. (2018) expressed their concerns about whether teachers’ language proficiency and knowledge were sufficient to teach the communicative curriculum. In 2017, the political decision was made to adjust the accomplishment date for Project 2020, extending the implementation time from 2020 to 2025 (Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 2017). Although it is noteworthy that the program has now been rebadged as Project 2025, as yet no official evaluation of the reform has been made public.

3 Research design

As part of a larger research project on the processes and practices of the new English language curriculum for upper-secondary schools in Vietnam, this study explored the teacher attitude about, understanding of, and perceived challenges to the new communicative curriculum. In particular, the study sought to inform the following research questions:

1. What were the attitudes of the upper-secondary school teachers towards the new curriculum?
2. What did these teachers understand about the new curriculum and its pedagogical underpinnings?
3. What were the challenges to the new curriculum as perceived by the teachers?

This study adopted a mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010;

Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) that enabled a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The potential for triangulation within this research design offered the construction of meaningful and coherent explanations from both quantitative and qualitative data; therefore, enhancing the legitimation of the research findings (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). The research was based in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. Data for the study was drawn from a teacher survey (n=347) and in-depth interviews (n=16).

3.1 The survey

A major advantage of using a survey is that it allows for the collection of a breadth of data from a large sample which can be generalised to larger populations (De Vaus, 2002; Ruel, Wagner, & Gillespie, 2016). As the new English curriculum is being trialled out in parallel to the existing 2006 curriculum, the target teacher participants of this study included those who (i) have been working with the new curriculum in upper-secondary schools in the city, and (ii) have attended in-service professional training in relation to the new curriculum. During the in-service teacher training workshops organised by the local department of education, 400 teachers of English from 20 districts of the city were invited to participate in the survey. A number of 347 responses were

received, making a response rate of 86%. Table 1 summarizes demographic details of the teacher participants in relation to gender, education, teaching experience and the current level of English proficiency.

Table 1
Teacher demographic information

Teacher demographics		n ^a	%
Gender	Male	40	11.7%
	Female	302	88.3%
Education	Undergraduates	259	75.5%
	Postgraduates	84	24.5%
	Other	0	0.0%
Teaching experience (years)	1–5 years	16	4.6%
	6–10 years	70	20.3%
	11–15 years	102	29.6%
	16–20 years	105	30.4%
	> 21 years	52	15.1%
Current level of English proficiency	B1	0	0.0%
	B2	22	6.5%
	C1	315	93.2%
	C2	1	0.3%

Note: n^a represents the total number of responses in one category. Incomplete responses were excluded.

The quantitative data collected from the survey were analysed by IBM SPSS 25. The survey data were entered, then defined and recoded. Descriptive statistics was used as a method of univariate analysis (Bryman, 2012) to generate frequency distributions of single variables. A bivariate analysis including Pearson chi-square and Cramer's V tests, was generated to determine the statistical significance and strength of association between two categorical and/or dichotomy variables.

3.2 *Semi-structured interviews*

As a robust data collection method, the interview offered ample opportunity to seek detailed explanations or clarification of the issues identified in the survey (Morse, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2011; Leavy, 2014), 16 teachers (or approximately 5% of the survey size) were selected (Table 2). All interview participants were highly qualified and experienced teachers, with an average of fifteen years in the classroom. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, focusing on three main themes: (i) teacher attitude in relation to the curriculum reform, (ii) teacher understanding of CLT, and (iii) perceived challenges to the curriculum implementation. Before the interview, the participants were asked for their preference for the language of the meeting (i.e. English or Vietnamese), and all chose Vietnamese. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

A qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2004) was used to analyse interview data. This method of analysis enabled the researchers “to sift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion” (Stemler, 2000, p. 1). A deductive content analysis was used as the starting point of analysis and then combined with the complementary inductive strategies to add more sub-categories deriving from the data set. The data were coded into the three predefined overarching categories guided in the interview protocol. The codes for the identification of participants were made in alphabetical order for the purpose of confidentiality.

