



Vietnamese EFL Novice Teachers' Pedagogical Decisions within a Mandated Communicative Language Curriculum

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While research in Vietnam, like in many Asian countries, points to cultural constraints and testing systems as barriers to English language education, increasing attention has been given to the influence of teachers' beliefs and practices on learners' communicative second language (L2) development. This paper extends this research by reporting on a study which investigated the influence of contextual factors on the cognition and decision-making of five Vietnamese novice EFL teachers in using the national English language textbook series. This textbook series, in line with Vietnam's language policy, is underpinned by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews with teachers from two high schools in Vietnam. The results indicate that the teachers modified the textbook activities in ways that limited opportunities for student oral interactions in English. The teachers explained their more conservative practices as a response to their perceptions of their students' limited motivations and capacities. As an area of research that has received little investigation in the EFL literature, the teachers' prioritization of their students' capacities and motivations beyond other considerations, despite their own enthusiasm for a more communicative approach, is an important finding.

Ngoài những trở ngại trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh xuất phát từ khác biệt về văn hóa và hình thức đánh giá đã được chỉ ra trong những nghiên cứu ở Việt Nam và Châu Á, ngày càng có nhiều nghiên cứu quan tâm đến sự ảnh hưởng của nhận thức và thực tế giảng dạy của giáo viên đến sự phát triển khả năng giao tiếp ngôn ngữ thứ hai (L2) của người học. Bài viết dưới đây tìm hiểu tác động của các yếu tố ngữ cảnh đến nhận thức và thực tiễn giảng dạy của năm giáo viên trẻ ở Việt Nam khi sử dụng bộ sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh, được xây dựng theo chính sách phát triển ngoại ngữ của Việt Nam và nguyên tắc giảng dạy theo định hướng giao tiếp (CLT). Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua phỏng vấn, quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn sau giờ dạy với giáo viên từ hai trường trung học phổ thông ở Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy các hoạt động trong sách giáo khoa đã được điều chỉnh, khiến cho cơ hội giao tiếp tiếng Anh của học sinh bị hạn chế. Lý do giáo viên phải điều chỉnh các hoạt động trong sách giáo khoa xuất phát từ nhận thức của họ về động cơ học tập và năng lực hạn chế của học sinh. Việc giáo viên ưu tiên chọn cách dạy phù hợp với năng lực và động lực học tập của học sinh hơn những yếu tố khác, cho dù bản thân họ hứng thú với phương pháp giao tiếp được xem là một phát hiện quan trọng trong nghiên cứu này.

Key words: language teacher cognition; novice teachers; CLT; EFL textbook; Vietnamese EFL



context

Introduction

For several decades, in response to the global economy, governments in Asia have adopted policies and strategies designed to support students to become successful English language users (Li et al, 2022; Zhu & Shu, 2017). This has involved a commitment, at least at the policy level, to a communicative approach to language pedagogies due to the perceived importance of the use of English in contexts outside the classroom (Brown, 2007; Littlewood, 2007). In Vietnam, following the *Doi Moi* (Economic Reform) in 1986, English became the dominant foreign language. At this time, the prevalent teaching method was the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) (Brown, 2007). However, in the early 1990s, the influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and thus a more student-centred approach became evident in Vietnam's language policy. This led to an initiative beginning in 2002 resulting in the development of a new curriculum and textbook series which aligned to a major goal of the National Language Policy:

By 2020, most young Vietnamese graduates of professional secondary schools, colleges and universities will have a good command of a foreign language which enables them to independently and confidently communicate, study and work in a multilingual and multicultural environment of integration; to turn foreign languages into a strength of Vietnamese to serve national industrialisation and modernisation (Vietnamese Government, 2008, p. 1).

Nevertheless, despite growing interest in pursuing CLT in Asia, a number of challenges have been identified in implementing this approach in EFL classrooms. Some scholars argue that CLT is substantially biased towards “Western communicative styles and cultures” (Holliday 2005; Leung, 2005), with “an idealized native-speaker model” (Leung, 2005, p. 139) as the goal for English language learners. They contend that EFL teachers and teacher education should take greater heed of the social and cultural context of English language teaching, reconsider the sources of English language materials, and ask critical questions about the place of local cultural heritage (e.g., Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). These arguments (see Liu, 2016, for further discussion), coupled with the teachers' perceptions of their students' motivation and capacity for English language learning (see Viet 2014; Wang & Lee, 2019) provide an important context when considering the pedagogical decisions that teachers make. Furthermore, additional EFL scholarship on CLT situates the challenges and constraints of its implementation in local cultures and societies. These include human resources and materials, class sizes, limited instructional hours, testing systems that do not reward oral communication, and the limited opportunity to use English outside of the classroom (Butler, 2011; Shao & Gao, 2016).

Our intention, however, is not to anticipate this assumption; rather our point here is to highlight that, while earlier studies have focused on socio-cultural factors, there is a need to explore in greater depth both what and why teachers do what they do in the classroom in light of these socio-cultural factors with the ultimate aim to further enhance the teachers' classroom practices. This can be done by using more targeted methods (e.g., biographical interviews, stimulated recall interviews) to better examine the cognition and practices of teachers.

Specifically, in the context of Vietnam, there has been a growing number of studies exploring the extent and challenges of implementing CLT. Similar to the literature cited above, these challenges include: traditional examinations (Hiep, 2007); large class sizes (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hiep, 2007); cultural constraints characterised by beliefs about teacher and student roles (Khoi Mai & Iwashita, 2012); students' low motivation and varying abilities; and teachers' limited expertise in creating communicative activities (Hiep, 2007). While these external challenges provide some explanation for the limited implementation of CLT, studies of teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning suggest that these too have a considerable impact on teachers' practice and learner outcomes (e.g., Zhang & Liu, 2014). This suggests

that, if there are to be any changes in classroom practices, teachers' knowledge and beliefs, and the factors affecting these, must be taken into account. In this paper, we draw on an analysis of novice teachers' pedagogical decision-making in relation to the prescribed national textbooks activities and their explanations for these decisions as a way of identifying their knowledge and beliefs, and the factors influencing those beliefs.

