



## UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ON VIETNAMESE EFL NOVICE TEACHERS' COGNITIONS ON COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### ABSTRACT

*In an effort to enhance language teaching and learning practices, recent studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between teacher cognition and language teaching and learning. They have also shown that a variety of factors can influence this relationship, which highlights teacher cognition as an important area of study. Guided by a model of language teacher cognition, this paper reports on one aspect of a larger study that examined the influence of contextual factors on the cognitions and practices of Vietnamese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) novice teachers. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews were conducted with five novice teachers from two high schools, one in a rural and one in an urban area of Vietnam. Results demonstrated the impact of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the preferred approach in teachers' talk about EFL teaching; however, their dedication to this approach and hence their practice were shaped by various contextual factors, particularly the teachers' perceptions of their students. This paper concludes with a discussion about supporting novice teachers to overcome contextual factors whilst implementing CLT and suggestions for future research on students' beliefs to inform better teaching practice.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, governments in Asia have made a strong commitment to enabling students to become successful English language users (Littlewood, 2013; Savignon & Chaochang, 2003; Zhu & Shu, 2017) due to the increased importance of the use of English in contexts outside the classroom (Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007). This has led to the introduction of a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) to many language classrooms (Jeon, 2009; Shin, 2012). As is the case in other Asian

countries, Vietnamese government policies have shifted towards CLT to better prepare Vietnamese students with the skills they need to enter the workforce in a globalised world (MOET, 2008). The major goal of the National Language Policy of the government (Prime Minister, 2008) makes this explicit:

... 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 (Prime Minister, 2008).

Despite the efforts in applying CLT, Asian countries including Vietnam have encountered a number of challenges in implementing CLT in EFL classrooms. One noticeable difficulty is the tension between CLT principles and local values, especially cultural norms, in Asian regions (Butler, 2011). In her review of studies conducted in Asian contexts, Butler (2011) nominates two further challenges to teaching CLT in Asian contexts: classroom-level (e.g., human resources and materials, class size, limited number of instructional hours); and societal-institutional level constraints (e.g., testing systems and limited opportunity to use English outside of the classroom). In Vietnam, the documented 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; teachers' limited expertise in creating communicative activities (Hiep, 2007); and limited teaching resources (Canh, 2001).

While unsuccessful implementation of CLT could be explained by the aforementioned external challenges, studies of teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning suggest that these too impose an important impact on teachers' classroom practice and consequently learner outcomes (e.g., Macalister, 2012; Zhang & Liu, 2014). If teachers' practices are to be better understood, it is important then to understand how these practices are shaped by their beliefs and the factors influencing these beliefs. The study described in this paper takes up this challenge by examining the factors

influencing beginning Vietnamese EFL teachers' cognitions and how these were evidenced in their classroom practices.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Bourn (2015), teachers constitute a fundamental part of effective teaching and learning, and are seen as key players of change within the classroom, within the wider school, and within society as a whole. In this sense, what characterizes teachers, for example, their values, beliefs and cognitions, is also important to the successful implementation of any innovations in teaching and learning. Teacher cognition as defined by Borg (2003) refers to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching" in relation to "what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). Borg (2003, 2015) posits that language teachers' cognitions are shaped by different factors including school-based learning, professional coursework, and school and classroom contexts. What teachers believe about teaching imposes a significant effect on their pedagogical decisions, instructional practices, and professional development (Zhang & Liu, 2014).

In the context of Asian studies of EFL teachers' cognitions and practices in relation to the implementation of CLT, contextual factors including class hours, class size, teacher and student constraints have been found to have significant influence (e.g., Nishino, 2008; Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010). Despite their positive attitudes to a more communicative teaching approach, most of these studies have shown disparities between what teachers believe and what they actually do in the classroom. In the specific context of Vietnam, an increasing amount of qualitative empirical research examining teachers' cognitions and practices regarding the implementation of CLT has indicated a limited utilisation of CLT in the classroom (e.g., Canh & Barnard, 2009; Viet,

2014), despite teachers' espoused commitment to this approach.