Table 2*Details of interviewed teachers*

#	Teacher	Gender	Age (years)	Teaching experience (years)	Qualification	Level of English proficiency
1	Teacher A	F	32	9	BA	C1
2	Teacher B	F	38	14	MA	C1
3	Teacher C	F	38	13	MA	C1
4	Teacher D	F	43	18	BA	C1
5	Teacher E	F	33	6	MA	C1
6	Teacher F	F	42	16	BA	C1
7	Teacher G	F	43	15	MA	C1
8	Teacher H	F	38	10	BA	C1
9	Teacher I	M	41	10	MA	C1
10	Teacher J	F	51	25	BA	C1
11	Teacher K	F	41	17	BA	C1
12	Teacher L	F	45	19	BA	C1
13	Teacher M	M	42	18	MA	C1
14	Teacher O	M	49	23	BA	B2
15	Teacher P	F	45	15	BA	C1
16	Teacher Q	F	44	20	MA	C1

4 Findings

4.1 Teacher attitude towards the curriculum goal

As seen in Table 3, less than 20% of respondents expressed confidence that students could reach Proficiency Level B1 within the new curriculum. The vast majority (77.5%) took the view that only partial achievement of this goal could be possible, while 3.5% regarded this proficiency goal as unachievable.

Table 3*Teacher attitude about the achievability of the curriculum goal*

Curriculum goal	Unachievable	Partially achievable	Achievable
Teaching and learning English in the upper-secondary level aim to develop student communicative competence, equivalent to Proficiency Level B1	3.5% (n=12)	77.5% (n=268)	18.5% (n=64)

A correlation test (with a p -value based on Pearson Chi-square test, confidence level at 95%) showed a statistically significant relationship between teacher attitude and their levels of education ($\phi=.176$, $p=.005$). This indicates that there was an association between teacher education and their attitude towards the achievement of the curriculum goal. However, this association was not strong enough ($r=.174$) to conclude that teacher education directly influenced their attitude. Other factors, including gender ($p=.577$), teaching experiences ($p=.757$) and levels of English proficiency ($p=.952$), were not associated with teacher attitude about the curriculum goal.

The interview data shows a similar finding, where 11 over 16 teachers expressed their doubts on the feasibility of the proficiency goal and that only a certain number of their students could reach the target level. Common to the teacher comments was that the Proficiency Level B1 appeared to

be only feasible for high-performing students to attain. By contrast, they believed that it was difficult, even impossible, for those at the mid-range of ability to achieve this goal. The estimated proportions of students who could reach this level varied for different teachers, as evident in the following comments:

I think there is about 40 to 50% of my students who can achieve that level. The reality is that a lot of students do not gain much from English studies in more junior years. Some have little motivation, who only learn English to avoid failing marks (Teacher A)

Only a small number of students can reach level B1. In non-selective classes which I teach, there may be a maximum of 5 or 6 students who can achieve that level. The rest know almost nothing. It is very challenging to teach these classes where I have to use Vietnamese to teach because students do not understand English (Teacher D)

Notably, four teachers expressed their concern that the targeted proficiency goal was overly ambitious and impossible to be attained. As exemplified in the following comment, a senior teacher regarded this proficiency goal as “a fantasy” and Project 2020 as “a waste of money”:

Impossible. The question is what level students finishing lower-secondary school could actually achieve to be ready for the upper-secondary program? I have to say that this proficiency goal is just a fantasy, even the level A2... Many parents think their children will become a worker, so why they need to learn English? This project is a waste of money (Teacher O)

4.2 *Teacher understanding of CLT*

In interviews, when asked to describe what CLT involved and how to apply it in the classroom, the teachers found it difficult to conceptualise. This is evident in the fragmented descriptions of CLT recorded throughout the teacher interviews. None of the teachers was able to give a detailed account of CLT, nor was able to describe in a more detail their practices using CLT. Little CLT-associated metalanguage, such as ‘communicative competence’, ‘functions’, ‘authentic materials’, ‘genuine interaction’, were mentioned. Generally, teachers appeared to have an incomplete knowledge of CLT. Their conceptions of CLT remained very general and centred primarily on three aspects: it made a focus on speaking, it involved more pair and group work, and it was a learner-centred approach.

4.2.1 *CLT meant more speaking*

Teachers appeared to express a narrow view of CLT, in which they equalled ‘communication’ with ‘speaking’ and believed that CLT focused extensively on speaking activities. The following quotes exemplify this view.

