

## Researching the Research Culture in English Language Education in Vietnam

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### Abstract

Although research has an important place in language teaching, and language teachers are encouraged to conduct research for professional development, not much has been published about teachers' aspirations and beliefs about research, and their actual experience with it. Even less is known about what teachers working in developing countries such as Vietnam believe about research, how they are rewarded and challenged in the process of conducting research and disseminating results. This paper investigates the research culture of English language professionals at the university level in Vietnam. Data gathered from official documents and interviews show that Vietnamese English language educators espouse the need to conduct research. However, multiple factors, such as researchers' dissatisfaction with current evaluation regulations, as well as conventions and formats in reporting research results, lack of time, lack of materials and opportunities to disseminate results, and contextually inappropriate training tend to discourage teachers' aspirations to do research. Suggestions are then offered with a view to promoting the research culture in Vietnam as well as in similar contexts.

### Introduction

The notion of teacher as researcher is familiar in the field of language teaching. However, not much has been learned about teachers' aspirations for and beliefs about research, and their actual experience with it. While there have been several attempts to record teachers' experiences in conducting research (see Brindley, 1992), these attempts largely focus on teachers working in the inner circle countries such as Australia, the UK, and the USA. Currently, very little is known about teachers doing research in the outer and expanding circle countries. This paper seeks to investigate the role of research, and how it is perceived and conducted by English language teachers in Vietnam.

## English Language Education and the Role of Research in Vietnam

Since the economic reform known as *doi moi* in 1987, awareness of the need to increase the quality of English language education has been widespread in Vietnam. Policy makers and teachers have been looking for new teaching methods that aim to equip students with a good command of English to satisfy various communicative needs in their future work. Indeed, attempts have been made for a shift from a methodology and curriculum focusing on teaching reading, grammar, vocabulary and linguistics to the ones focusing on communicative skills (V. C. Le, 2000; Pham, 2005). However, the shift to the communicative approach does not seem to be successful in many contexts in Vietnam. Although a great number of teachers have been trained and encouraged to use communicative language teaching, it is widely reported that they continue to use old methods such as grammar translation once they leave their training courses (V. C. Le, 2000; Nguyen, 2001; Thuy, 2001). English language teachers are now required to develop research skills which help them to look critically at the knowledge and expertise that they have gained either in advanced TESOL courses in the West or in-service teacher education courses delivered by Western agencies inside the country (T. A. P. Le, 2005; Luu, 2006, Pham, 2005). Research, especially classroom research, therefore, plays an important role as it can help generate classroom practices which are appropriate to the social, cultural and physical contexts in which they work.

However, a small body of literature published locally in Vietnam reveals that research is not a feasible practice among Vietnamese teachers of English. For example, T. A. P. Le (2005) notes that the English language teachers' heavy workload leaves teachers with little time for research work. In fact, many teachers teach only 10 45-minute periods per week at their institutions, but they have to give private lessons, or work in private language centers to earn additional income. As a result, many actually teach about 30 periods, or some others as many as 60 periods per week. It is understandable that with this heavy workload teachers do not "have enough time to do research or even think about it" (T. A. P. Le, 2005, p. 12).

Doan and Nguyen (2005) note that most Vietnamese English language teachers often think that they themselves cannot generate knowledge through conducting their own research. For many classroom teachers, "the idea of undertaking a research project seems to be reserved for those considered experts or professional researchers" (Doan & Nguyen, 2006 p. 4). Doan and Nguyen also observe that Vietnamese English language teachers do research "only when they cannot avoid it" (p.4). For example, all teachers enrolling in the MA TESOL courses at universities in Vietnam are required to conduct a research project leading to a graduation thesis. However, after having obtained an MA degree, "they are unlikely to do any more genuine research" (Doan & Nguyen, 2006, p. 4). Based on a survey conducted with 202 teachers of English from various institutions in Vietnam, Doan and Nguyen sketches out the portrait of the Vietnamese teacher-researcher as follows:

First of all, she is a teacher who is very busy earning a living but does not shy away from the idea of research. She gets her first experience in doing research when taking a master's degree course, as required by many universities, especially in large cities. When she starts doing research, the primary focus is on

the teaching job and the roles of the classroom teachers, but not on students. When doing research and faced with problems, she goes neither to her former teachers nor to the school head master for help; instead, she goes to a close colleague (who may have also just finished an MA degree) to discuss and perhaps compare their problems. They probably do this in an informal way and at times laugh over tea at their lack of experience. (p. 6)