Although there is a small but growing research on pre-service and experienced teachers' beliefs and practices, so far there has been little discussion about the cognitions and classroom practices of novice teachers in the EFL context in Asia and the factors that influence their cognitions and practices. Most of the language-based research on this group of teachers has been conducted in ESL contexts (e.g., Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell & Yang, 2019), with a few in non-Asian EFL contexts (e.g., Erkmén, 2014; Kaca & Yigitoglu, 2017) and Asian EFL contexts (e.g., Kang & Cheng, 2014; Moodie & Feryok, 2015). Among the small number of studies on EFL novice teachers in Asia, only a few were conducted with a specific focus on examining novice teachers' cognitions and practices in relation to CLT and these appeared to be limited to the context of EFL teaching in China (e.g., Kang & Cheng, 2014). In the context of Vietnam, one study in particular was conducted on novice EFL teachers, albeit not specifically related to the teachers' cognitions. Lam Hoang and Filipi (2019) explored how novice teachers pursued students' understanding and responses through the practice of language alternation. The study described in this paper takes a further step to investigate the influence of contextual factors on the cognitions and practices of Vietnamese EFL novice teachers. In particular, this study addresses the following question: "How do the contextual factors influence Vietnamese EFL novice teachers' cognitions and practices on their implementation of CLT?"

According to many scholars, the term "novice teachers" is used to refer to those who have taught English for up to five years after their pre-service teacher training program (see Farrell, 2012; Kim & Roth, 2011). These early years of experiences with school and classroom teaching

play an essential role to novice teachers' professional development and inform their commitment to effective teaching in the future (Ginns et al, 2001). In these important years, novice teachers "test their beliefs and ideas, expand their teaching strategies, acquire practical knowledge, and formulate their professional identity" (Kang & Cheng, 2014, p. 170). Nevertheless, novice teachers often encounter challenging experiences and go through a "reality shock" in the first year of teaching since they realise that what they learnt in the teacher education program may not be applicable to the classroom reality (Farrell, 2006). In addition, while they have to work under pressure to fulfill the ongoing and ever-changing requirements of their classes and schools (Ginns et al., 2001), novice teachers may receive limited professional support in working with challenging students (Hong, 2010).

### **Research methodology**

Like other studies on teachers' cognitions (Baker, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Viet, 2014), a qualitative research approach was selected to investigate the complex interplay between novice teachers' cognitions and their classroom practices. This study employed multiple methods of data collection and analysis, including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations as well as stimulated recall interviews with the novice teachers.

This present study drew on a larger study in which a purposive sampling method was employed. In order to gain access to schools and teacher participants, I had to first seek for approval from the Provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET), the main gatekeeper into the high schools in the province, before being able to approach high school novice teachers – the main participants of the study. The DOET sent a list of high school English teachers in the province including their schools and years

of teaching experience. Prior to granting me approval to proceed with the study, the Department asked me to select the schools and teachers for the research. After viewing the list of teachers, I selected two high school teachers in the city school and three in the district school who met the major criterion for the study, that is, they were within their first five years of teaching. Each high school in the province has a school website providing teachers' emails and contact phone numbers. I contacted these teachers via phone and later met with them to clarify the nature of the research before obtaining their written consent. When the teachers agreed to participate in the study, I contacted the school principals and requested their permission to conduct research in their schools. After having the teachers' consent forms and school principals' permission, I obtained approval from DOET to carry out the research with the teachers at the two schools.

**Research site and participants**

The study was conducted 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 school (pseudonym) is located in the city, which is also home to the university the novice teachers attended for their pre-service teacher education. The second school, Nhan Van (pseudonym), is located in a district of the same province. The five participating teachers (pseudonym) - four female and one male all graduated with a bachelor degree in English Teaching from the same public university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

The five teachers had been certified as having achieved the standard of English Language proficiency (i.e., Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) required to teach English Language at the high school level, thus demonstrating that they were all competent in using the English language.

A brief summary of the teachers' profiles (e.g., gender, school, teaching experiences, classes and number of lessons observed) is provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. The novice teachers' profile.**

Teachers	Gender; Age	School	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
<b>Total</b>				<b>9</b>	<b>29</b>

## 2.1. Data collection

**Semi-structured interviews** were conducted in Vietnamese with the participating teachers to obtain a thick and detailed description of each individual teacher's biography to provide a picture of their socio-economic backgrounds, early language and school-based language learning experiences, professional coursework and current teaching contexts, as well as their cognitions about language teaching and learning and how these have changed over time. The interviews lasted between 60-120 minutes. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews included questions such as:

- Could you please tell me how you learnt English at secondary school and high school?
- What approaches were used at that time?
- Do you remember an unforgettable lesson that you had before?
- Why did you want to become an EFL teacher?
- What approaches did your university lecturers use to teach English?
- What approaches do you use in teaching? Why?
- How do your students influence your teaching?
- How do you use English and Vietnamese in class?
- How do you collaborate with other colleagues in teaching?
- Does this collaboration impact your teaching?

