

Teachers' Collective Agency Enactment in Implementing the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2

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Abstract

Teacher agency has received attention from researchers around the world, particularly in Vietnam recently. A small number of studies have been conducted in Vietnamese settings to examine teachers' individual agency enactment with a focus on the language policy under the National Foreign Language Project 2020. However, little research has been carried out to look into teachers' collective agency putting an emphasis on the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2. In order to fill in the gap in the literature, this study grounded on the ecological approach proposed by Priestley et al. (2015) examined teachers' collective agency enactment in implementing the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2. Data were gained through documents, interviews, and observations. The findings highlighted that the participant teachers collaborated together in the experience exchanging meetings, the professional development program, and at the foreign language center. Teacher collaboration with their colleagues at the intra- and inter-school level was driven by their relationships with their colleagues, their previous knowledge and prior professional experience, and the foreign language center's culture. The study gives implications for policy makers, school administrators, and teachers in the process of operating the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2.

Keywords: *Teacher agency, Teachers' collective agency, The Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2, Vietnam*

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Introduction

In the process of putting the curriculum policy into practice, the role of teachers is undeniable. Despite their significant importance in translating the curriculum policies into the classroom settings, teachers had little rights to engage into the construction of the curriculum policy. Nevertheless, they are expected to follow the guidelines of enacting the curriculum reform as dictated by the curriculum mandates. Researchers have highlighted the critical role of teachers in enacting the curriculum policy at the classroom level (Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Le et al., 2020). As suggested by Fullan (2007), what teachers enacted actions and thought impacted educational changes. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to respond to the urgent need of teacher agency at the classroom level.

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued the new general education curriculum through Circular 32 on December 26, 2018. Following Circular 32, the MOET also proposed the instructions of operating the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2 (hereinafter called as the English curriculum) in which English is regarded as the optional subject for students from Grades 1 to 2. The English curriculum has direct influence on the teaching and learning in Vietnamese primary settings.

While teachers' individual agency received attention from researchers, the role of teachers' collective agency in the curriculum reform enactment has been examined in a small number of studies (Spicer, 2011; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2019). For example, Spicer (2011) conducted a study into the development of teachers' collective agency in which teachers collaborated together to transform the school artefacts into the collective tools for the classroom practice. Fu and Clarke (2018) investigated teacher collaboration in interpreting the curriculum mandates and adapting the curriculum mandates taking into consideration the local teaching and learning conditions. Poulton (2019) put an emphasis on the ways teachers worked together in designing two English units. In general, these studies focused their attention on teacher collaboration in lesson design, teaching material design, the curriculum policy interpretation, and the curriculum reform operation (Spicer, 2011; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2019). Their collective agency was shaped by the curriculum assessment, the collegial relationship, the leadership, individual teachers' prior knowledge and previous professional experience.

Sharing the similar perspectives with the viewpoints from the above-mentioned researchers, this study put an emphasis on the ways teachers collaborated together in the experience exchanging meetings, the professional development program, and at the foreign language center to enact the Getting-to-know-English for Grades 1 and 2. Grounded on the ecological approach proposed by Priestley et al. (2015), which shed lights on teachers' individual agency enactment which was driven by teachers' personal and professional biographies, their current working environment, and their future

orientations, this study integrated teachers' collective agency and resources for teachers' collective agency into the ecological model of teacher agency suggested by Priestley et al. (2015) due to its significant role in implementing the English curriculum. The participant teachers had chances to reflect on their collective actions when the ecological model of teacher agency was deployed as the theoretical framework in the study. Therefore, the following are the overarching research questions:

1. How did the participant teachers enact their collective agency in implementing the English curriculum?
2. What were the resources for teachers' collective agency in implementing the English curriculum?

Literature review

Definition of agency under four approaches

Certain approaches have defined agency (Giddens, 1984; Bandura, 2001; Davies, 2000; Priestley et al., 2015). Agency is conceptualized as individuals' agentic capacities in enacting human action and resulted in the consequences from conscious actions based on the sociological approach proposed by Giddens (1984), as individuals' intentional actions to exert influence on their functioning with the intention of changing contextual conditions based on Bandura's socio-cognitive approach (2001), and as discursive phenomenon in different subject positions stemming from different subject (1998). The sociocultural approach was the only one to emphasize agency's temporal component, connecting the past to the future. To better comprehend teacher agency in the classroom, this study used the sociocultural approach's definition of agency.

