

LEVARAGING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

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Introduction

In 2008, the Vietnamese government issued a decision to approve a national project aiming to upgrade the foreign language competence for Vietnamese citizens. The project, also known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFL2020), has the following aim: “by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth who graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently... to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multicultural environment with a variety of languages...serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country.” (Article 1:1/Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008).

To fulfil these goals, the project sets out to “renovate thoroughly...teaching and learning [of] FLs...at every school level” through a number of policies and initiatives. As a result, an English curriculum for primary students was introduced and English became compulsory in grade 3 by 2018-2019. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) also decided to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a way of setting benchmarks of language proficiency for both teachers and students. As such, primary and lower secondary teachers of English are expected to reach the B2 level of CEFR; upper secondary and university teachers are supposed to pass C1 accordingly.

One of the most important solutions is to re-examine foreign language teachers’ level of proficiency for further training and support. A large-scale assessment of foreign language proficiency has been implemented since 2011. As it turns out, teachers’ foreign language competence, particularly English, is rather low compared to the pre-specified benchmarks. According to the public reports, 97% of high school teachers of English could not meet the standards proposed by the NFL2020 (Vinh Ha 2012). Figure 1 provides a snapshot of Vietnamese high school teachers of English meeting the proposed NFL2020 standards (CEFR-C1). Of 1,500 teachers participating in the diagnostic proficiency exam in An Giang, a southern

province of Vietnam, only 165 met the standard. Likewise, the gap is also distinct in two biggest cities, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

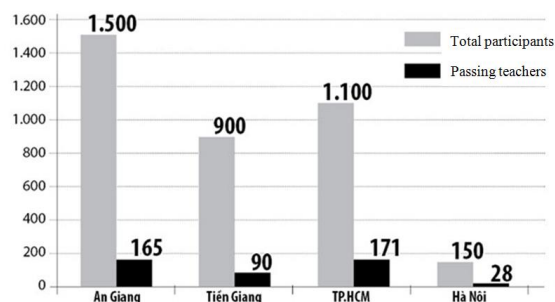


Figure 1. Numbers of teachers passing the standard in the diagnostic exam (Vinh Ha 2012)

Teacher proficiency is an alarming issue, as it challenges the NFL2020 goals and visions which prioritize the mastery of foreign language use rather than language knowledge. Therefore, many efforts have been made to improve teacher language proficiency along with a focus on teaching methodology. In fact, in the in-service English teacher competence framework (NFL2020, 2013) approved and issued by MOET, (2012), language proficiency plays the pivotal role among five domains of teacher competence. As a result, many language development courses are undertaken before the methodology component in different re-training programs throughout Vietnam. Likewise, many commercial programs have been introduced to facilitate teachers’ self-study. However, these programs are limited in access and expensive for teachers to purchase on their own. Therefore, they cannot sustain their learning after the training programs are completed. Also, teachers cannot transfer their learning experiences in those commercial programs to help their students. In mainstream education, Open Educational Resources (OER) have gained traction as they offer alternative solutions to teacher education and development. OER refer to open-license, free-access materials and media that are favourable for multiple educational purposes such as teaching, learning, assessing, and researching. However, the way in which OER could be leveraged to help English teachers in

their professional development has been less clear to date. This paper describes a training project employing OER to develop the language proficiency of 30 secondary English teachers in Northern provinces in Vietnam. Data from a pre-workshop questionnaire, trainers' journals/reflections, and post-workshop surveys were analysed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Responses collected from the open-ended questions were also examined to provide insights into the teachers' learning needs.

Language Improvement in English Language Teaching

While the top-down approach to in-service teacher development as described above remains controversial and instigates never-ending debates, a close review of the literature indicates that teachers whose English is not their mother tongue express their needs for target-language proficiency development.