**Classroom observation** is regarded as an essential tool in the field of language teacher cognition research to investigate teachers' cognitions (Borg, 2003, 2015), particularly in prompting teachers to think about what they do in the lessons. In this study, classroom observations aimed i) to document and analyse

teachers' actions regarding the implementation of CLT; and ii) to serve as resources to confirm teachers' reported cognitions (in the interviews) and as stimuli for the stimulated recall interviews to capture the teachers' interactive thoughts and decision-making processes retrospectively. On average, each of the teachers was observed for five 45 minute lessons. Each observation was video-recorded and transcribed. Lesson that were observed included Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing and Language Focus.

The English textbooks employed by the teachers in this study were based on the National Curriculum and used for students in mainstream high schools (15-18 years of age) at Pre-intermediate level, "English 10", "English 11", and "English 12". A group of textbook writers, including teachers and educators teaching at universities and high schools across the country, were invited by the MOET to design this textbook series. Each textbook consists of 16 teaching units and six review units. 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.

**Stimulated recall interviews** (SRIs) have widely been used to "explore aspects of cognition that lie behind the participants' decisions and actions" (Barnard & Burns, 2012, p. 145). The eliciting of teachers' retrospective thinking requires a stimulus such as a video recording of the activity (Barnard & Burns, 2012). Similar to previous studies that utilise SRIs (e.g., de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Farrell & Yang, 2019), in the present study, the recorded classroom observations were used after the teachers had taught the lessons to stimulate their

thinking about their decision-making (Borg, 2015).

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: What were you thinking when you were doing this? Could you recall your thoughts why you were doing this? Would you always organize your lessons around other skills like that? These questions were derived from the notes collected during the classroom observations and the selected segments that the author found relevant while watching the teachers' recorded teaching videos.

## **2.2. Data analysis**

The data analysis began with an examination of activities in the lessons the teachers taught using the taxonomy of language teaching techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by Baker (2014). This categorisation allowed the author to classify the activities into three types: controlled, guided and free. Controlled activities refer to mechanical practice activities such as repetition or substitution exercises, with the teacher's dominance over predictable responses regardless of students' understanding about the language they are using. Free techniques relate to activities where students have a more prominent role in collaborating and negotiating with other peers involving unpredictable and opened responses in more real-life contexts. Guided techniques or semi-controlled techniques lie within the continuum of controlled and free techniques, and possess mixed attributes of these types of techniques. Guided techniques are those still under the teacher's control; however, responses for tasks of this type can be open-ended and unpredictable (e.g., information gap activities). This examination enabled us to compare the direction of the teachers' practice (e.g., teachers'

modification of activities) in relation to the original activities in the textbooks.

As a next step, following Borg's model of language cognition, the semi-structured interview data were analysed to examine the influence of different contextual factors on the participating teachers' cognitions. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with particular attention to the teachers' early language learning, professional coursework, classroom and related contexts. This resulted in a thick and detailed description of how these factors impacted the teachers' values and beliefs about teaching English.

The next step involving a preliminary analysis of observations of the teachers' classroom practice in both schools revealed that the teachers often diverged substantially from the activities presented in the textbooks. This motivated a systematic investigation of each of the teachers' recorded lessons and identification of where activities conformed with, reproduced, or diverged from those in the textbooks. This resulted in the categorisation of activities, in terms of: retention; modification; or omission of activities. Further analysis was carried out to examine the communicative extent of these activities (i.e. controlled, guided, and free) based on the taxonomy of techniques (Baker, 2014; Crookes & Chaudron, 1991) which was used earlier for the textbook analysis.

Finally, the SRIs were utilised to determine the teachers' explanation for what they did in the classroom (e.g., their divergences from the textbooks). The teachers' responses were coded in terms of their explanations for the actual classroom activities (e.g., students' language abilities, students' learning motivation).

## **3. FINDINGS**

### ***3.1. Teachers' preference of CLT***

The analysis of the novice teachers’ interviews indicated that by the time they commenced teaching English, the teachers all preferred CLT, introduced and promoted in their teacher education, as an appropriate approach to teaching English. This approach was contrasted to the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), a method prevalent in their previous language learning. They described how the focus on discrete linguistic knowledge (e.g., grammar, vocabulary and drills), contributed very little to their language development. This was in contrast to their learning experiences at university, where they were introduced to “a communicative language environment” (Mai-Semi-structured interview) that significantly enhanced their language abilities. When they began teaching, these novice teachers described themselves as relatively well prepared and willing to apply CLT in their current classrooms. They were keen on using games, target language and communicative activities in the classrooms so as

students could develop their language proficiency. The teachers also expressed their preference of pair and group work and encouraged students to use more English especially in speaking lessons.