Teacher agency under the ecological approach

Based on Emirbayer and Mische's theory of agency, Priestley et al. (2015) presented the ecological approach to teacher agency (1998). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) focused on human agency, while Priestley et al. (2015) focused on teachers' school activities.

Iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective agency combine to give teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015). The iterational aspect of agency was linked to teachers' personal and professional lives. Teachers' professional biographies connected to their previous professional experiences as student teachers and experienced teachers, while their personal biographies related to their abilities and expertise. Agency's practical-evaluative aspect was relevant to three key categories: cultural (ideas, values, beliefs, discourses, and language), structural (relationships, roles, power, and trust), and material (supplies and physical environment). Agency's projective aspect involved teachers' short-

and long-term goals. Priestley et al. (2015)'s ecological approach to teacher agency considered temporal agency, connecting teachers' past and future.

Teachers' collective agency

The notion of teachers' collective agency was described as the exercise of agency by a group of individuals or a community (Bandura, 2001). Teachers' collective agency was shown through the ways teachers participated in groups, shared knowledge, skills, resources to attain the communal goals. Teacher collaboration with their peers is evident not only in their school environments such as in lesson design, teaching material design, the curriculum policy interpretation, and the curriculum reform operation, but also in the informal interactions of many professional communities such as participating in the professional development program, seminars at inter-school to enhance their knowledge and professional skills (Spicer, 2011; Nguyen & Bui, 2015; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Ryder et al., 2018; Poulton, 2019; Desmaizayatri, 2019). This study concentrated on the content of teacher collaboration with their colleagues inside and outside the school settings to putting the English curriculum into practice.

Factors affecting teachers' collective agency

Teachers' collective agency was supported or constrained by three individual factors and five contextual factors (Desmaizayatri, 2020; Tran, 2019; Connor & Bengtson, 2020; Day, 2017; Poulton, 2020; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Ayubeyava, 2018). The former was relevant to teachers' prior knowledge, previous professional experience, and their short-term and long-term orientations. The later was related to the school culture, the school structure, material resources, students' backgrounds, students' learning outcomes, and the curriculum assessment.

Research methods

Research design

Qualitative case study was deployed in this study to discover teachers' collective agency enactment in implementing the English curriculum. This study employed multiple case studies to dig into teachers' collective agency with the aim of deepening the researcher's understanding of nature of agency from various viewpoints (Yin, 2012).

Participants

The study was undertaken at two primary schools in Ba Ria Vung Tau province (BRVT) in Southern Vietnam. These primary schools were selected due to the researcher's familiarity with the local environment where she is a local resident which created favorable conditions for the researcher to gain access to the research setting, the

participants, and smooth the path of collecting data for the study. Four primary English teachers at two primary schools in BRVT teaching students of Grades 1 or 2 were chosen as participant teachers in this study. They received the college degree at a local college in BRVT majoring in teaching English to secondary school students. They got engaged in Modules 1 and 4 in the professional training program delivered by Department of Education and Training (DET). Module 1 introduced the general overview of the English curriculum for Grades 1 to 5 while Module 4 paid attention to lesson planning with the intention of fostering students' communicative competence. The participant teachers worked with teachers from other schools to design lesson plan for any unit of the textbook for Grades 1 and 2.

Data collection procedures

Data were gained through documents, semi-structured interviews, and observations to explore teacher collaboration with their colleagues at the intra-school and inter-school level. Documents were used to lay the basic foundation on the requirements, instructions of putting the English curriculum into practice. The main documents used in this study were Circular 32 about the new general education curriculum dated on December 26, 2018 by the MOET and Directive 681 on the guidelines of implementing the English curriculum. Following this phase, observations were conducted to support the researcher in exploring the forms and content of teachers' collective agency in enacting the English curriculum.

Data analysis

The study made use of thematic and discourse analysis to analyze teachers' collective agency enactment. The participant teachers were also asked questions related to their collective actions in implementing the English curriculum. The precedent form of analysis consisted of six phases namely familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The later type of analysis was discourse analysis which used speech function analysis to give deeper insights into the frequency and content of teachers' collective agency in peer observation discussions. More specifically, moves served as the tool to analyze discourse patterns of speech functions. Data assembled from discourse analysis complemented with information achieved through semi-structured interviews help the researcher to shed light on teachers' collective agency enactment in implementing the English curriculum.