While many teachers do research for their advanced studies, others become engaged in research just to satisfy institutional requirements, and thus may do research in a superficial way. T. A. P. Le (2005) notes that at many Junior Teachers' Colleges in Vietnam, an academic staff member is required to spend a certain amount of time for research alongside his/her teaching duty annually. The time for research varies between 40-75 periods, depending on the teacher's seniority and the institution in which he/she works. For example, if a teacher has worked for four years or less, the research duty for her is 40 periods. For senior teachers, it can increase to up to 75 periods. In cases in which a teacher does not want to conduct any research project, these 40 or 75 periods are transferred to the teaching workload, which means that the non-research teacher has to teach longer hours than those who do research.

The requirements for research involve a proposal submitted to a research committee at the start of the school year, and a presentation of a final report. Committees for evaluating research may consist of academics who are not in the field of language teaching. Commenting the quality of this research, T. A. P. Le (2005) writes:

Casual conversations with many teachers have confirmed to me that the quality of these reports is often far from desirable, but they are usually assessed as acceptable or good, either because those responsible want to help the teachers so that none of them have to teach extra hours, or because those in charge do not have the appropriate expertise to properly evaluate the reports ... In the end, these writings, whether good or not, fall into oblivion. No one ever seems to make any use of them. (pp. 8-9)

Despite this pessimistic note, T. A. P. Le notes that a real research culture in English language education has emerged in Vietnam. Observing the teachers returning from in-service courses in which they have learnt reflective skills and action research skills, she believes that many teachers start to see the connection between their classroom teaching and research work. These teachers no longer believe that only experts or researchers could do research. Now they have come to realize that "[classroom teachers] could and should do research into their own teaching and that the information gained from such research could boost their teaching ability (T. A. P. Le, 2005, p. 10).

Moreover, many Vietnamese who study abroad often choose to make domestic issues the focus of assignments and research, and thus decide return home to collect data for their research. After their studies, armed with research and reflective skills, these colleagues may continue with further research. Also, an increasing number of Western trained Vietnamese teachers have started to publish their research findings in local, regional and even

international forums. This indicates that besides instrumental motives such as to earn a degree or satisfy institutional regulations, many Vietnamese teachers want to conduct real research to enhance their own teaching performance and scholarship.

## **Research Questions**

This project seeks to explore the emerging research culture in Vietnam. It particularly addresses the following questions:

1. What is the formal position of research at tertiary institutions in Vietnam? How do universities structure the research process in terms of support, evaluation and dissemination?
2. How do Vietnamese language teachers define research? What are the general attitudes and aspirations of teachers toward research work?
3. What problems and rewards do teachers have in doing research?
4. How do teachers disseminate their research findings? How does this affect teachers' motivation in doing research?

It is expected that the study will provide insights that can help local communities as well as the international communities to promote research work in Vietnam, and in other similar contexts.

## **Methodology**

The methods for data collection for this paper include document reviews and interviews with the teacher-researchers. Official documents relating to the regulations of research at universities in Vietnam were consulted to extract how universities in Vietnam view research, and how they set regulations regarding the support and evaluation of the research process, and dissemination of research results.

Interviews were conducted with seven English language educators who were teaching at three different tertiary institutions in Vietnam. The key criterion for selection was based on the availability of the teachers who had experienced doing research in Vietnam and were willing to volunteer to be informants of the study. An invitation to participate in the project was emailed to 21 English language teachers in four tertiary institutions in Vietnam: one in the north, one in the south, and two in the central regions in Vietnam. Nine colleagues responded to the email, but I was able to interview only seven, most of whom were located in Central Vietnam, because I could not afford to travel to the north and the south to interview several colleagues there. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to interview one colleague from the north when she was visiting my university.