The majority of studies of language teachers' knowledge and beliefs, often captured under the concept of teachers' cognition (Borg, 2015), have been conducted with pre-service teachers (PSTs) (e.g., Burri, 2015; Gan, 2013) and experienced in-service teachers (e.g., Baker, 2014; Liviero, 2017). Overall, these studies suggest that teachers' cognition and practices do not always, nor necessarily, align with one other. Studies of pre-service language teachers suggest a variety of contextual factors, including school-based language learning (Johnson, 1994), teacher education (Burri, 2015), and classroom factors (Gan, 2013), as main contributors to PSTs' knowledge and beliefs. Studies of experienced in-service language teachers, on the other hand, point to the contextual factors in which teachers live and work including time constraints, rapport with students, and classroom management, as well as students' limited language ability, motivation, and expectations around examinations. With novice teachers, such as those in the current study, both sets of factors are likely to have considerable influence. Beginning teachers may continue to look for inspiration from their own early experiences of language learning and professional education, while contextual factors, particularly those related to their immediate context, the school and the classroom, are likely to play a major role in mediating their beliefs.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, although there has been an increase in research on English teachers' cognition, most of this research has focused on in-service and pre-service teachers (e.g., Farrell & Yang, 2017; Gan, 2013; Liviero, 2017), giving scant attention to novice teachers, especially in EFL contexts such as Vietnam. In addition, while previous studies tend to conduct interviews and classroom observations as the main methods for data collection (e.g., Kang & Cheng, 2014; Rahman et al, 2019), our study extends this by conducting more in-depth types of interviews, specifically biographical interviews (e.g., examining the environment and educational context in which the participants grew up) and stimulated recall interviews using the classroom observations as stimuli (e.g., probing into participants' explanations about the pedagogical decisions they made in the classroom). Therefore, this study will hopefully shed more light on the cognition and practices of EFL novice teachers.

The first years of teaching are very important for novice teachers' professional development. We define novice teachers as those who have completed their PST training and taught English for up to five years after finishing their formal teacher education program (see Farrell, 2012). During this important stage, novice teachers "test their beliefs and ideas, expand their teaching strategies, acquire practical knowledge, and formulate their professional identity" (Kang & Cheng, 2014, p. 170). However, their experiences are often challenged as they navigate their new role as professionals (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). Novice teachers often encounter a 'reality shock' in the first year of teaching when they realise that the principles they learnt in teacher education programs may not work so readily in their own classrooms (Farrell, 2012). In addition, they are under pressure to fulfil the ongoing and ever-changing requirements to be "good" teachers and may receive limited professional support in dealing with challenging students (Hong, 2010).

This article draws on the results of a larger study (Ngo, 2018) investigating the personal, situational and sociocultural contexts that influenced Vietnamese EFL novice teachers' cognition and teaching of English. It specifically focuses on those aspects of the study which help to understand the choices the teachers made in enacting CLT principles, as embodied in the mandated Vietnamese English language textbooks, in their classrooms. The paper thus addresses the following research questions:

1. How are CLT principles evident in the activities included in the Vietnamese English language textbooks for secondary schools?
2. To what extent do Vietnamese secondary school novice teachers enact or diverge from the principles and practices of CLT in their classrooms in the context of the textbooks?

3. How do the teachers explain their decision-making associated with the enactment (or not) of CLT in their classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

Originally developed in the European context in 1960s, CLT has emerged as a global trend in teaching since that time (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). CLT was originally based on the functional theory of language, which places a focus on language as a means of communication, thus aiming to enhance communicative competence. The notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), also known as communicative ability (Brandl, 2008), involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to apply such knowledge to a variety of communicative situations. A key assumption underpinning CLT is that learning is most effective when learners engage in meaningful communication (Johnson & Morrow, 1981).

CLT advocates a learner-centred approach to promote cooperative and collaborative learning, typically in the form of pair and small-group work (Brandl, 2008; Brown, 2007). Through exchanges with the teacher and other peers, the intent is for students to not only receive information but also act in the role of conversational interlocutors. These forms of classroom interactions give students opportunities to interact and construct meaning with others, and consequently to learn to resolve difficulties that may occur during these exchanges (Brandl, 2008).

Another important principle of CLT is that pedagogical activities need to be communicative. According to Johnson and Morrow (1981), communicative activities have three features: information gap, choice, and feedback. An information gap exists when teachers and learners have communication exchanges for unknown information instead of facts that they already know. As Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) argue, classroom activities will be mechanical and artificial if students are not asked to look for missing or unknown information through interacting with others. This communicative exchange must also enable learners to make choices about what they want to say and how they want to say it. Finally, activities are deemed communicative when the listener has an opportunity to provide the speaker with feedback upon what was said, thus indicating to the speaker whether or not the communicative purpose of the activity has been achieved (Brown, 2007).

These principles are used in this paper to guide an examination of: i) the extent to which the textbook activities realised these communicative principles; ii) the ways in which the activities were taken up by the novice teachers; and iii) these teachers' explanations for their modifications.