Berry (1990) argues that language development components should be given more attention in language teacher training programs. He maintains that by doing so, two learning outcomes could be achieved. First, teachers can both improve their command of English and enhance their confidence in using it in their class; second, teachers can learn from the trainers' teaching behaviours and modify their own subsequent practice. Berry recounts his experience while working for the British Council in China, where local teachers had limited access to the target language culture. He used a questionnaire to ask different groups of teachers to rank three components according to their immediate needs (theory, methodology, and language improvement). Language proficiency development was more preferred than the other needs. He also provided another questionnaire to examine the influence of language learning experiences on teachers' teaching practice. The result corroborated his conjecture that language improvement in in-service teacher training is not only beneficial to proficiency development, but also facilitative of teachers' subsequent teaching practices.

Likewise, Murdoch (1994) argues for the provision of language improvement in non-native English teacher training curricula. He administered a survey to 208 pre-service teachers of different colleges in Sri Lanka, asking them a number of issues including the importance of the target language development. The results revealed that their teaching confidence relied much on their command of English and suggested more training

on this element in comparison with other ones in the curriculum. In the similar vein, Cullen (1994) attempts to link language proficiency development to methodology training in his teacher training programs by using what the teachers learn from the language classes as the input for the methodology sessions. He reflects that this approach could address teachers' needs for language development while at the same time provides them with hands-on experiences on how to teach. The approach is encapsulated in what Lortie (1975) termed an "apprenticeship of observation", in that "teachers learn to teach by how they were taught, by what they experienced, and by what their teachers modelled in their language classrooms, as well as by the content of their teacher education programs." (NFL 2020, 2013)

Recently, Pasternak and Bailey (2004) have utilized the declarative/procedural framework in skill acquisition to compare the strengths and weaknesses of both native English teachers and non-native English teachers. While they are aware of the controversies of the term 'nativeness' in the literature and propose to look at proficiency as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, they argue that the term "native" vs. "non-native" can be useful if we can maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses for both groups of teachers. Non-native teachers' advantages are their explicit knowledge of the target language, as they are learners themselves. Thus they can explain grammar rules or declarative knowledge more productively. However, they may not be able to use grammar rules appropriately in conversations or compositions. Whereas native teachers of English can be a good model of language use, when it comes to explain the generalizations and exceptions, they may have to struggle with this. As such, Pasternak and Bailey emphasize the importance of language proficiency for non-native teachers as one way of minimizing their weaknesses, and therefore boosting their teaching confidence.

Clearly, including language improvement in second language teacher education and development programs is a real need. It is often observed that this component is taken for granted, in that teachers come to training programs to upgrade their methodology, not general language proficiency (Berry 1990). Even though a thorough search for relevant articles to teachers' proficiency development was carried out, the outcomes are rather modest. If such articles exist, they mostly focus on the rationales of including language improvement in teacher training programs rather

than on how to put it into practice. This paper, therefore, presents a program that incorporated language proficiency development in an in-service English teacher training program in Vietnam.

The OER-Based Language Improvement Project

When I was involved in a number of in-service teacher training projects throughout Vietnam within the initiatives from the National Foreign Language Project 2020, I observed that most training programs gathered teachers from different places to higher education institutions in big cities over the weekend or summer for professional development activities. However, these teachers were disconnected from the community of practice and from materials access when they went back to their schools. I reflected on the idea of using open educational resources as one way to provide materials and promote teachers' self-study for their own professional development in the longer term. As a result, I proposed the idea with the departmental leaders and college administrators where I was working for developing and implementing a one-day workshop for secondary English teachers in the community.

Needs Analysis

To be able to maximize the effectiveness of the one-day training program, a needs assessment was carried out to learn about teachers' immediate needs and concerns. Brown (1995) defines need analysis as: "...the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation (Brown 1995: 35). The needs analysis included informal interviews with several selected secondary teachers and my colleagues who were involved with teaching in-service teachers, faculty meetings where we discussed the main problems in-service teachers often encountered, and my personal reflections from different teaching, learning and training experiences. Overall, these teachers showed their preferences for aural and oral English skill development and some focus on the exam format, as they felt under pressure to achieve the B1-CEFR requirements.

Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OER) refer to open-license, free-access materials and media that are favourable for multiple educational purposes

such as teaching, learning, assessing, and researching. Atkins, Brown and Hammond (2007) define these resources as follows: "OER are teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others...[it] includes full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge" (p. 4). For this project, OER are those that are either developed by a professional educator/publisher or relevant materials on the internet, which can be used for educational purposes.

Three portals were identified, based on the teacher's needs. The first portal was ESL-Lab, a free-access listening lab developed by Randall Davis for learners of English. Here, the listening lessons are arranged into three levels (easy-medium-difficult) to accommodate different learners' proficiencies. Learners are instructed to work on the listening and complete a number of exercises and activities to consolidate their learning. The second portal was TED Talks, which provides a wide range of videos recorded from conferences on different topics. It also offers subtitles in different languages to facilitate viewers. Topics covered in TED Talks are diverse and broad, and can meet learners' needs and preferences. The third portal was English Central, a semi-commercial portal that provides English learners with opportunities to practice their speaking skills and get instant feedback on their pronunciation by using speech recognition technology. Learners can select their favourite videos from the library and practice speaking by repeating the sentences in the video.

A platform was developed using google sites so that teachers could navigate easily. From my experience, teachers often have many difficulties with computers. I focused on the practical ideas of using the portals rather than trying to tell teachers everything about each one. The principle can be expressed through the maxim that "pedagogy leads technology not the way around". Likewise, teachers would appreciate it if more demonstrations are presented, rather than lecturing and discussing.

The Workshop

The workshop agenda can be accessed either via the web address at <https://goo.gl/bXmN0> or the appendices. The participating teachers would work for six hours, three in the morning, three in the afternoon. They had two and a half hours for

lunch break as it is a common practice for Vietnamese people.

Pre-Workshop Survey

To gain a better picture about the participating teachers, a quick survey was given at the beginning of the workshop via Google form. The teachers were asked to provide background information and learning needs. All of them were female teachers, aged 34-41 (M=38.4; SD = 3 .88). 23% reported that they owned a smartphone while 77% did not. The teachers use the internet every day, primarily for checking emails. They also have frequent access to a lesson plan-sharing website (Violet.vn) for their work. Most of them reported that they did not have opportunities to use the target language, except for their teaching. For instance, one teacher revealed;

I have no chances to communicate with foreigners or others English teachers.

Another explained:

I'm not satisfied with my productive skills. I haven't reached the level of proficiency as I expect when I speak. I have difficulty in writing research papers

Moreover, their teaching workloads could also prevent them from improving their own language proficiency. Ngoc, an experienced teacher, commented:

I have little chance to use my English, to practice it in real life. Besides teaching English, we have too much work at school so we can't spend much time on our teaching.

When asked about their urgent needs for language development, most of them preferred to focus on listening and speaking skills. Hong (pseudo name) stressed:

I need to improve all four skills of using English, especially speaking and listening skills.

Hoa elaborated:

My urgent needs in English language development are listening and speaking skills. I want to improve my listening and speaking skills more and more, and I want to have the chance to talk with the foreigners from the USA, Holland or Australia.

To tap into the teachers' language learning beliefs, a question was given to elicit their response "In your opinion, what is the best way to master a language?" Interestingly, most of them wrote that practice is the key to language development. Their responses were entered into a word-frequency producing program (wordle.net) to provide an overview of the teachers' language learning beliefs.



Figure 2. The screenshot of the wordle.net/created from the teachers' responses

During-Workshop

During the workshop, the teachers were instructed to work through three specified educational portals. Instead of introducing the portals, I explicitly stated the learning techniques and procedures that could be employed to leverage the affordances of each website. For example, every listening lesson in ESL-Lab is divided into three stages: Pre-While-Post. The participating teachers were instructed to reflect on why they should or should not follow the procedure, and how they might do so differently in their teaching. Many of them had obstacles in navigating on the computers and the portals. Therefore, additional computer support was given accordingly.