Among the seven respondents, five had studied research in a Western English speaking country, two others in Vietnam. Two participants hold a doctorate, and the rest an MA degree in TESOL or applied linguistics. Their teaching experiences and research interests varied. All of them had at least conducted one formal research project in Vietnam. Details of the participants' profiles are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Participant Profiles**

<b>Teacher [1]</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Number of Formal Completed Projects</b>	<b>Research Interests</b>
Xuan	40	Female	17 years	MA, Australia	4 (2 solo, 2 joint projects)	Native/ Nonnative Teachers, Teaching culture
Nhu	42	Female	16 years	EdD, Australia MA, USA	1 (solo project)	Non-verbal communication
Bao	42	Male	17 years	MA, Australia	4 (2 solo, 2 joint projects)	Methodology, Evaluation
Ngoc	45	Female	13 years	MA, Vietnam	1 (solo project)	Cross-cultural communication
Thanh	39	Female	14 years	MA, Vietnam	1 (solo project)	Teaching the four skills
Hoai	35	Female	11 years	PhD, New Zealand MA, USA	2 (solo project)	Vygotskian theory, group work, vocabulary
Binh	43	Female	18 years	MA, Australia	1 (solo project)	Intercultural Communication

A semi-structured interview format was used to obtain the data. All the participants were asked a similar set of open-ended questions, which was distributed to them prior to the interview. These questions aimed at eliciting responses to the above research questions in light of the participants' personal views and experiences in doing research (See Appendix A for a schedule of questions used in the interviews). Participants were encouraged to answer at length.

Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of the respondents and researcher. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The English version of the transcription was given to two participants to check for accuracy. The data were analyzed with a view to sorting out recurring themes, comments and views. Adopting Spradley's (1979) analysis approach to interviews, I perused the transcripts with the

intention of constructing the hypothesis of *domains* in response to the research questions: teachers' views of research and aspirations within the institutional research regulations and policies imposed on them, rewards and problems in conducting research, and research dissemination.

## Findings

### Formal Position of Research in Vietnam

Promoting research and enhancing its quality is a constant topic in current educational literature in Vietnam. In a climate in which Vietnam is trying to enhance the quality of education and to integrate to the region and the world, most universities in Vietnam have specified that research is one of the key duties of instructors. For example, while the Vietnam National University (VNU)'s overall aim is "to build VNU into a comprehensive training and research center of excellence, which closely links training with research" (Vietnam National University, 2006), the University of Hue seeks to:

[B]uild and develop the University of Hue in a way to enable it to become a center of research which can facilitate many big research projects and can attract a number of researchers from many parts of the countries and abroad. (Le, 2005, p. 17)

The overall goal of research work in universities, as specified by the Ministry of Education and Training, is to:

1. Promote education and training
2. Serve the economic and social development
3. Enhance professional development for educational management, teaching and researching staff.
4. build and develop science and technology potential (MOET, cited by University of Hue 2006, p.1)

University academic staff are thus required to conduct research alongside teaching. At many Vietnamese universities, doing research is considered one criterion for evaluation of work performance of a faculty member. At the University of Hue, for example, lecturers are required to conduct, at least, a research project or publish a journal article per academic year to be able to be rated as *good lecturer*.

### Research Support, Processes and Evaluation

Research projects of all types are funded by the university. Research projects at universities in Vietnam are normally classified into three different scopes: *De Tai Cap Khoa* (Project at the Department Level), *De Tai Cap Truong* (Project at the Institution Level), and *De Tai Cap Bo* [2](Project at the Ministry Level), with the last type of research being the most popular. Current funding for a project at the department level is around 1 million dong (63

USD), at the institution level is 2.5 million dong (158 USD), and at the Ministry level is 25 million dong (1,580 USD), while the basic salary of a senior lecturer in Vietnam is around 3 million dong per month (less than 200 USD).

Staff who want to conduct research projects at the department and institution level must first submit proposals to be reviewed by a selection committee appointed by the rector of the college. Proposals for ministry level projects must be reviewed and approved by a research selection committee appointed by the president of the university[3]. Reports of completed projects must be presented in bound copies conforming to the following format:

I. Introduction:

1. Reasons for choosing the topic
1. Methodology
2. Scope and content
3. History of the issue under research
4. Structure of report

II. Content: consists of chapters presenting the findings

III. Conclusion

1. Brief account of the findings, and limitations
2. Recommendations for further research (if relevant)
3. Recommendations for application of findings into reality and other recommendations, if there are any (University of Hue, 2005, pp. 1-2)