To determine the degree communicative activities are present in the textbooks and enacted by the teachers, analytical procedures developed by Baker (2014) drawing on the taxonomy of language teaching techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) have been utilised. Broadly speaking, these scholars categorize techniques on a spectrum ranging from controlled to guided to free techniques, with controlled techniques tending to be less communicative and free techniques considered more communicative. Controlled techniques are largely directed by the teacher and typically involve highly structured activities such as drills, exercises, read alouds, explanations, and discrimination activities. Free techniques, in comparison, involve little or no direct guidance from the teachers and typically involve student-centred activities such as drama, presentations, role-plays and similar activities for which the students have created the texts. Guided activities represent a transition between these two activities. These activities tend to be partially structured by the teacher, but students are responsible for working together, frequently involving some form of negotiation of meaning as they work through a task (e.g., information gap tasks). When used together systematically, moving back and forth between each of the activity types, students can achieve communicative competency over time (Baker, 2021). The guided and free activities, in particular, represent increasingly more meaningful use of the target language and thus are essential to determining to what extent a communicative approach it used in the classroom. If classroom activities only focus on one or two of the three activity types, especially if primarily controlled are employed, skill development for free

communicative purposes is less likely to be achieved. Our coding of classroom activities was based on this framework (see Table 2 below).

Methods

Context

The study was conducted in the Mekong Delta, an agricultural-based region of Vietnam, known as the largest rice producer in the country. Socioeconomically, however, in terms of the industry and service sectors, education and qualifications of the workforce, it falls behind other parts of the country, especially in more rural areas (Garschagen et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study, the researchers aimed to provide a wide catchment of data by including both urban and rural examples. In rural areas, students' motivation to learn and high attrition rates have become major issues (Vietnamnet, 2013). Most rural students who drop out of school get involved in agricultural work or migrate with their parents to work in industrial parks away from their hometowns (Vietnamnet, 2013) where there are limited opportunities for using English. As a result, English is likely to be perceived to be of little value by parents and school students.

Participants

As a primarily qualitative study, the purpose of the study was to ensure a depth of rich data, and to be able to describe the complex phenomenon of teachers' classroom practice in relation to the situational and socio-cultural context of their practice. It was judged that two schools in different contexts would provide this opportunity.

The schools were recruited after reviewing a list of teachers and their teaching experience in a province of the Mekong Delta. Two senior secondary school teachers in a city school and three in a district school met the major criterion for the study, that is, they were within their first five years of teaching. These teachers were invited to participate in the study and, after being provided with information about the study, gave their consent.

The novice teacher participants worked in two schools located in a province of the Mekong Delta: one situated in the city, and the other located in a district area. Van Lang Senior Secondary School (pseudonym) is located in the city, which is also home to the university the novice teachers attended for their PST education. The second senior secondary school, Nhan Van (pseudonym), is located in a rural district of the same province; it takes 50 minutes for a 30 km trip from the city to the school by motorbike, a common form of transport in the area. The five teachers - four female and one male - all graduated with a Bachelor Degree in English Teaching. English was the primary language of instruction in their courses.

All five teachers had taken language training courses towards the completion of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for high school language teaching. This award is part of the framework introduced by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2014 as part of the National Language Project 2020 (Vietnamese Government, 2008), requiring language teachers from primary to high schools to meet specific English language standards for their level.

A brief summary of the teachers' profiles and the classes they taught is provided in Table 1 below. After the completion of Grade 9, all students are required to take a high school entrance examination. The students are then grouped into classes from top to bottom level according to their examination performance. Number 1 is often used to signify the highest-achieving class (e.g., 11A1) and the classes with subsequent number designations are considered progressively weaker academically (e.g., 11A8).

TABLE 1
The Novice Teachers' Profiles

Teachers' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Schools' pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	Classes	Number of observations for each class
Tam	F	25	Van Lang	4	11A1	4
					10A3	2
					10A4	2
Mai	F	25	Van Lang	4	11A4	3
					11A5	3
Anh	F	24	Nhan Van	3	10A6	2
					10A8	3
Minh	F	25	Nhan Van	4	11A8	5
Long	M	24	Nhan Van	3	10A5	5
Total					9	29

Data Collection

Data from four different sources were collected: high school English language textbooks in Vietnam; biographical and post-observation interviews with participating teachers; classroom observations; and simulated recall interviews.

The English language textbooks

In many language teaching contexts, textbooks may be the principal resource for much of the language input, instruction and practice that learners receive (e.g., Mohammad & Abdi, 2014). In Vietnam, where the curriculum is strongly mandated, textbooks are produced by MOET. These textbooks ensure that curriculum outcomes can be reached when utilised, and arguably, become the most important influence on teachers' classroom practice (MOET, 2006). Teachers in Vietnam are required to follow the national curriculum and textbooks (MOET, 2006) instead of selecting or creating their own teaching resources. Through using the national curriculum, teachers are expected to adopt a communicative approach to language teaching: "Communicative skills are the goals of the teaching and learning process; linguistic knowledge is the means by which communicative skills are formed and developed" (Translated from Vietnamese, MOET, 2006, p. 7).

The English textbooks utilised by the teachers in the study (Van et al, 2013) were designed for students in mainstream high schools (15-18 years of age). The nomenclature used translates as Pre-intermediate level -"English 10", "English 11", and "English 12". Each textbook consists of 16 teaching units and six units of review. Each unit presents a topic (e.g., Special Education, An Excursion, The Mass Media) and is organized into five corresponding lessons: Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language Focus. Each lesson is tailored to be taught in a 45-minute period and lessons focusing on specific skill areas in each lesson are similar in structure. For example, the Reading lessons in most units in the Grade 11 textbook consist of activities labelled: "Guessing meaning in context"; and/or a "Comprehension passage." For the purpose of this study, Unit 7, "World Population" (Grade 11) was chosen for more detailed analysis to determine the nature and extent of activities with reference to CLT. Unit 7 was considered representative of many of the units in the textbooks for the following reasons. First, although each unit might have some differences in its contents and activities, overall, the units have a similar structure. For example, the Reading lessons of most of the units in the textbook consist of: "Guessing meaning in context"; and/or a "Comprehension passage." Similar patterns were evident for the units in the textbook for Grade 10. The second reason for our choice of Unit 7 for analysis was that it was one of the units taught by the teachers Tam and Mai and hence the unit for which most data were collected in the form of observations and SRIs.