Results

The data revealed that the participant teachers collaborated with teachers inside and outside their school settings, particularly in (1) the professional development program, (2) experience exchanging meetings, and at (3) the foreign language center to design lesson plan, exchange feedback concerning the English lessons for Grades 1 and 2, and discuss issues arising from their implementation of the English curriculum. Teacher collaboration with peers at the intra-school and inter-school level was shaped by their relationships with their colleagues, their previous knowledge and prior professional experience, and the foreign language center's culture.

Teachers' collective agency in the professional development program

The participant teachers went through the professional training program implemented by DET in which Module 4 provided practical opportunities for them to exchange their viewpoints with colleagues outside their institutional settings with the intention of designing lesson plan for Grades 1 and 2. They were introduced the new format of the lesson plan to assess students' communicative competence instead of utilizing the old one with a focus on knowledge evaluation orientation. The objectives of the lesson plan's new format are divided into core competences (cognition and skills), general competences (self-control and independent learning, communication and collaboration, problem-solving and creativity), and attributes (kindness, diligence, honesty, and responsibility). Each activity includes objectives, teaching methods, procedures, expected product, and expected assessment. The participant teachers exchanged their viewpoints with their colleagues about planning the English lessons complying with the new format of the lesson plan. They were concerned about teaching activities, teaching methods, teaching materials, and students' learning outcomes when designing a lesson plan.

With the goal of producing a session that would be enjoyable and engaging for young learners, they examined the activities and instructional methods that ought to be included in the class to make it engaging and exciting for the younger students. They also discussed how to choose the right materials for the class while taking the students' backgrounds into account. They used additional teaching materials in addition to the textbook required by the curriculum guidelines to encourage student engagement in the lesson. They emphasized that using the textbook was insufficient to deliver an engaging lesson to the students because of the repetitious activities, unappealing graphics, and uninteresting information. The participant teachers were similarly concerned about teaching procedures. They put an emphasis on the importance of setting up teaching activities in accordance with their prior knowledge and previous teaching experience.

Lastly, students' learning outcomes were what they paid attention to while designing a lesson plan for their young learners.

The participant teachers claimed that their reluctance to share their opinions was a result of their concern that their colleagues in other institutional settings could criticize them. In the conversation on lesson planning, the teacher who was in charge of the English department at a school or who felt secure in their skills and background took the lead. The other teachers took on the role of the advocates, adding further arguments in favor of the discussion. Little dispute took place during the discussion, and teachers were able to identify views they had in common.

Teachers' collective agency in the experience exchanging meeting

Teacher collaboration with their peers in the experience exchanging meetings with the aim of exchanging their perspectives in relation to key aspects of the English lessons after the peer observation sessions. The observational data revealed that the participant teachers were concerned about certain categories of the lesson namely the interaction between teacher and students, classroom management, methods of assessment, teaching procedures, teaching materials, teaching methods, teaching activities, teaching instructions, and issues arising from their teaching practices.

Due to her most significant attempts at opening the conversation, Hoa assumed the leading role. Hoa also contributed the most to the support of her teammates by making the most follow-up supportive actions. In contrast, Hang took on the position of a supporter, responding to her colleagues' inquiries most frequently. In order to provide serious suggestions to their colleagues and improve the quality of the conversation, Hoa and Hang made an effort to elaborate, extend, and develop their views as well as the ideas of their colleagues. Key aspects draw Hoa and Hang's attention in the meeting were classroom management, teacher-student interaction, teaching materials, teaching activities, assessment methods, teaching methods, and problems resulting from their teaching practices. Their willingness to accept colleagues' perspectives indicated the talk's harmony. They occasionally opposed their colleagues' opinions. Arguments were made to improve English curriculum implementation and help teachers comprehend the challenges. They interacted with honesty, trust, and accountability. Teachers' constructive interaction allowed them to share ideas without fear of condemnation and helped execute the English curriculum.

Throughout the meeting, Huong and Nhi acted as the supporters by making similar response actions. Their peers nominated them to field inquiries about their own and other members' lessons during the roundtable. Due to their lack of self-assurance in their knowledge and experience sharing and were fearful of being regarded as

incompetent teachers by their peers, they assumed a passive stance and made a comparable number of answering moves during the discussion. To ensure that their colleagues understood the underlying motivations behind their decisions and actions regarding their teachings, they made an effort to provide further justification, clarity, and explanation for their thoughts. They focused their attention on several essential elements of the English lesson such as classroom management, teacher-student interaction, teaching instructions, teaching procedures, teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching activities.