While researchers conducting department and institution level projects must report their findings to a departmental or college evaluation committee, researchers conducting ministry level projects are required to present their complete work to two evaluation committees subsequently. The first committee -- the college committee -- is appointed and chaired by the rector of a college in which the researcher is working, the second committee - the university committee -- is appointed and chaired by the president of the university or his/her nominee. Each committee consists of seven members, two of whom are called *phan bien (counter-arguers)*. The researcher can recommend the counter-arguers but the chairs of the committees make the final decision. The rest of the committee is made up of academics who may not specialize in the researcher's discipline. While the two counter-arguers are supposed to read carefully the research project before writing their evaluation reports and reading them aloud to a committee following the researcher's oral presentation, all other members can rate the project using a set evaluation form. The final mark of the project is the total points given by all committee members (University of Hue, Guidelines, 2006). The rating of the project is based on the following criteria:

1. Conformity with the proposal in terms of objectives, contents, methodology and time
2. Scientific value, originality and freshness
3. Applicability - creating new products, or having impact on training and education.
4. Research findings are evidenced by the quantity and quality of publications such as reference books, textbooks, journal articles and science bulletins.
5. Contributions to social and economic, science and technology development, and human resource development

6. Quality of final report in terms of contents, format, text and presentation
7. Conformity with financial regulations (University of Hue, 2006, p. 8)

Given the research standards, evaluation regulations and dissemination as set out above, it is important to investigate how English language teachers think the context in which they work shapes their aspirations, research practices and outcomes.

### **Teachers' Definitions of and Aspirations for Research**

Congruent to objectives 1 and 2 in the overall goals of research set out by the Ministry of Education and Training, most teachers defined research as an inquiry into classroom practice which aims to obtain knowledge to improve teaching and learning. Because research, as most teachers viewed it, should be focused on classroom concerns, many said they aspired to conduct research primarily because they wanted to improve their teaching practices. The teachers also claimed that doing research is also part of their job since they were teaching at university. For example, Xuan said:

For me I think that research is not something big and too academic as some people think. In our daily teaching, we may come up with some particular problem and this urges us to explore why this problem exists and if there is any possible solution to it.

Thanh expounded:

Because we are teachers, university teachers, we need to do research, but research for us basically means reflection on our practices, on a particular classroom problem to find out ways to improve our work.

Bao was even more expressive about what he defined as research:

There are some aspects about teaching and if we learn it only from the training course... I mean the theory, it can be like this, but when we put it into practice, it might be different, I mean we might not be successful in applying what we have learnt from training... the theory, thus there need to be some investigation into what does not work in the classroom. For example, communicative language teaching sounds very interesting and useful in theory, but often it is not used successfully in the Vietnamese classroom, so we need to reflect on it, we need to identify whether and to what extent it is suitable to the Vietnamese classroom... We might ask students and colleagues to find out the answers, and share our experience, then report the findings at staff seminars. This is research in my view.

Three teachers also talked about the two kinds of research: formal and informal. Xuan explained:

Formal research is the project we do with funding from our institutions. We



must submit a proposal, get it approved by a committee, then we obtain the funding. When the project is completed, there must be an oral and written report... Informal research is what we want investigate without being judged by a committee, without funding, we might want to work on some ideas in our own classroom for our interests and concerns, and this does not lead to a tangible product, though one might give an oral presentation as result of it at a staff meeting or conference.

## **Rewards and Problems in Doing Formal Research**

Regardless of the material rewards such as money, the teachers talked about numerous issues that they believed tended to discourage them from conducting formal research. Many believed that the current way Vietnamese universities evaluate research projects was inadequate, and thus encouraged some researchers to conduct research only for additional income rather than for academic interests and professional development. Bao commented:

Though some researchers work hard and seriously to produce quality work, many do not get engaged in real scientific research, they just see doing research as a way to earn extra income and getting other rewards such as being positively evaluated for their annual work.

As described above, there are procedures that a researcher must go through if she wants to conduct a formal research. For example, those who want to do a formal project must submit a proposal and then defend it before two research committees. However, many respondents saw that these were just the formalities which did not help to ensure the quality of research:

You know, they [the committee] meet just as a formality. All projects are passed and rated as very good. (Xuan)

When a project is evaluated and you need two counter-arguers who write [evaluation] reports and read them before the committee, but the problem is you can recommend the counter-arguers. They are also two members of the five members of the committee, these people can be your good friends or your favorite colleagues. So they, of course, will rate your project as very good. (Bao)

From the experience of Xuan, Nhu and Hoai, committees would eventually rate all projects as very good, but they did give comments. However, these comments tended to show the evaluators' lack of academic competence and expertise in judging research work, particularly qualitative research.