Interviews with teachers

Biographical, semi-structured interviews, and post-observation interviews were conducted with participating teachers to provide a rich description of their socio-economic backgrounds, early language and school-based language learning experiences, professional coursework and current teaching contexts, as well as their cognition about language teaching and learning and how these evolved over time. These interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and, although the teachers were all proficient in English, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. Using their first language helped the novice teachers feel comfortable and confident in sharing their thoughts with the first author who is a Vietnamese native speaker. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed in Vietnamese, then translated into English when excerpts were needed for co-authors and publications.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations were used: 1) as a way of documenting and analysing teachers' actions; and 2) as stimuli for the stimulated recall interviews to capture the teachers' interactive thoughts and decision-making processes retrospectively. Each teacher was observed for five 45-minute lessons. The complete lesson was video-recorded and transcribed. As mentioned earlier, each unit consists of 5 lessons (i.e., Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and Language Focus) and each lesson lasts 45 minutes. The number of lessons chosen for observation in this study was based on previous studies whose classroom observations varied between two to six lessons (see Farrell & Guz, 2019; Liviero, 2017; Tayjasanant, 2010; Viet, 2014). The lesson selections were made mainly based on the teachers' comfort and time availability for observations. Therefore, in this study, the five lessons observed were not necessarily in one entire unit but were split across more than one unit. Our goal was to ensure that five lessons (i.e., Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and Language Focus) were observed in each of the teachers' practices in order to examine what the teachers did with the textbook activities and the rationale for their choices.

Stimulated recall interviews (SRIs) with teachers

Stimulated-recall interviews or SRIs lasting between 35 and 90 minutes were conducted with the teachers typically two to three days at the earliest or up to a week at the latest due to their busy schedules with teaching and other personal activities and travel distance. SRIs have widely been used to "explore aspects of cognition that lie behind the participants' decisions and actions" (Barnard & Burns, 2012, p. 145), usually employing a stimulus such as a video recording of the activity upon which the participants will be asked to reflect. In this article, the data produced from these interviews have been specifically used to provide teachers' explanations for their choices of activities. The questions used to prompt the teachers' responses about their decision-making were adapted from a number of empirical studies (e.g., Baker, 2011; Canh, 2011). For example, teachers would be asked questions such as: What was your focus in this activity? Can you explain why you did this? These questions were derived from the notes collected during the classroom observations and the selected segments found relevant while watching the teachers' recorded lessons. During the SRIs, the teachers were invited to watch these video extracts of their lessons and to make comments whenever they wished. The videos were also paused at specific points in the recordings and the teachers were asked to explain particular teaching decisions. The 35-90 minute, audio-recorded SRIs were conducted and transcribed in Vietnamese and translated into English when needed.

Data Analysis

Regarding data coding and analysis, all of the data was analysed as described below based on the coding framework developed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by the second author (Baker, 2014) and employed in her previous publications. The second author also provided important and critical feedback

in order to check and ensure that the analysis and interpretations of the textbooks, interviews, classroom observations were credible and trustworthy.

English textbook analysis

The activities in the English language textbooks were analysed to answer the first research question: How are CLT principles evident in the activities included in the Vietnamese English language textbooks for secondary schools? The categorisation tool adapted from the taxonomy of language teaching techniques (Crookes & Chaudron, 1991, adapted by Baker, 2014) described above was first used to classify the textbook activities into three types of activities: controlled (C), guided (G) and free (F). Both guided and free activities are considered to be communicative in nature, but guided activities tend to be more structured. Figure 1 below provides a visual graphic that illustrates the continuum of these activities.

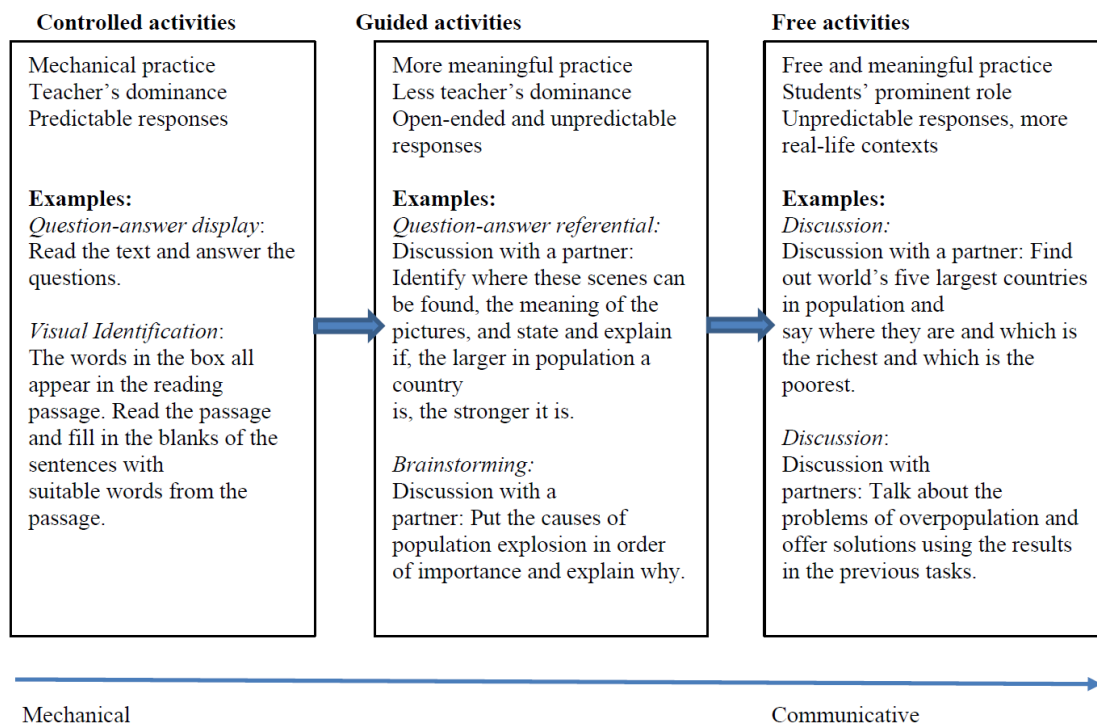


Figure 1. An adaptation of taxonomy of language teaching techniques ranging from mechanical to more meaningful and communicative activities.