### 3.2. Teachers’ modifications of textbook activities

When the teachers began teaching in their own classrooms, however, their commitment to CLT was considerably challenged and their practices demonstrated this. A comparison of an analysis of their lessons with the analysis of the textbook units they were teaching indicated 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 oral communication interactions. Table 2 below demonstrates the direction of this modification from free (F) and guided (G) to controlled (C).

**Table 2. Types of modified activities.**

<b>Original Textbook Activities</b>	<b>Modified Teacher activities</b>	<b>Transformations of Activities</b>
Question-answer referential (4)	Checking comprehension (3)	G → C
	Question-answer referential (1)	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);	G → C
	Cued narrative (2);	G → G
Report (2)	Checking comprehension (2)	F → C
Production-Audio Identification (4)	Audio Identification (3)	G → C

Original Textbook Activities	Modified Teacher activities	Transformations of Activities
	Checking comprehension (1)	G → C
Narration (2)	Drill (2)	G → C
Cued dialogue (1)	Drill (1)	G → C

In this table, column 1 provides the types and numbers of the original textbook activities; column 2 displays how these activities were modified in terms of types and numbers. Column 3 represents the direction of how the original activities were modified (e.g., G → C; F → C). As seen in Table 2, there were a large proportion of controlled activities modified from original activities, which were classified as guided (60%)<sup>1</sup> or free activities (12%). The shift from free and guided to controlled activities suggests the teachers' priority for more mechanical rather than communicative practice. The original communicative activities, often in the form of discussion, narration, wrap-up, report, and production-audio identification, were adapted into controlled practice in the form of drills, checking comprehension and audio identification. For example, writing activities, originally designed as narrative writing where students would have more choices for guided writing, were altered into drilling writing activities, in which the students used the information to substitute into the sample writing. Both the information and samples for the writing activities were provided by their teachers.

Only 12% of activities remained as guided practice after they had been modified into another type of activity. For example, a wrap-up listening activity, where students needed to talk about the World Cup winners, was adapted into a cued narrative where the teacher provided

prompts to assist with their expression. Some activities which were originally controlled (16%) were modified further to become a simpler form of controlled activity to require less from the students. For example, while one original activity asked students to answer the comprehension questions based on the reading passage, it was turned into a multiple-choice activity where the students responded to the questions based on suggested answers.

The following example from Mai's listening lesson (Unit 7, English 11) provides an illustration of how the teachers modified the textbook activities. Although the final activity in the listening lesson (*After you listen* activity) asked the students to work in groups and summarize the main ideas of the listening passage, Mai turned it into a game to check her students' comprehension. To run this game, Mai divided the class into two teams and asked them to choose a number on the screen, which was corresponded to a question. If the students gave the correct answer to the question, their team would receive the points. Although the game engaged the students' participation as they tried to answer the questions, it moved away from the intention of the original activity, which was to generate the students' use of language by summarising what they had heard. To accomplish the original activity, the students would have needed to provide a response that required more than just repeating back what they

<sup>1</sup>In this table, there were 25 activities, in which 15 guided activities were modified into controlled activities (60%); 3 free activities were modified into controlled (12%); 3 activities remained as guided activities after modifications (12%); 4 activities remained as controlled activities after modifications (16%).

had done in the earlier activity. The modified activity only asked them to answer questions whose 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, for the most part, only had to give very short answers.

In brief, these figures reveal that an extensive proportion of the communicative activities were modified into more mechanical practice; which means that opportunities for communicative language production became more limited for the students.

### **3.3. Rationales for teachers' divergent practices**

Although the teachers expressed their keenness on implementing CLT in the classroom, their classroom practices as demonstrated above suggest that there is a mismatch between their stated beliefs (at least at the beginning of their lives as teachers) and teaching practices. When asked to explain their choices of activities, it became clear that the teachers' perceptions of their students' language ability and interest in learning language was the major factor influencing their choices/decisions to stay with or diverge from the activities in the textbooks; and specifically to limit communicative activities. The teachers described a number of contextual factors inside and outside of the classroom that were obstacles to their implementation of CLT in their current classrooms. However, the most important hurdle they nominated was their students' lack of the necessary language abilities to follow the communicative aspects of the lessons. The students' language deficiency also seemed to result in their apparent lack of interest in learning English. As such, although the teachers said that students, in general, were capable of learning English, all of them affirmed that they struggled to teach students who had very limited English proficiencies and motivation to learn, and thus they tended to divert from the CLT approach they had learnt in their teacher education. They argued that for most of their students, activities

which involved interactive communication were beyond their language capacities; the students were unable and/or reluctant to speak in English in the classroom, either to the teachers or with their peers. For example, in an interview Tam explained that she "is trying to use a Communicative Approach" but it is a challenge for her since "students' English background is very limited" though she had made the exercises as simple as possible but "students still give the wrong answers."