Sometimes the feedback is destructive rather than constructive. I mean they criticize you by pointing at some trivial things. I mean they do not ask questions with a view to helping the presenter do better but they tend to challenge, and test the researcher's knowledge, sometimes to make her lose face. It is not like the atmosphere at many seminars in the West, which is more relaxing and

cooperative. (Xuan)

I presented the findings of a project I did some years ago, this project was about group work with a survey and interviews conducted with 30 students. Some people in the committee questioned why I had not surveyed 1000 students. Some panel members believed that I should have included a larger sample so that my project could be more valuable. (Hoai)

Xuan also commented that qualitative research seemed not to be accepted, or at least, favored, in her institution:

It seems that they do not understand, see the meaning of qualitative research. For many of them, statistics with tables, charts and graphs look more scientific and more convincing. My previous research focused on seven teachers and a dozen of students, but they said the number is not sufficient and thus no findings could be made based on this small number. I said, of course I did not mean to generalize my findings to other contexts. I tried to argue that I talked from a certain angle or a certain aspect, but it is very hard to argue ... because they and I do not share the basic view.

Binh had the same view:

You can do qualitative but there will be a lot of questions raised when you present it to the committee... if you want your research to look good to them, you must combine qualitative and quantitative methods.

Nhu explained that the above problems arose because very often the people who had the higher status in the committee were linguists or academics majoring in other languages. Most of them had not been trained in Western, English-speaking countries. They were not thus familiar with the research approaches and methods in education that were often practiced in these countries. Nhu also remarked that because research was often not fairly evaluated by committees, many competent colleagues at her institution did not want to conduct formal projects with the university despite financial rewards. These colleagues, instead, elect to conduct informal research in their own way, and publish in regional and international forums. However, the problem is that there is no funding for such 'informal' research.

### **Research Presentation and Format**

Three teachers who were trained abroad believed that the format which they were required to follow in terms of writing the final report was "odd":

The guidelines for writing the final report at my university keep changing. They are not scientific. In fact, they are odd. According to the current guidelines, it seems that there is no place to put the literature review in (Nhu).

However, Xuan had a different interpretation of the presentation format set out the university:

They want us to include as much as possible in the first chapter... I mean all the background and literature review. Other chapters are for the presentations of charts and graphs, and then discussions of findings. And they sort of want the researcher to make all the big claims and recommendations such as "this research will change something or improve something substantially". Otherwise, they would say the research is not very practical and valuable.

Xuan thought that this format was incongruent with what she believed she had learnt in Australia:

I've learnt that we need to have a sustained argument, presenting the study in a coherent way, often state the aim of a project first, then the rationale and the significance. Then in chapter 2 we can locate the issue under research, locating it in the wider background ... I mean the literature review. I have also learnt that we should not jump to hasty conclusions... it is not advisable to claim that this study will change something or produce something right away, but rather I would say this study will obtain knowledge to enlighten something. (Xuan)

Interestingly, the fact that the researchers were required to submit a final report in Vietnamese was also viewed as a challenge for those trained overseas. Nhu commented:

The problem is I read most of the materials in English but I have to write the report in Vietnamese. I find it very difficult. You can imagine, I rarely write academic papers in Vietnamese.

Xuan said that although she was good at writing in Vietnamese, she found writing up her research in this language challenging because:

There are so many terms and concepts and these equivalents don't exist in Vietnamese yet. In fact, some terms have been rendered into Vietnamese, but different people use different translations. So if I use a particular term someone in the committee may ask why I use this term but not the other.

## **Ethics**

Nhu reported that the concept of ethics in research in Vietnam was very different from what she had learnt overseas, and this affected many who were familiar with the concept of ethics observed in their Western training:

I once gave a paper based on a study conducted at an institution in Vietnam. I did not want to name the institution where I collected the data. It is an ethical rule, you know, especially when the results are not very positive. But they asked me to name it, tell where it is located, in Hue or Danang? They wanted me to

prove something. I have seen many Vietnamese researchers use the real names of the participants. This may shock researchers in the West.