Analysis of observations of teaching

A systematic analysis of each of the teachers' recorded lessons was conducted to identify where activities conformed with or diverged from those in the textbooks in order to answer the second research question: To what extent do Vietnamese secondary school novice teachers enact or diverge from the principles and practices of CLT in their classrooms in the context of the textbooks? This resulted in the categorisation of activities in terms of: retention, modification, or omission of activities. Further analysis was carried out on this data, using the taxonomy of techniques (Baker, 2014; Crookes & Chaudron, 1991) described above, to analyse for and determine the communicative extent of these activities. The results of the textbook analysis and the examination of the teachers' classroom practices were compared to reveal the direction of the teachers' modification of activities in relation to the original activities in the textbooks (see Table 2 in the Findings section).

Analysis of the interview data

Finally, the interview data (SRIs, biographical interviews, and post-observation interviews) were analysed in order to answer the third research question: How do the teachers explain their decision-making associated with the enactment (or not) of CLT in their classrooms? The SRIs were coded in terms of the teachers' explanations for the pedagogical choices they made in their classrooms, in relation to the modifications they made to the textbook activities. In addition to SRIs, the biographical and post-observation interviews were also drawn on to provide further explanations about the teachers' classroom practices, and the challenges they faced.

Findings

The Vietnamese English Language Textbooks

Overall, the textbook analysis revealed evidence of a communicative teaching approach through its emphasis on guided and free communicative activities, allowing students' opportunities for interaction with peers by answering questions, discussing, and role playing. Specifically, an analysis of activities in Unit 7 using the categorisation taxonomy described above indicated opportunities for communicative interactions in Unit 7 across the four language skills. In the textbook, substantial attention was given to building up students' language progression through meaningful and free activities, whilst little attention was paid to mechanical activities. This is evident through the proportionally greater number of guided (6 out of 13; ranging approximately 6 to 12 minutes/activity) and free (4 out of 13; ranging approximately 6 to 10 minutes/activity) compared to controlled activities (3 out of 13; ranging approximately 6 to 8 minutes/activity) included in the language skills lessons.

These guided and free activities expected students to engage in cooperative learning in pairs and groups. Examples of guided activities in Unit 7 were Brainstorming, Preparation, or Wrap-up, where students were asked to work with their peers to answer the questions, and/or summarize the main ideas of what is taught. Likewise, free activities were primarily Discussion activities, where students were prompted to engage in exchanges which produce more unpredictable information. Similar to the activities in the Reading, Speaking and Listening lessons, the Writing lesson in this unit provided a free activity, asking students to write a descriptive paragraph about a population chart. Despite a provision for supporting language phrases and statistics given in this activity, students could choose the ways they used language and structure the information in their paragraphs.

In contrast to the communicative activities, there were fewer controlled activities in Unit 7. The three controlled practice activities in the language skills lessons were Visual Identification and Question-answer display in the Reading lesson and Audio Identification in the Listening lesson. For example, the first reading activity asked students to choose the appropriate words from the passage to fill in the blanks of the sentences; and the second one also referred them back to the reading passage to look for the answers. What this analysis of Unit 7 (as representative of all units in the textbook) demonstrates is how the language goals as promoted in policy and curriculum were interpreted in the textbooks through a high proportion of communicative teaching activities and a limited number of controlled activities.

Teachers' Modifications of Textbook Activities: From Free to Controlled

In their biographical interviews, the teachers indicated that CLT was introduced and promoted in their teacher education coursework (see Ngo, 2018), and they preferred it over GTM, a method prevalent in their previous school-based language learning. The novice teachers described themselves as relatively well prepared and willing to apply CLT when they first began teaching. They were keen to apply "a learner-centered approach" (Mai, Anh) that allowed for the use of authentic language and where teachers were

facilitators and activity designers of pair and group work. As Anh said, "students should use more English than teachers, especially in a speaking lesson." However, despite the nature of activities provided in the English language textbook they were using and their own personal preferences for using CLT, as time progressed, this commitment to CLT was noticeably challenged.

Results from the analysis of all of the video recordings of the teachers' observed lessons demonstrated that while the teachers followed the textbooks by retaining activities that were mostly simple and not very demanding, they tended to omit or substantially modify those guided and free language activities that involved more communicative interaction. These findings thus indicate that the teachers frequently diverged from the principles and practices of CLT in their classrooms despite the textbooks' orientation toward a more communicative approach. The following table provides a summary of the modified activities observed in the teachers' lessons.

TABLE 2
A Summary of Modified Activities

	Reading	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Language Focus	Overall
Textbook activities	25	16	21	7	18	87
Modified activities	7	8	7	3	0	25
Proportion of activities modified	28%	50%	33%	43%	0%	29%

As shown in Table 2, more than a quarter of the activities in the lessons observed (29%) were modified. The majority of modified activities were in the Writing lessons (43%), and in two other lesson types with an emphasis on oral language, Speaking (50%) and Listening (33%). The modification of half of the textbook activities in the Speaking lessons suggests that the teachers found many of the oral activities challenging for their students. By contrast, the Reading lessons had a smaller rate of modified activities (28%). In these lessons, the lower proportion of modified reading activities was due to the high rate of retained reading activities (52%) (see Ngo, 2018). It might also indicate that the Reading lessons were less demanding on the students' oral language abilities compared to the Speaking and Listening lessons. While the activities in the language skills lessons were modified, the activities in the Language Focus lessons, which were primarily controlled practice, remained unchanged (0%). Despite variations in the proportion of modified activities in the language skills lessons (i.e., Reading, Speaking, Listening and Writing), the classification of modified activities given in Table 3 below as well as the teachers' explanations for their modification of activities further in this section suggest that the teachers judged a considerable proportion of the activities too difficult for their students.