Like Tam, despite her interest in implementing CLT, Anh argued that it would be a challenge to encourage her current students to use much oral language. Due to 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 test and exam:

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)

In the following quote, to explain for her modification of the *After you listen* activity into the game, Mai says that, due to her assessment of the activity difficulty and the students' abilities, she only asked her students to tell her how many solutions there were for reducing population growth rather than requiring them to list the solutions:

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]. (NT-Mai- SRI-Listening lesson)

The teachers themselves acknowledged that they were not well-prepared as beginning teachers to teach communicatively across a range of contexts, including with students who were reluctant learners and for the most part were likely to see little value in learning English. All of the teachers mentioned the ease with which they were able to conduct communicative lessons in micro teaching to their peers at university, however, they had to cope with the challenging reality in their current classrooms. In addition, the teachers felt that there was not sufficient support from their schools or from professional learning experiences to assist them in pursuing CLT in their classrooms. The teachers often had exchanges with colleagues through frequent classroom observations and meetings with their colleagues for feedback on teaching. However, they primarily talked about how to make vocabulary, grammar or reading more comprehensible to students rather than how to design effective and communicative classroom activities to promote students' language skills. Despite attending the teaching seminars organized by Department of Education and Training, they commented that these seminars were not appropriate to their low-performing students, thus they rarely implemented what they learnt from the seminars into their classroom practice. For example, in relation to observing her colleague's teaching using new textbooks for gifted students, Tam said: "It is not applicable to my teaching reality because I am not teaching the new textbooks. They are only relevant to the gifted students at that school, whereas, for my students, they [the textbooks] must be a little lower."

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Similar to previous studies (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Jeon, 2009; Zhu & Shu, 2017), the teachers in this study indicated their interest in using CLT and expressed their intentions to utilise this approach in the classroom in accordance with language policies and their teacher education program. However, despite their stated preference for CLT, the teachers' practices demonstrated how they modified the lessons in the textbooks to reduce, or almost eliminate the guided and free language activities. The findings of this study are also consistent with those of Gok and Yigitoglu (2017) whose study was conducted on two EFL novice teachers in Turkey. The teachers in this study and those in Gok and Yigitoglu's (2017) study all displayed their keenness on applying a communicative teaching approach, however, their practices demonstrated that they were not always able to put their belief into practice. While the main reason for the Turkish teachers' omission and replacement of the textbook activities was mainly due to their confusion with the skill-specific expectation of the curriculum and the lack of guide in the curriculum, the main explanation for the novice teachers in this study for their modifications was the need to be responsive to their students' capacities and motivation, which, in terms of the classes they were teaching (mostly lower level) were perceived to be very limited. This study further supports evidence from previous studies (e.g., Ariatna, 2016; Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013) in that the teachers' adaptations of their teaching materials was a reasonable response to ensuring their appropriateness to the teaching contexts in which they were assigned to teach low performing students who also had little interest in learning English.

While the teachers' practices were justifiable, their modifications of the textbook activities point to some issues for discussion. As shown in the findings, the controlled activities were more prevalent than the guided and free activities in the classroom. Although controlled exercises can have a positive impact on learners' language

development as these pre-communicative activities provide learners with a basic command of linguistic system for more communicative purposes (Littlewood, 1981), their dominant use to conform to students' language abilities at the expense of guided and free activities may hinder the students' communicative language development. Research has demonstrated that the employment of communicative practice (e.g., guided and free activities) provide students with opportunities for interactive communication and thus have an important influence on students' extension beyond their current language capacities (Brown, 2007). In addition, research has shown that the integration of controlled and communicative activities can be more beneficial to learners' automatization of declarative and procedural knowledge language automatization than the use of mechanical and meaningful practice alone (Khatib & Nikouee, 2012). Such a combination was rare in this study. This suggests that, although teachers support CLT, they may need further support on how to integrate controlled and communicative practice effectively in the classroom.