To my understanding, it [CLT] mainly focuses on developing speaking and listening skills. Besides, reading and writing are accompanying skills. Students should be provided with a lexical resource to enable language output (Teacher E)

I think the focus of the new program places on providing students with opportunities for speaking. Student should practice and develop their speaking skills (Teacher K)

4.2.2 CLT involved more pair and group work

Pair and group work were regarded as closely associated with CLT in the teacher interviews. The teachers believed that collaborative activities could foster language use among students. In the following comment, a teacher expressed her view of using pair and group work activities:

The more pair and group work, the better, especially for those who are shy from raising their voices. In these activities, students can act out a conversation in role plays (Teacher M)

In another, a teacher claimed pair and group work as a useful technique, particularly group presentations in which students could actively plan and design their own projects.

I can use a lot of activities and techniques; for example, pair work, group work, especially projects. Students are divided into groups, each of which has a leader. They will have to divide their own duties and roles. They can search for information on the internet and making slides for presentation (Teacher H)

4.2.3 CLT meant a student-centred approach

All the interviewed teachers shared a view that in the CLT classroom students should be the central figure of teaching and learning, with more control, independence and responsibility over their own learning. As one teacher commented:

It relies on the students. They should establish their own personal goal, something like what they want to achieve in the future or what they should aim for their learning. If they can answer these questions, they will have a good learning outcome. If they think that they are learning for their parents or teachers, the motivation may be different (Teacher O)

The student-centred approach was also linked to the new roles of teachers and students in the communicative classroom. All the teachers agreed that teachers were no longer the transmitter of knowledge, but the facilitator and monitor of classroom activities, as in:

It means that the teacher is the organiser of activities and students actively work to solve the problems. The teacher only guides students on what to do, the rest will be done by the students. They discover by themselves, share their opinion and learn from that process (Teacher D)

4.3 Perceived challenges to the CLT curriculum

Table 4 shows the perceived suitability of CLT in the local classroom. Roughly 70% of the teachers believed that CLT was not a good fit for their local context of teaching and learning.

Table 4
Teacher perceived suitability of CLT

<i>Perceived suitability of CLT</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Suitable	103	29.8%
Not suitable	236	68.2%

This finding was supported by the teacher interviews. While four teachers expressed their confidence about the applicability of CLT, the remaining teachers expressed doubts and concerns whether this pedagogy could work in their local classrooms. No statistically significant

correlation was found between teachers' perceived suitability of CLT and other factors, including gender, language proficiency and teaching experience. Rather, their perceived unsuitability of CLT were largely linked to a number of practical constraints hindering CLT to be enacted in their local classroom, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Perceived constraints to the communicative curriculum

Constraints to CLT	n	%
Large class size	294	85.0%
The national exam remains written and grammar-based	284	82.1%
'Heavy' syllabus	219	64.0%
Lack of classroom facilities	128	37.0%
Under-motivated students	125	36.0%
Teacher's limited proficiency in English	56	16.2%
Others	7	2.0%

4.3.1 Class size

The large class size is the most frequently mentioned constraint for the successful implementation of the CLT curriculum at the classroom level, shared by 88% of the surveyed teachers. Class sizes of up to 50 students make it overly challenging to conduct communicative activities in which every student participates. It was also mentioned that it can be difficult for the teacher to give individual feedback and keep track of the progress of individual students.

The classroom is overcrowded. In a language classroom, such a large class makes it so challenging to teach. When it is really hard to conduct communicative activities in large classes. It is also difficult for teachers to observe and monitor all the students when they work in groups. This is the biggest challenge (Teacher B).

Teacher E shared a similar view and further noted that in the traditional style of classroom arrangement, students sit in symmetrical rows of fixed seating, all facing the teacher at the front of the room. Such an arrangement was originally established to support the traditional one-way communication with the teacher as the centre of the interactivity, which was at odds with the communicative language classroom. In the following quote, an informant commented:

In a large class, only one teacher cannot monitor and keep track of all students. Each student is at a different level, has different capacity and strength, so it is difficult to make sure all 50 students equally participate in the activity. Furthermore, classroom arrangement remains the same. It is difficult for students to interact with each other face-to-face. In fact, they only see the back of other students (Teacher E)

4.3.2 Washback effect of exams

The washback effect of the high-stakes written examinations is seen to be another prominent constraint, expressed by 83% of the teacher respondents. A shared concern was that an intensive focus on communicative ability would be at the expense of grammar practice, resulting in poor achievement in written tests and examinations. A teacher noted this washback effect as a result of the incompatibility between the prescribed teaching methodology and the traditional type of assessment:

The national examination has enormous impacts when schools and educational managers evaluate the quality of teaching and learning via the concrete marks that students achieve. If the teachers do not go

with that, they will be negatively evaluated as bad teachers. Therefore, speaking and listening skills are not the focus of teaching and learning. These skills are not included in the examination which is based mainly on grammar and vocabulary (Teacher I).