Table 3 demonstrates the direction of the teachers' modification of the textbook activities from free (F) and guided (G) to controlled (C) across all units observed. In this table, column 1 represents the types and numbers of the original textbook activities while column 2 shows how these activities were modified. Column 3 displays the direction of the modification (e.g., G → C; F → C). For example, a listening activity in Unit 7, Grade 10 that asked the students to work in pairs and answer questions such as: How often do you listen to the radio? What programme do you like listening to and why? was labelled as Question-answer referential since the teachers did not know beforehand the response information. However, as the teachers modified them into questions like: Do you know radio? Yes or No? Do you often listen to the radio? Yes or No?, this activity became Question-answer display as the teachers already knew the response. In another example, writing activities, originally designed as narrative writing (narration) where students would have more choices for guided writing, were altered to writing drill activities, in which the students used the information to substitute into the sample writing. Overall, these data show that, of the 21 textbook activities categorized as either Free (3) or Guided (18), 20 were transformed into controlled activities by the teachers.

TABLE 3
Types of Modified Activities and Direction of Modification

Original Textbook Activities	Modified Teacher Activities	Changes to Activities
Question-answer referential (4)	Checking comprehension (3) Question-answer display (1)	G → C G → G
Checking comprehension (2)	Checking comprehension (2)	C → C
Meaningful drill (1)	Checking comprehension (1)	C → C
Drill (1)	Drill (1)	C → C
Discussion (Pre-discussion) (1)	Checking comprehension (1)	G → C
Discussion (1)	Drill (1)	F → C
Wrap up (6)	Checking comprehension (4); Cued narrative (2);	G → C G → G
Report (2)	Checking comprehension (2)	F → C
Production-Audio Identification (4)	Audio Identification (3) Checking comprehension (1)	G → C G → C
Narration (2)	Drill (2)	G → C
Cued dialogue (1)	Drill (1)	G → C

The shift from the more communicative free and guided to less communicative controlled activities suggests the teachers’ preference for a more mechanical than communicative pedagogy. The original communicative activities, often in the form of discussion, narration, wrap-up, report, and production-audio identification, were frequently adapted into controlled practice in the form of drills, checking comprehension and audio identification.

The following lesson is a typical example of how the teachers modified activities. In this Listening lesson (Unit 16, Grade 10) taught by Anh, the original activity asked the students to listen to a talk about a tourist site and answer the questions about it verbally. In terms of the categories above, this activity was classified as Production-Audio Identification. The challenge was that the students had to identify the information as they listened and respond with complete answers orally. Anh chose to turn this activity into a multiple-choice activity, which still followed the questions in the original activity; however, each of the questions was made available with four multiple choice answers, thus providing the students with more supporting cues to choose from instead of generating answers from the English text themselves. In addition, the classroom observation showed that the students simplified their responses even further by just saying the number and the letter to nominate the options they chose (e.g., 1A, 2D, 3B) or by reading the words already provided in the answers (e.g., “It lies on the Thu Bon River”). The students were then asked to write the answers on the board (e.g., 1A, 2D, 3B) rather than saying them in English. In this way, the original activity was modified into an Audio Identification activity. The data set includes more examples of such practices; however, the main purpose of this paper is to give greater focus on the teachers’ explanations, which will be discussed in the next section.

Additional analysis of the observation data revealed that the teachers also excluded activities in the textbooks that were designed to be primarily communicative (e.g., free and guided activities). The majority of these were communicative activities that took the form of pre-discussion questions, wrap-up and discussion. The teachers were more likely to omit activities in the Listening lessons (64% of the communicative activities), compared with the Reading (27%) and Speaking (9%) lessons. This suggests that the teachers considered most of the listening activities too challenging for their students because of their emphasis on communicative language production.

Teachers’ Explanations for Their Choices of Activities

When asked to explain their classroom decisions in the SRIs, the most common reason all five teachers gave for their modification of the textbook activities was related to their perceptions of their students’ capacities and interests. In these interviews and their biographical interviews, the teachers described how they struggled to assist their students, whom they described as having very limited English proficiency and motivation to learn. They argued that, for most of their students, activities which involved interactive

communication were beyond their language capacities. They viewed their students as unable and/or reluctant to speak using English in the classroom, either with the teachers or peers. For example, Tam explains in the following quote that, although she would like to use a communicative approach, she had to simplify the difficult activities and even then, the activities were a challenge for her students:

I am trying to use a communicative approach. But... my students' English background is very limited, so it is very difficult for me to use it. I try to use as much and simple as possible. I merely ask them yes/no questions, but they still give the wrong answers. (Tam, biographical interview)

Like Tam, Anh stated that she preferred a more communicative, learner-centred approach. Anh contrasted the ease with which she was able to implement communicative teaching in micro-teaching practice to her peers during her professional coursework, with the reality of her current classroom. She argued that it would be a challenge to encourage her students to use oral language, because, with their limited English proficiency, they could only produce short sentences or learn the responses by heart. Consequently, she redesigned most of the communicative listening activities in the textbooks so that they took the form of true/false or multiple-choice activities. As she pointed out, these were also the kinds of activities that the students would do in their listening tests and exams:

Because my students are going to take the examination, so I adapted it based on the format of the exam, that is True/False and Multiple-choice questions. Usually, I modify the listening activities to be easier because the listening activities in the textbooks are very difficult. (Anh, SRI Listening lesson)

Like Anh, Tam talked about how she faced a challenge in prompting her students to speak English and she did not know how to solve the problem:

The post activities are usually the sections where students can talk but they do not want to speak up. I have instructed them, but they still do not want to speak... I have tried many times getting them in pairs and groups but they do not want to talk. I really do not know why. (Tam, SRI Speaking lesson)

In another example, Long explained why he turned an oral task which required the students to talk about the events in the reading passage into a more controlled task which simply asked his students to fill in the gaps with the words provided:

When I do that [completing the information], it becomes much easier for the students. If I require them to talk, it will be much difficult. The students' levels are so low that they can't give a complete oral answer like this... I know their levels because I taught them from the beginning of the school year, so I know which parts they can and can't do and I can judge that. (Long, SRI Reading lesson)

One notable difference found between the teachers in the district and urban areas was related to the ways they treated the textbook activities. While the teachers in the district school (Anh, Minh and Long) tended to omit the post language skills activities such as *After you read*, *After you listen* or the final speaking activities, the teachers in the city school (Tam and Mai) were inclined to follow or modify these activities rather than exclude them. Interview and observation data suggests that, compared to their colleagues in the city school, the teachers in the district school perceived their students as having even lower language proficiency than those in the city school, making it difficult for them to carry out those activities with the students. This could also be related to the socioeconomic backgrounds in the district that influenced the parents' as well as the students' interest in learning English. As Minh explained, many of her students' parents were farmers or merchants who "saw little value of learning English to their children, thus showing little concern about how their children performed at school". The district school opened an evening English center targeting communicative language skills, but it was soon closed due to very low enrolments.

Nevertheless, even when these city school teachers chose to use these activities, they tended to make them less demanding for the students. The following example from Mai's listening lesson provides a clear illustration of how the teachers in the city school modified demanding and communicative activities into less interactive activities. In her quote, Mai talks about why she changed the original *After you listen* activity, which asked the students to work in groups and summarise the main ideas of the listening passage, to a game to check her students' comprehension. Although the game enhanced the students' participation as they tried to answer the questions, it only asked them to answer questions to which answers could be traced back to the scripts that Mai provided her students for a gap-fill activity earlier. In addition, to answer these questions, the students typically only had to give very short answers, whereas the original activity was to generate the students' use of language by summarising what they had heard.

If I asked them what the solutions were, they would have to think of the answers in English. As I asked them spontaneously without letting them discuss first, I think they could not answer the difficult parts. This question is about solutions [for population explosion] and it would also be difficult for them to list the solutions as these solutions are associated with difficult vocabulary. The vocabulary was also difficult to remember and it would take them much more time to read [the answers]. (Mai, SRI Listening lesson)

It could be argued that the teachers' decisions to limit communicative activities were very reasonable responses to their understandings of their students' capacities and interests. However, it could also be argued that the teachers' decisions to diverge from the textbooks and specifically reduce the communicativeness of the provided activities did not help the students go beyond or improve their present language capacities.

In addition, contributing factors such as the teachers' perception of their students' motivation and capacity for learning inhibited the teachers from implementing more innovative activities in the classroom, and instead, they tended to gravitate to more traditional techniques. Such results have also been documented in previous studies (Canh, 2009; Viet, 2014). For example, in Viet's (2014) study, the teachers placed more focus on form than meaning by converting communicative activities into more controlled ones due to their concern that their students would not be able to carry out communicative activities. Similarly, Canh (2009) also found that, although teachers wanted to implement CLT, their perceptions about students' limited English and motivation were the main constraints to the utilisation of this approach in the classroom. Specifically, the teachers did not include communicative activities such as the free practice by the end of the lessons or spoke limited English to avoid their students' frustration.

Limited preparation and support for teaching reluctant students

The teachers themselves acknowledged that they felt ill-prepared, as novice teachers, to teach communicatively across a range of contexts, including with students who were reluctant learners and who, for the most part, were likely to see little value in learning English. Anh admitted, "Honestly, I am still very inexperienced as I do not know what to do so that my weak students will study." Anh went further to comment that the theory she learnt from the PST training was not always applicable to the reality of the classroom:

The teaching methodology at university was mainly theory. I practiced teaching with my classmates but it was not really realistic. I realised that depending on students' abilities, we would have to make appropriate adjustments. Our micro teaching at university was quite perfect, however, when I did my teaching practicum, it was a big gap. (Anh, Biographical interview)

The following quote from Minh reveals the gap between pre-service teacher education and the teachers' teaching reality and how they are not prepared to handle those challenges to maintain communicative teaching:

In my early years of teaching, I applied what I had learnt from the university [going through teaching procedures Pre-, While-, Post-]; however, my students could not follow. In recent years, because of the pressures of scores and the influence of the head of the English department, I had to cut off those steps. If I follow these procedures, my students will not understand anything.” (Minh, Post-observation interview)

The novice teachers also described how there was very little support at their schools or from professional learning experiences to assist them in pursuing CLT in their current classrooms. Although the schools organized fortnightly meetings for professional development, teachers primarily talked about how to teach vocabulary and grammar to their students. While the novice teachers did attend teaching demonstrations by colleagues from other schools, they were not applicable because they either targeted high performing students or focussed on teaching grammar and vocabulary in more traditional ways and neither of these demonstrations helped to resolve the oral language issues in their classroom.