### **Inadequate Research Training, and Lack of Research Skills**

The two teachers who had done their MA degrees in Vietnam constantly talked about their lack of skills in doing research. Thanh lamented:

If I can tell you about all the difficulties I had when I did my MA research. I did not know how to write a proposal, how to go about doing research, I knew nothing. Although in the MA course, there was a subject called Research Work but this was not useful at all. It taught us the many concepts about research, the abstract concepts, it did not teach us how to conduct research practically, for example, how to choose a topic, how to design research methods, or how to design a questionnaire, doing analysis... such and such.

Like Thanh, Ngoc recounted the same problems. Since Ngoc's thesis advisor lived and worked in another city far from where she was studying, she was not able to have frequent contact with him, so:

I sought support from the two colleagues who had studied in Australia instead. They were very helpful. Without them, I think I would have never completed my thesis.

### **Lack of Materials and Library Skills**

Ngoc and Thanh also believed that the lack of materials together with their lack of library skills highly challenged their research work.

I spent long hours and days looking for materials. I mean it took a lot of time, but all the materials found were often very old. And because we did not know what materials were good and appropriate for our projects, we tended to photocopy everything that came to our hands. It cost us a lot of money.

Although there was a computerized resource center at the university where Ngoc and Thanh had studied, they thought this center was not useful since they had not been taught to locate the electronic materials efficiently. Furthermore, Thanh commented,

The resource center can't afford to subscribe to full text articles, so when I come across something, it is only the abstract and there is a notice to ask for payment for the full text.

Even Xuan who had been enrolled in a distance EdD program with a university in Australia had problems in finding materials:

I think I am more privileged than other colleagues because I can have access to

the library of [name of an Australian university], but I still have difficulties in finding the materials I want. For example, I can order something but I can only get one book chapter at a time sent to me via email attachment, not the whole book because of copyright laws. But too often, only looking at the table of content of the book, I order the wrong chapter. I need to look at the whole book... It is better for journal articles, I can get access to many journals in our field, but whether I can read the article is another thing, it depends on the computer and the server, sometimes it is so slow. Also, printing out the document is expensive.

### **Time Constraints**

All respondents stated that they could barely find time for research. Except Nhu, all had to teach private classes, and some moonlighted as doing translation work for additional income. Binh commented:

In many richer countries, university lecturers teach fewer hours, and they do not work outside campus like us since their salary is good enough. They even can obtain study leave for doing research. We are not able to do so here. Last semester I started a project. I have interviewed a dozen of people, but since then I was not able to find time for the transcribing. You know, I take the children to school in the early morning, come here to teach in day time, then take the kids back home in the late afternoon, often I have to teach in the evening. Where is time for research?

### **Research Dissemination**

When asked how they disseminated their research findings when a research project had been completed, all the teachers said that after making the oral presentation to the committee, there was often no avenue to talk about the project. In fact, Hoai had once managed to run a staff seminar but "very few people came and I was disappointed."

Hoai also said that she had published three articles in international journals and some others locally. Nhu and Xuan published in the *Teacher's Edition* -- Vietnam's first and only TESOL magazine published in English. Nhu and Xuan hesitated to write for international journals because as Nhu said, "it would take a lot of work for revision of a research, and we have to wait a long time, but the acceptance rate is very low, and there's no guarantee for success."

Among the seven teachers, only Xuan and Bao had the opportunity to have attended and presented in international conferences thanks to the grants they obtained from overseas organizations. Other teachers sadly said that given their modest salary and no financial support from their institutions, "going to international conferences is a dream" (Binh), even going to national conferences held outside their province in Vietnam would be difficult.

In her interview, Nhu mentioned that one of her papers had recently been accepted by a

conference to be held in Japan. She came to ask the University Rector for support, but he said that the school was too poor to support a trip to Japan and suggested asking funding from the conference. Nhu eventually had to cancel her presentation.

## Discussion of Findings

The above findings reveal some significant aspects regarding doing research in Vietnam. The Ministry of Education and Training and universities in Vietnam stress that research plays an important role in educational life and encourage academic staff to conduct research. They have thus attempted to set up standards for research processes, evaluation, dissemination, and reward.