Inevitably, the mismatch between the designated pedagogy and assessment has led to roughly 64% of the surveyed teachers claiming that they placed a primary focus on teaching grammar, lexis and examination skills as the best way to prepare their students for the national examination (Table 6). By contrast, only 22% of the teachers claimed to take communicative competence as their first priority. These statistics explain the belief of the majority of teachers that the goal of communicative competence within the new curriculum could only be achieved partially.

Table 6

The priority in teaching

Teachers' priority in teaching	n	%
Developing student communicate competence	73	22.1%
Focusing on grammar, lexis and exam skills to prepare students for the national examination	223	64.5%
Focusing on pronunciation	31	9.0 %
Other	4	1.2%

4.3.3 Syllabus load

The 'heavy' syllabus was another constraint reported by 64% of the survey participants. The teachers complained that the lesson was too long, and they "always lack time" to cover the required content. Most of the teachers' comments were concerned with the large amount and high level of difficulty of the learning content, which was even challenging for teachers themselves.

Some lessons are difficult for students. Actually, they are even difficult for the teachers as well. If teachers do not even understand the content, so how can they teach? The lesson is too long to be covered in one period. Especially in listening and writing lessons, I always lack time. There isn't enough time for students to practise (Teacher F).

Lack of a learner needs analysis was believed to be the cause of the problem. In the following comment, a senior teacher complained that there was a lack of consultation with the ultimate end-users of the curriculum, that is the teachers and students, particularly students' needs, preferences, levels and learning styles. Failing to undertake a needs analysis may be a costly mistake, resulting in the establishment of an overambitious proficiency goal that teachers perceive to be unachievable for many students.

It's a long way to meet the expectation of the textbooks. The textbook writers design the books on their subjective views rather than on the students' needs. There is a very bad thing about MOET here. There is no analysis of students' needs and levels. There seems to be no plan at all. Now students are expected to achieve level B1 without any evidence or research (Teacher O).

4.3.4 Other factors

Other factors, including students with mixed levels of motivation (36%) and lack of classroom facilities (37%), were also believed to be the impediments of the communicative curriculum renewal. Although almost all of the teachers in this study demonstrated a sufficient level of English proficiency, about 16% still regarded this as a barrier to teaching the curriculum.

The interview data further revealed other issues, such as the gap between the socio-economically developed central urban area and the less developed suburban and rural districts, coupled with the limited supplementary materials and opportunities for English use outside the classroom. In the following comment, a teacher commented on the gap between different socio-economic regions where students in economically less developed areas hardly ever have the opportunities for real-life interaction in English; the classroom was the only place where they use (if any) the target language.

We have to note the difference in socio-economic conditions in different regions. This pedagogy is suitable for urban schools where students have more real experience with language use. It means that students learn in school and then they can practice outside the school in different ways. For students in rural and remote areas, it is not very effective (Teacher B)

In another, an informant complained that the lack of supplementary materials made it challenging to provide more input into the lessons:

The new program no longer focuses only on grammar as the previous one, but on communicative skills and cultural understanding. Besides the textbooks, supplementary materials are rare, very rare. For myself, I really wish there are more varied sources of materials to introduce students with more information (Teacher D)

Teacher stress and pressure were also evident in the interviews. Part of the pressure was rooted in the practice of classroom observations, which take place on a regular basis with the observers being colleagues, headteachers or other managerial officials who might not have expertise in language teaching. The main purpose of these observations is to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. In the following quote, Teacher D expressed:

I really hope that the head or a manager has a more open-minded opinion and evaluation after the classroom observation to release stress and pressure of teachers. It is because the teachers ourselves are under a lot of pressure. Everyone wants to keep the job, wants to do the job at their best, but sometimes there is some reason that they do not perform well. A more multi-faceted and sympathetic view may help us be more relaxed (Teacher D)

5 Discussion

The research findings have revealed negative teacher attitudes and concerns about the feasibility of the curriculum goals, which they considered to be overly ambitious. The common view was that the desired Proficiency Level B1 was achievable by high-performing students, but was too challenging for those in the mid-range and below. On that basis, the teachers were reluctant to wholly endorse its achievability. The teachers in the study also demonstrated a fragmented understanding of CLT principles, the pedagogy underpinning the curriculum reform. Various barriers to the new communicative curriculum were reported by the teachers, raising a serious concern whether the new communicative language curriculum could actually work in the local context of teaching and learning.