Discussion

Similar to other literature where teachers expressed positive attitudes to using CLT (e.g., Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010), the teachers in this study also indicated that they had initially been eager to implement the approach. As mentioned above, most of the research explaining teachers' shift from an espoused commitment to CLT to a more traditional teacher-centred approach points to the broader cultural context. A key contribution of our study, however, was the finding that while the novice teachers did mention the effects of the written-based examinations on their teaching, their first and most frequent explanation for their modifications of the activities in the textbooks was their perception of their students' limited abilities and motivation to learn English. Due to this perception, they found it difficult to progress beyond mechanical activities or controlled practice to the more communicative-oriented guided or free activities they wished to use with their students. Given additional time to either enhance the students' basic English proficiency or motivation and/or, alternatively, change their own perceptions of the students' capabilities/motivations, it may be that the teachers might be able to pursue a more communicative-focus to teaching English in their classrooms.

The study described in this paper also makes a number of key contributions to the field of language teacher cognition. Firstly, as discussed earlier, there is limited attention given to language teacher cognition in EFL contexts; this empirical study has thus contributed to our understanding of the cognition and practices of EFL Asian teachers, especially novice teachers. Secondly, the triangulation of multiple sources of data employed in this study helps to provide corroborating and reliable evidence in relation to the novice teachers' cognition and practices. In particular, the use of stimulated recall interviews allowed us to collect the teachers' explanations for their classroom practices based on questions generated from observations of actual practices and not simply through interviews alone, which can only examine reported practices. Last but not least, while this study specifically focussed on novice teachers, the utilisation of multiple approaches described in the study might be useful for future studies that are keen on exploring more deeply the cognition and practices of pre-service and experienced teachers.

While wider socio-cultural factors, such as the economic and political context, traditional views of learning and teaching in Asia and written-based examinations, are more difficult to change, the teachers' perceptions of their students' lack of ability and their students' reluctance to engage in a more communicative approach to learning English are factors that can be addressed. Firstly, the challenges faced by the novice teachers in our study were partly to do with their early career status, with little support in how

to teach more communicatively with reluctant students. These are students whose reluctance, we would argue, is at least in part been due to their limited exposure to English in their everyday lives in their villages or to their perceived relevance of learning English for their futures. There were limited resources offered either in the teachers' professional coursework at university, or in the professional development offered at their schools to support the teachers working with such students. The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for more targeted professional development that assists novice teachers to approach teaching English in a more communicative fashion, especially to students for whom English currently seems to have little relevance. Therefore, practical and effective training in using CLT across specific contexts should be provided so that teachers are able to explore new ideas and potentially put these ideas into practice. In this sense, this study suggests that teacher education, government and local language management in Vietnam as well as in other countries of similar contexts needs to grant greater resources to training and supporting teachers in their delivery of communicative lessons to students with different capacities and motivations. Teachers should not only be provided with opportunities to interact with innovative and practical ideas of teaching but also to allow them to talk about their specific classroom constraints and seek strategies to handle these difficulties whilst following CLT.

Secondly, the predominant use of a direct approach, as described above, considerably limits students' learning. As has been pointed out in education research more broadly (e.g., Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012), pedagogies make a difference. Pedagogies that assume limited capacities and futures for students also limit opportunities. In the specific case of reluctant students, Wery and Thomson (2013) claim that they, "thrive on accomplishing appropriately challenging tasks and being held to high expectations" (p. 106). The data of this study indicates that, for students who see little relevance in learning English in their everyday lives and futures, like those in parts of the Mekong Delta, the problem is not simply one of the inappropriateness of a communicative approach, but one that raises questions about pedagogies that maintain social divisions. In addition to that, it would be useful to help students see the value of learning English in their lives and that being competent in English can help transform their lives. To encourage students to learn English, teachers could communicate with them about the potential economic development of the Mekong Delta due to its favourable conditions in relation to geographical location, natural and human resources, and tourism (Garschagen et al., 2012).

Thirdly, as indicated in this study and elsewhere in the literature, currently, students' primary reason for learning English is the mandatory nature of the subject and the required assessments in English (i.e., written-based exams). The evidence from this study indicates that, if the intention of Vietnam's policy towards language education is to enhance citizens' communicative language skills, first and foremost, the exam process needs to be reconceptualised. The research literature and the teachers' explanations in this study both reported the current exam format as a major hurdle to teachers' efforts in implementing CLT. In addition, if CLT is the goal, then the community of practice at the school is one important site for change. The school administrators and the head of the English department could encourage both novice and senior teachers to prioritise CLT as the preferred teaching approach. In the case of novice teachers, they particularly need support during the first transition year into the new teaching environment including support to apply innovative and authentic teaching ideas into their classrooms. Importantly, teachers' interactions with their professional colleagues in the social practices of teaching and learning are an important resource that can lead to profound changes to teachers' beliefs (Chappell, 2017). In this way, the successes of professional development in other studies (Álvarez & Sánchez, 2005; Giraldo, 2014) suggest that it is possible to create a learning exchange platform that allows novice as well as experienced teachers to initiate and negotiate innovative teaching ideas that are applicable to their teaching context.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that while the Vietnamese novice EFL teachers began their teaching of English with a commitment to a CLT approach aligned with the national curriculum, their beliefs and

practices subsequently changed to accommodate their assumptions about the students' limited language abilities and motivation. The word 'assumptions' is used intentionally to point to our understanding that neither we, nor the teachers, were necessarily privy to the students' reasoning for their evident reluctance to participate in more communicative activities. This points to a gap in the EFL literature: while there is substantial evidence identifying students as a key contributing factor in the shaping of teachers' cognition and practices, we know less about factors that influence students' learning. These include situational factors (specifically school contexts and students), social and cultural contexts (e.g., rural and urban) of the schools, and how these impact students' aspirations, their language exposure, and hence their interest and capacities to engage with English as a foreign language in the classroom. This points to the fourth implication of this study – the need to know more about students' perceptions to be able to develop teaching materials and practices that go beyond simple Western notion of CLT practice – and suit the needs of these specific students' learning in local contexts.

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