Teachers' collective agency at the foreign language center

Teacher collaboration with their peers could be identified not only in the professional development program, the experience exchanging meeting, but also at the foreign language center. They paid attention to certain aspects of the English lesson namely the new characteristics of the English curriculum for Grades 1 and 2, teaching activities, teaching materials, teaching methods, culture instruction, test design, and problems resulting from their teaching practices.

The new Grades 1 and 2 textbook "Family and Friends" included a culture component that contrasted Vietnamese and international cultures. Instead of 15-minute, 45-minute, mid-term, or final tests, pupils would be tested through various learning activities. In terms of teaching activities, teachers exchanged their viewpoints with regard to activities that fitted their students. In a passive class, students would play "matching words with the given pictures" instead of "slap the board" to review the new lexical items they learnt in the prior activities. Because each class was different, the teacher couldn't use the same activities for pupils of the same grade. In other words, teachers should consider students' traits when incorporating educational activities into classes. English curriculum teaching resources were also discussed.

To create a joyful learning environment for pupils, they were advised to use realia like sticky balls, plastic hammers, etc. Information technology should also be used to assist pupils stay current. The participant instructors also noted that teachers of the same grade, such as grades 1 and 2, could adopt instructional approaches shared by their colleagues, but they should examine students' characteristics first. Each class had its own characteristics, so the same teacher can teach differently in each class of the same grade. Project-based learning worked effectively in a lively class with high speaking skills, but not in a passive class with low English competence. When teaching culture, they let pupils watch the video clip to assist them recognize imagery and learn new vocabulary terms. When teaching Grade 1 kids about "Birthday in Canada," they watched a video clip to identify birthday party items including cakes, candles, gifts, etc. They then learned birthday party vocabulary. The teacher also showed photographs of "Birthday in

Vietnam" and "Birthday in Canada" to ask pupils about the differences. Students also matched birthday photographs from Vietnam and Canada with lexical words.

Another issue that concerns participant teachers was how to construct assessments to assess students' communication competence without putting too much pressure on young learners. As students grew familiar to the workbook activities and could identify photos in the workbook or student's book, test items should be prepared in a similar format. Pictures should be drawn from the student's book or workbook. To prevent students from misidentifying external images, they would not be used. The participant teachers also discussed daily teaching challenges. Classroom management was crucial to implementing the English curriculum. To assist teachers, students were advised to share class management. To be more specific, the class monitor and group leaders should be given power to govern the class and enforce classroom rules so the teacher can teach without interruption.

Mistake rectification was another subject discussed by participants. Students were instructed to work as a class, in groups, in pairs, or individually to review the pronunciation of newly-learned lexical items after receiving instruction in pronunciation. If kids make pronunciation errors, teachers should pause the session to correct them since, if they don't, it will become a habit and hinder their future language acquisition. As full-time foreign language teachers, the participants were willing to exchange ideas with their colleagues. They assisted each other to efficiently administer the English curriculum and address challenges they encountered. Their relationship was built on trust, accountability, and sincerity. They shared their views with colleagues without hesitation. More significantly, they worked in a culture of innovation, shared responsibility, and respect. Thus, discussing and criticizing ideas were essential to English curriculum quality enhancement.

Discussion

Teachers' collective agency could be identified in the professional development program, the experience exchanging meetings, and at the foreign language center. The participant teachers collaborated with their peers outside their school settings to plan the English lessons for Grades 1 and 2 following the new format dictated by the curriculum policy. Teaching activities, teaching materials, teaching methods, teaching procedures and students' learning outcomes were the center of attention in the enactment of teachers' collective agency in the discussion. They demonstrated a hesitation to bring up their thoughts because they were fearful of being judged by their peers in other institutional contexts. This fear caused them to display their reluctance. In the debate regarding lesson planning, the teacher who was the group leader of the English department of a school or the teacher who was confident in their own expertise and experience assumed the role of

the dominant participant. The other teachers took on the role of supporters, providing the presentation with additional details to back up what was being said. It was determined that many of the teachers had similar beliefs, and there was relatively little contention raised throughout the conversation. Poulton (2019) also indicated that the school structure exerted direct influence on teacher collaboration with their colleagues. According to the findings of his research, teachers' ability to make decisions regarding the design of lessons was aided by the robust professional contacts that were shared amongst instructors. These interactions were built on the principles of trust, responsibility, and sincerity. Because there was such a positive relationship amongst the instructors, they were able to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives without the fear of being judged, which greatly facilitated the efficient execution of the policy. However, teachers demonstrated that they were not inclined to give their thoughts or inquire for further explanations if it was determined that there was a lack of trust and honesty in teachers' professional contacts (Day, 2017; Poulton, 2020).