5.1 *The new curriculum, existing problems*

Fullan (2007), in a debate on the roles of different stakeholders in curriculum innovation, observed the two “divergent worlds” - the policymaker and policy implementer, involved in the complex process of curriculum change:

We have a classic case of two entirely different worlds: the policymakers on the one side, and the local practitioner on the other. To the extent that each side is ignorant of the subjective world of the other, reform will fail - and the extent is great (p. 99)

Findings from this study appear to support Fullan's view. A major cause problem of the top-down curriculum reform in Vietnam was the lacking of collaboration and interaction between these "divergent worlds", leading to the absence of teacher voices in the shaping of the new curriculum. The top-down imposition of the new curriculum with its new goal and pedagogy came at a cost when the misalignment was evident between what was expected by the policymakers and what was perceived as feasible by the practising teachers. As informed in the study, the lack of collaboration resulted in doubts and concerns among the teachers about the achievability of the curriculum goal, with the majority taking the view that Proficiency Level B1 was overly ambitious and, for the most part, unattainable to mainstream students. This finding corresponds with a report by T. Vu, Winsler, and Walsh (2021) who found a similar result when exploring teacher evaluation of the proficiency goal level A2 for lower-secondary schools. These studies offer empirical evidence that, to the majority of teachers, the proficiency goals within Project 2020's curriculum reform were neither feasible nor practical for mainstream classrooms at both lower and upper-secondary levels.

Various challenges hindering the communicative curriculum to be enacted in the local classroom were reported by the teachers in this study. Primary among these barriers, large class sizes with limited facilities which were not conducive to building a communicative classroom. The continuing importance of the written, high-stakes examination for entry to university and its washback effect demotivated students to become orally active and more competent in the spoken language. The spectre of the 'make-or-break' examination regime set the tone for teaching and learning with a focus on accuracy, instead of fluency. These were combined with the heavy workload and unmotivated students were at odds with the communicative language classroom, which might contribute to the potential failure of the new curriculum. The 'victim' of communicative teaching and learning would be that "only lip-service [was] paid to communication" even though the communicative approach was officially operating (Le & Barnard, 2009, p. 28).

It is not difficult to realise that some of these challenges were not new, for example in Le (2007, 2015); Pham (2007). They were also the recurring challenges documented more than 20 years ago, for example, in Carless (1998); Li (1998), and have been mirrored and echoed in other contexts as reported in the literature (Butler, 2011; Kam, 2002; Littlewood, 2007, 2014; Nunan, 2003; Spolsky & Sung, 2015). It is disappointing to realise that Project 2020 was developed in the context of an extensive literature on reforms in the domain of English language teaching and learning in a range of similar contexts. There has been no lack of cases, experiences and lessons to be drawn from the various attempts to adopt CLT in curriculum innovation. It might be expected that Vietnam would learn from both the successful and unsuccessful attempts of the past to plan and initiate curriculum change which would be more contextually sensitive (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). However, the reported challenges revealed a lack of the preparations necessary for the communicative curriculum to take place. Nothing changed in regards to the large class size and the strong washback of high-stakes examinations among other factors, all of which were at odds with the communicative curriculum. What has been evident here was a new curriculum, a product of a highly invested national project, but with an existing set of problems remaining largely unresolved.

5.2 Teacher lack of understanding about CLT

The findings indicated that the teachers had only a fragmented knowledge of the principles and processes of CLT, which could potentially lead to confusion about how to establish a classroom in which communicative teaching and communicative learning are the norm. A lack of clarity about CLT, however, is not specific to this study. The literature on CLT abounds with studies that found teachers to be confused about CLT. A similar finding was reported in a recent study by T. Vu (2020),

highlighting a fragmented understanding of CLT amongst lower-secondary school teachers in northern Vietnam, which was combined with a critical shortage of time, energy and particularly an insufficient level of professional support. Other studies in different settings include studies conducted in Libya (Orafi & Borg, 2009), in Japan (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), in China (Fang & Garland, 2014), in South Korea (Lee, 2014), Turkey (Kirkgoz, 2008), and in Thailand (Segovia & Hardison, 2009). Rahman (2015) in an attempt to explore teacher understanding of CLT in Bangladesh found that English teachers who claimed to be practising CLT in their classrooms did not have a clear idea of what it entailed. In Hong Kong and China, Chan (2014) and Zheng and Borg (2014) found discrepancies between teacher understanding of Tasked-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), a ‘spin-off’ of CLT, and its principles as stated in curriculum documents.