Vietnamese university teachers of English basically see research as an investigation into a classroom issue and problem. Many of these teachers aspire to do research to improve their teaching practices. However, many Western-trained professionals are dissatisfied with current conceptions of research standards and regulations. They think that these regulations give rise to low quality research projects. Western-trained researchers also find it challenging to report findings in Vietnamese as required by the regulations, though Vietnamese is their mother tongue. This is echoed in other studies. Shi (2002; Shi, Wang, & Xu, 2006), for example, note that returnees from the West tend to "be disadvantaged because they have less sophisticated first language writing skills than their local trained counterparts" (Shi et al., 2006, p. 774).

While research conventions in their own country are seen as a factor affecting Western-trained researchers' motivation to conduct research, inadequate research training affects the work of those trained in Vietnam. Added to this are the lack of time and lack of access to materials that disappoint both Vietnamese- and Western-trained researchers. This problem confirms Canagarajah's (1996) observation that non-discursive obstacles, such as the lack of material resources, leads to the marginalization and exclusion of Third World scholars.

All participants of this study state that they aspire to conduct research primarily for professional development. This necessitates the need to share their results with other colleagues. However, Vietnamese researchers feel discouraged, knowing that they have very few opportunities to disseminate their research findings. Except the required seminars in which they have to report their work to evaluation committees, departmental and institutional seminars have not yet become regular forums for research dissemination in Vietnam. Meanwhile, presenting at regional and international conferences is not feasible since Vietnamese teachers have no financial support from their own institutions. Binh asks, "What is the point of carrying out a project when knowing that you only produce a report which will finally live covered in dust in a library?"

The only avenue for many Vietnamese researchers to disseminate their research findings seems to be *Teacher's Edition*. Indeed, *Teacher's Edition* has played a growing role in English language teacher development in the country. The key goals and effects of this publication, as its editor points out, are "to edit sensitively and mentor first-time

Vietnamese academic writers, [and] ...to help give voice to the increasing level of TESOL professionalism in Vietnam, and to make resources available in a resource-poor environment" (Baurain, 2006).

As a Vietnamese researcher for this project and others, I share with my colleagues the difficulties and challenges recounted above. My salary as full-time lecturer at the university is modest, so I have to work as a freelance translator for additional income. This leaves with little time for doing research. Also, as I mentioned earlier, for this "informal" research, I had no financial support for my research. To find time for the writing up to meet the deadline I had to decline an offer for a translation project and thus even had to sacrifice some additional income. However, I was motivated to do this because it gave me a very good opportunity to discuss with my colleagues the concerns we shared about doing research in the Vietnamese context. When asked if they would mind if I recounted their perspectives about doing researching in our context in international forums, all participants said they would be happy if colleagues in international contexts could know and understand their situation. Moreover, when conducting this study, I knew I was very likely get my work published in *TESL-EJ* special issue since my proposal for this paper had already accepted by the editors of this issue, which inspired me a great deal. This was unlike the case, as Nhu recounted above, in which my colleagues hesitate to spend considerable time writing for international journals, not knowing for sure if their work will be accepted.

## Implications

There is currently a call in TESOL to decentralize the hegemonic power, prestige, and authority of the Western scholarship, while at the same time, encouraging and promoting academic work from the periphery countries (Canagarajah 2002, Makoni et al., 2005). However, there are tensions in this movement. It seems that scholars working in non-Western developing contexts are likely to continue to be underrepresented in international forums. These scholars, as Flowerdew (2001) and Canagarajah (1996) observe, encounter many difficulties in getting their work published. However, there are more fundamental and less documented causes: non-Western scholars encounter numerous problems and challenges in conducting research for publication.

To promote the research culture in Vietnam or in similar contexts, more efforts need to be made both at the local and international level. Universities in Vietnam or similar contexts need to find ways to encourage scholars to conduct real and quality research rather than superficial projects for additional income. There must be significant changes in the way in which research is evaluated. For example, research projects need to be reviewed by external/international academics. There must be objective ways to evaluate projects. As V. T. Le (2006) proposes, in order for a project to be rated as *very good*, the researcher must prove he/she has published a paper from it either nationally or internationally. Policy makers need also consult with researchers in terms of designing appropriate formats for research reporting and presentation. Moreover, as Nhu suggests, "Research communities in Vietnam need to be open to new research approaches rather than maintain a conservative approach." Universities need to offer more practical research courses and seminars at the graduate level to help MA students learn the basic and practical aspects of conducting

research. More collaboration between Western-trained researchers and locally trained teachers is deeply important.