Similar to the previous literature (e.g., Shinde & Karekatti, 2012; Zhang & Liu, 2014), the teachers' classroom practices were significantly informed and shaped by their beliefs. On the one hand, the teachers still valued CLT and wanted to implement it in the classroom. On the other hand, through their experience working with the students, they perceived their students as having limited language abilities and motivation; thus, they taught according to this perception of the students' needs and capabilities. Compared with their value in implementing CLT, the teachers' beliefs about the students were more influential and evident in how they modified the textbook activities. Although the teachers' divergences were intended to support their students, the adapted activities did not seem to improve or extend their students' English proficiencies. This suggests that if teachers are expected to modify activities to be more communicative and

authentic, there needs to be some transformation in terms of their beliefs about the learners. As Wery and Thomson (2013) argue, such teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and the expectations they hold for students have considerable influence: when teaching unmotivated students, teachers need to believe that their students can learn. As Stipek aptly points out (1988), "To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn" (p. 209). By adopting beliefs that their students can learn, teachers are more likely to provide an encouraging and challenging learning environment for their students. Learning activities, if appropriately designed with challenging and realistic expectations for students, can make learning pleasurable (Harter, 1978) and enable students to feel competent and increase their intrinsic motivation (Assor & Kaplan, 2001). 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).

Previous studies have demonstrated that teachers' beliefs are not always static and they are willing to include communicative activities in the classroom. Unlike the teachers in this study who tended to use more controlled activities and hold unchanged beliefs about the students, the novice teachers in Kang and Chang's (2014) study demonstrated a positive change in the teacher's beliefs and practices. Explicit vocabulary teaching, form focussed drills and exercises were the main objectives of the teacher in Kang and Chang's study due to her lack of confidence in the student's abilities. However, thanks to a number of supporting factors such as the teacher's self-reflection on teaching and professional learning experiences with school colleagues, her beliefs and practices began to change. This was evident through the teacher's employment of meaning focussed language activities (e.g., dialogue and role-play), groupwork and summary writing. The teacher

also gained better understanding and had more confidence of her students.

Regarding the professional learning experiences, the teachers in the study felt inadequately prepared to work with diverse groups of students using a CLT approach. Neither their professional coursework at university nor later professional development offered any guidance in teaching using a communicative approach with reluctant students, especially when they were in the early stages of teaching career. Although CLT is widely encouraged and promoted, there is limited research and guidance on how to support teachers to pursue this approach to various groups of students in different contexts (Hiep, 2007; Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013). That said, there needs to be more professional support both from university and workplaces as well as evidence from empirical-based research for teachers, in order to improve the implementation of CLT, particularly in how to teach reluctant students.

Finally, although there has been much discussion in terms of the teachers' assumptions about their students' language abilities as well as their reluctance to learn English as the barriers to CLT implementation, we know little about these matters from the student perspective. Teachers may believe that their knowledge about their students informs their teaching practices; however, their cognitions and practices are not necessarily always compatible with what students actually think and want. As Horwitz (1988) argues, insights into learners' beliefs are essential, as they help teachers to better understand learners' preferences for learning approaches and strategies and suggest appropriate teaching instructions to their students. In other words, teachers need to know what shapes their students' motivation and what might capture their imaginations so that they want to learn English. It follows that future studies should involve an examination of students' perceptions in their given socio-economic and cultural contexts to compare and contrast these with their respective teachers'

cognitions and practices. Insights into the similarities and differences between both learners' and teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning can provide useful implications for teachers and scholars in designing language lessons and in curriculum development (Dongho, 2017; Horwitz, 1988).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of contextual factors on the cognitions and practices of Vietnamese EFL novice teachers. The research has identified the participants' commitment to a CLT approach; however, their practices were divergent from their stated beliefs and the textbook activities due to their assumptions about the students' limited language abilities and motivation. Findings of the study suggest that it is our responsibility as teacher educators and developers of professional learning to ensure that our pre-service and novice teachers not only understand the theory and reasoning behind our approach to teaching the English language, but also to ensure that they understand the potential barriers and influences that they may face in their new careers. This study implies that perhaps more time and effort need to be placed on the solutions and scenarios that novice teachers will most probably face and how to best reconcile these issues without negatively affecting the students' opportunities to meet the standards of English imposed by the 2020 policy and framework of MOET. Future research could explore these constructs from the students' positions to enable various stakeholders (e.g., teacher educators, professional developers, teachers) to better understand learners and inform more efficient teaching.

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