One explanation for the clouded understanding about CLT is that at the level of theory, CLT has had a problem of identity (Littlewood, 2014; Spada, 2007). There is a dearth of texts with definitive statements about CLT or with any single model of CLT that is universally accepted as authoritative. The value of CLT is now often seen as “a generalised umbrella term” (Harmer, 2007, p. 70) to describe the ultimate goal of “developing communicative competence in personally meaningful ways” (Littlewood, 2014, p. 349). The fluid set of CLT principles has created multiple opportunities for interpretations and has also resulted in misconceptions because of this openness (Mitchell, 1987; Richards & Renandya, 2002). One common misconception, one also made by teachers in this study, was that CLT only focused on speaking. This finding is in line with Lee (2014) and Zheng and Borg (2014), who reported that teacher perceptions about the approach were that it involved communicative work with a predominant focus on speaking. The reason for this may be rooted in the concept of ‘communication’ since many teachers equate this term with ‘speaking’ (Spada, 2007; Thompson, 1996). However, CLT has never been exclusively concerned with face-to-face oral communication. Its principles extend equally to reading and writing activities that engage students in the interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 2002, 2005).

Insufficient teacher professional training appeared to be a major reason behind the lack of knowledge of CLT principles amongst the teachers in this study. There was no doubt that the curriculum reform created palpable emotional and professional pressure for the teachers. Within a rapid timeframe, they were expected to renovate their pedagogy, especially the long-held cultural perception of their role to shift from a transmitter of knowledge to a multi-role language educator. They were challenged to develop new skills for teaching English communicatively, to change how to assess students, to improve their capacity to adapt the content in the textbooks and to apply modern technologies in their teaching. None of these they were taught themselves. Without adequate professional support and training, it was neither possible nor realistic to expect these changes to be made. The insufficient professional training and support would contribute to preserving the gap between the intentions and realities of the reform.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

The study has reported an attempt to explore the attitude, understanding and perceived constraints to the communicative curriculum reform at the upper-secondary school level through the lens of the practising teachers. The findings indicate a more negative than positive teacher attitude towards the curriculum goal, an incomplete teacher understanding of CLT principles and various barriers hindering the curriculum implementation at the classroom level.

Although Vietnam is on the right track in its effort to improve the quality of English language education in the schooling systems, the reported challenges here suggest that changes will be needed to bring the intention and the reality into alignment. The proficiency goal level should be adjusted to be attainable to mainstream classrooms. It is also important that some structural changes should be made to establish the preconditions for the communicative curriculum to take place in the classroom. These include smaller class sizes and the need for alignment between the curriculum goal, pedagogy and assessment, which necessarily puts more weight on oral competencies. Furthermore,

a strong leadership needs to be demonstrated at all levels and at all points in the process to “orchestrate the interaction between top-down control and bottom-up autonomy” (Le, 2019, p. 74).

A central focus should also be placed on enhancing the capacity of the Vietnamese teachers, which is also part of the attempts to combine and reconcile the top-down and bottom-up forces. Without sufficient training and support, Project 2020, or 2025 and others in the future can only result in limited changes. We propose that teacher training and support in Vietnam should be given as a top priority in parallel to the curriculum implementation. The present and future focus of professional learning for Vietnamese teachers should be prioritised on enhancing teacher language competence sufficient for the teaching of communication, as well as on enhancing teacher knowledge of CLT. Competence in both language proficiency and knowledge will allow teachers to have greater autonomy, flexibility and power to make contextual adaptations in their daily practices. By doing so, the teachers become the ‘expert’ of their local classroom, so as to respond to changing teaching/learning demands and the diverse needs of learners. This is of great importance particularly in the ‘post-method era’, which necessarily requires the teacher to have the capacity to be able to apply.

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