Post-Workshop Survey

Near the end of the workshop, teachers were encouraged to complete a post-workshop survey. The objectives of the survey were to allow the teachers to reflect on what they had learned and help the facilitator to improve the design and learn more about the teachers' learning needs. The teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of the workshop and provide feedback on a scale, through seven questions. The remaining questions were open-ended so that the teachers could provide their responses on their preference.

Overall, most teachers offered high ratings for the workshop in general and in terms of content-relevance, facilities, and facilitators in particular. Surprisingly, 98% would recommend this

workshop to their colleagues. Three repeatedly mentioned strengths of the workshop were the useful websites for learning, supportive facilitators; and pressure/exam-free. However, they suggested reducing the workshop time, as six hours were too long for them and sometimes the facilitators spoke too fast. It was also suggested that the facilitators slow down their demonstrations on computers so that the teachers could catch up.

Reflections and Conclusions

Since this was an action research project, I do not attempt to make any generalizations. It is meaningful in my context, for my participants, and I hope it could be transferable to other contexts with adaptation and adjustments. Some implications could be drawn from the project as follows.

First, it is clear that language improvement is still one of the priorities among secondary teachers participating in this project. From both a preliminary and careful needs analysis, it is obvious that the teachers want to focus on their language proficiency, particularly speaking and listening. These preferences are corroborated by previous studies arguing for the provision of a language improvement component in in-service teacher training programs (Berry 1990; Cullen 1994; Medgyes 1999; Murdoch 1994; Pasternak & Bailey 2004). However, language proficiency is also a broad concept. It is important to conduct a needs analysis to pinpoint the relevant needs for a specific and localized program. Simple surveys and interviews will add up to the productivity of the program design.

Second, OER can be useful if teachers are trained to employ them for their own development and for their teaching. These resources are often mentioned as a promising alternative to promote educational justice, yet little is put into practice to examine its opportunities and challenges. The assumption that free and accessible OER will automatically facilitate teachers and learners is questionable. Both teachers and students need to be trained to maximize the potential of OER for their teaching

and learning. Frequent, bite-sized, flexible training programs are better for teachers.

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Appendices

Open Online Resources for English Language Development

Facilitators: Phung Van Huy

Participants: 30 Secondary Teachers of English | Time: 6 hours

1 – Outcomes

By the end of the workshop, the participants will be able to

- utilize 3 educational portals for English language development
- record themselves with a mobile phone or a laptop computer

2 – Training Aids

The handouts, Computer Lap, Projector & Screen, Internet, the website

3. Schedule

Time Activities

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 8:00 – 8:10 | Welcoming speech and computers start-off |
| 8:10 – 8:15 | Warm-up activities with a musical slideshow |
| 8:15 – 8:25 | Take the pre-workshop survey online |
| 8:25 – 8:30 | Share pre-workshop survey results and goal setting |
| 8:30 – 8:45 | Discussion on how to improve listening |
| 8:45 – 9:30 | Introduction to ELS-Lab.com and guided practice |
| 9:30 – 9:45 | Take a break |
| 9:45 – 10:30 | Independent practice with ELS-Lab.com |
| 10:30 – 10:45 | Introduction to TED.com |
| 10:45 – 11:15 | Independent practice with TED.com |
| 11-15 – 11:30 | Reflection on the training session |
| | |
| 14:00 – 14:10 | Warm-up activities and computer start-up |
| 14:10 – 14:15 | Introduction to Phonetics Focus by Cambridge |
| 14:15 – 14:45 | Practice Pronunciation online |
| 14:45 – 15:00 | Introduction to http://www.englishcentral.com |
| 15:00 – 15:30 | Sign up and Practice |
| 15:30 – 15:45 | Take a break |
| 15:45 – 16:30 | Practice speaking with EnglishCentral |
| 16:30 – 16:45 | Take the post-workshop survey online |
| 16:45 – 17:00 | Certificate and Wrap-up |
| 17:00 – 17:30 | Interview + Film making |