To enable researchers in Vietnam or elsewhere to have more opportunities to disseminate their research findings, academic staff should be encouraged and given support to give and attend seminars and conferences at the institutional level. Attending and presenting at local seminars should be made one criterion for annual evaluation of staff work performance.

While Vietnam's government needs to invest more money in research, and to give financial support to researchers who want to present at international conferences, international organizations such as Asia TEFL, TESOL and IATEFL can provide more opportunities for scholars from developing countries to present at international conferences by offering more travel grants. In fact, since its inception in 2003, Asia TEFL has offered 40-50 travel grants per year (each worth 300 USD) to presenters around East Asia, many of whom are from developing countries. These grants have enabled many scholars to make their trips to conference venues abroad possible. In addition to inviting world-renowned scholars to their annual conferences, the Asia TEFL organization invites a number of speakers from outer circle countries. Indeed, two Vietnamese scholars have been invited to participate in Asia TEFL conferences as featured speakers. This greatly encourages colleagues from outer circle countries to do research.

In terms of publication, local journals such as the *Teacher's Edition* need to be promoted and be recognized in the global TESOL community. At the same time, international journals, as Bao suggested, "must encourage local scholars to do more research and submit their work by running special issues devoted to English education in our local context". This special issue of TESL-EJ is an example in this regard.

For classroom teachers, doing research is, of course, a challenging job, especially for those working in difficult contexts such as Vietnam. However, teachers need to be aware that it is legitimate, within their constraints, to do, as Holliday (2004, p.173) points out, "Whatever they can to find out what they want to know." The mental reward of research is always lasting. As Xuan said:

The mental reward... this is all that encourages me. When I complete a project I feel proud because given time constraints, financial constraints, family, and other commitments, I can do something intellectually valuable. This shows that I am not a teaching worker. If you can sacrifice a bit of time and make a bit effort, then the joy will be more significant and more lasting.

## **Conclusion**

This study is necessarily limited in scope. The voices of these seven teachers may not represent all Vietnamese researchers. Moreover, as the number of Western-trained participants in this study far outnumbered those trained in Vietnam and this researcher was also trained in the West, the findings of this project might reflect the perspectives of a certain group of scholars trained overseas. Investigating an issue in my own backyard, so to



speak, I am also mindful of my potential bias in reporting the data. Larger scale projects need to be conducted with interviews conducted with a larger sample of participants, including administrators and university research committee members, to provide a more comprehensive picture about the research culture in countries such as Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the current findings reveal some significant aspects in the field. If TESOL wants to promote research, and enable more representation of researchers from the outer circle in international forums (Canagarajah 2002, Makoni, et al., 2005; Flowerdew, 2001), it is necessary to explore many of the issues of language and the resources they have, and how contextual constraints shape their current research practices and outcomes. This study is one of the initial attempts in this process.

## Notes

[1] All teachers' names are pseudonyms.

[2] Actually, many colleagues in Vietnam wonder why this type of project has this name since all the reviewing and evaluation processes are conducted by university committees and have nothing to do with the Ministry of Education and Training.

[3] There are many colleges within a university. For example, the University of Hue consists of seven colleges: Medicine, Agro-Forestry, Sciences, Economics, Fine Arts, and Foreign Languages

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## Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. How do you define research?
2. What are your general attitudes toward research work? What are your aspirations in doing it? What makes you hesitate to do it?
3. What form of research (e.g. quantitative, qualitative, action research) have you chosen/will you choose to conduct, and why?
4. How did institutions reward you for the research project(s) that you have done?
5. What problems you have experienced in doing research?
6. How did you disseminate your research findings? How does this affect /enhance your motivation in doing research?
7. What is the impact that you think their research can eventually make on your professional development, your students and your institution, and knowledge?
8. What you have said is very likely to be published in the TESL-EJ -an international journal in our field, I hope that many colleagues in the world will read it. How do you like this idea? Do you want to make any other comments about doing research in Vietnam?

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