Besides working with their peers at the inter-school level, the participant teachers collaborated with their colleagues at their school settings to exchange ideas related to the English lessons for Grades 1 and 2. Their discussion centered around teaching methods, teaching activities, teaching materials, assessment methods, teaching procedures, and teaching instructions, teacher-student interaction, classroom management, and issues arising from their teaching practices. Hoa and Hang, two participant teachers, were open to exchanging ideas with their peers because of their positive relationships with them, whereas Huong and Nhi, two participant teachers, lacked confidence in exchanging their opinions because they lacked sufficient knowledge and prior professional experience and were afraid of being labeled as unqualified teachers by their peers. It can be clearly seen that the participant teachers shared the similar perspectives on teacher-student interaction, classroom management, teaching procedures, teaching instructions besides other key aspects discussed by certain researchers (Spicer, 2011; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2019; Desmaizayatri, 2019). More importantly, teacher collaboration with their peers was not only shaped by the school structure but also individual teachers' prior knowledge and previous professional experience.

In addition to collaborating with their colleagues in the professional development program, the experience exchanging meetings, the participant teachers worked with their peers at the foreign language center to exchange their perspectives in relation to certain aspects of the English curriculum namely the new components of the textbook for Grades 1 and 2, the exam design, ways of teaching the cultural portion, teaching methods, teaching activities, teaching materials, and issues arising from their teaching practices. Teachers' collective agency in enacting the English curriculum was influenced by the foreign language center's culture. More specifically, a culture of trust, shared

accountability, and respect for new ideas was fostered among the teaching staff, and this fostered an environment conducive to teachers discussing and challenging ideas for improving the English curriculum's implementation. The results of the study were in accordance with that of the research carried out by Tran (2019), who emphasized that the school culture promoted a strong sense of unity and belonging shared among teachers under the influence of Confucian beliefs. Teacher collaboration with their peers to face the challenging issues and attain the communal goals were identified in such institutional culture. In contrast, Connors and Bengtson (2020) highlighted that the school culture that took charge of their professional work and prioritized students' success may limit the exercise of teachers' collective agency. In general, when implementing policy, school culture or norms may encourage or restrain teachers' collective efforts to accomplish a common objective (Desmaizayatri, 2019).

Conclusion

Teacher collaboration with their colleges at the intra-school and inter-school level could be clearly identified through the professional development program, the experience exchanging meetings, and the foreign language center. Teachers' collective agency was driven by the school structure, their prior knowledge and previous professional experience, and the culture of the foreign language center. In regards to the implementation of the English curriculum, the study's findings have significance for school administrators and teacher educators. Administrators of schools should create an environment that fosters shared responsibility, trust, and sincerity so that teachers are willing to share their perspectives, take risks, and innovate their teaching methods in order to create favorable learning conditions for students and assist them in achieving their learning objectives. In contrast, teachers' collective agency may be restrained if they operate in a school culture and structure that places a great deal of emphasis on their accountability outcomes and evaluates their performance based on kids' learning outcomes. Moreover, school administrators should give instructors with practical opportunities to foster a strong sense of unity and belonging, with the goal of fostering healthy relationships with their colleagues. They would be able to freely share their perspectives with their coworkers without fear of being criticized by their peers. For school educators, more informal interactions namely professional development programs should be implemented with the aim of helping teachers at the intra-school and inter-school levels exchange their perspectives concerning the English curriculum operation and find out solutions to problems they encountered during the process of teaching the English curriculum for Grades 1 and 2.

Limitations and future research

The research does have certain limitations despite its useful contribution to the field of teacher agency in enacting the curriculum reform mandates in language education. Firstly, the present study examined teachers' collective agency in the curriculum operation in which teachers worked as a group, collaborated with their colleagues at the intra-school and inter-school level in an attempt to facilitate the effective implementation of the English curriculum for Grades 1 and 2. Therefore, it is essential to conduct studies that investigate the influence of teacher collaboration with their peers on their individual agency enactment as well as individual teachers' contribution to the collective actions. Secondly, the study involved teachers' voices in putting the English curriculum practice with the employment of semi-structured interviews and observations. It would be more interesting to include the school administrators, the foreign language center's directors, and the professional development program's educators into the data collection procedures with the aim of gaining deeper insights into teachers' collective agency from different perspectives.

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