

## **Building Vietnamese English Teachers' Evaluation Capability: Filling Needs via Training Programs**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the impact of an evaluation-focused language teacher education program under Vietnam's National Foreign Languages 2020 project, run at Hanoi University in 2015 and 2017. Funded by The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), this intensive 150-hour university-level program employed international experts to deliver content about evaluation. The pedagogical goal was to enhance the capacity of 'key' teachers by guiding their application of theory-informed strategies to their institution's curricula and teaching materials. The underlying policy-directed goal was alignment with the Circular on Issuance of the 6-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework of Vietnam (MOET, 2014), the Vietnamese Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (VFLF). This study outlines the needs the course met under national policy, demonstrates how these were achieved and describes the course's impacts and constraints. A naturalistic interpretative enquiry, it draws on questionnaire data from participants to assess how the program met its objectives and the degree to which participating language teachers reported applying its content to their practice. The study points to a gap between the aspirational rhetoric of the 6-level framework and the constraints posed by gatekeepers where the 'key' teachers are supposedly present and future leaders but often lack the autonomy to innovate.*

### **Researching the Evaluation Program**

This paper presents a study of a critical moment in Vietnam's English Language Teaching (ELT) history by telling four thematic narratives based on the responses of 20 'key' tertiary-level teachers from the North of Vietnam to a series of questions about the value and impact of a unique learning program. The program is named "The training course on evaluation and improvement of English teaching-learning programs and materials for key language teachers under the National foreign languages 2020 project" (henceforth, 'Evaluation'), and the author delivered it twice in 2015 and 2017, led by the author and a second professor.

Funded and sponsored by 'State budget' (MOET, The Ministry of Education and Training) via a tender by The Department of Foreign Languages at Hanoi University, this intensive 150-hour teacher education program employed international TESOL 'expert' consultants to create and

deliver content about evaluation with a view to increasing uptake of the Vietnamese Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (VFLF). The course focused on implementing the principles of evaluation into educational practice. As conveyed by MOET, the program's goal was to update teachers' capacities for judging the efficacy of their curricula, materials and teaching teams in terms of their students' needs and the prescriptions of this 6-level framework.

The first part of this paper is an academic descriptive narrative of how experts and learners worked together to create impactful pedagogical interventions in such a context. It begins by describing the needs 'Evaluation' was to fulfil in the light of studies on the links between policy and curriculum and, passingly, on teacher agency. Then it outlines the content and the rationale behind the course. After describing this study's methodology, I present narrative data to assess how 'Evaluation' added, or potentially would add, value to the enterprise of the participants. Finally, considering the issue of agency, I relate constraints to implementation. The paper addresses the enquiries:

- In what ways has the 2020-sponsored 'Evaluation' program impacted on key teachers' work as pedagogical leaders within their educational institutions?
- What were the constraints for the implementation of 'Evaluation'?

Before I describe key aspects of the methodology and relate the four thematic narratives, I will analyse the socio-political and pedagogic contexts out of which the need for this program emerged. This involves understanding the tension between the desire for pedagogical and curricular innovation described in the policies of the Ministry, and the deep-rooted conservatism of powerful leaders within universities. As these traditionalists retire and younger professors take their places, there are likely to be increasing possibilities for teacher agency in terms of materials creation and curricular renewal in universities in North Vietnam. The institutional change required for programs like 'Evaluation' to have true impact lies beyond the scope of this current study.

### **Research Informing 'Evaluation'**

*Vietnam's education system may be thought of as a vast social field in which aspirations and constraints collide* (London, 2011, p. 3).

The teaching and learning of English in Vietnam seem torn between the aspirational, nationalistic, macro-level discourse of policy and a conservative micro-level management resistant to the interactive pedagogies and modes of assessment espoused by the curriculum. This is outlined in the Circular on Issuance of the 6-level Foreign language Proficiency Framework of Vietnam (MOET Circular number 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT). The practical, curricular part of the document is known as the Vietnamese Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (VFLF). This 'circular' drafts a new framework for teaching and learning the core language skills, as well as grammatical and lexical awareness, across six levels of competency.

The VFLF serves as a roadmap for implementing a robustly communicative, interactive and productive curriculum for Vietnam's new generation of technically savvy language learners for a globalized economy. It positions the teacher as enabler, mentor, guide and facilitator. The teacher is less figured as sage on stage, the conventional position of language teachers in Vietnam (Ngo, 2015; Nguyen, 2009; Pham, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Recent studies suggest that the degree of autonomy teachers have as implementers remains contentious despite cautious optimism (Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Nguyen, Hamid & Renshaw, 2016). As such the VFLF reflects

the desire for a more agentive, innovative and creative teaching workforce than has historically been the case. Clearly, to fulfill this aspiration requires carefully managed and supported intervention in situational change (Tran, 2013). It also demands capacity building for English language educators to make them invested and informed agents of implementation and dissemination (Barnard, 2015).

The resultant tensions both pose challenges and present possibilities for the agency of English language educators (Nguyen & Bui, 2016) and program administrators (Nguyen, Hamid & Renshaw, 2016). Teachers appear empowered by the possibilities for teacher identity and innovative pedagogies supported by the policy (Phan, 2008) but largely unsupported by managers for whom the adoption of student-centred, process-focused modes and of learning remain threatening (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen, Hamid & Renshaw, 2016). Analogously, administrators mediating the micro-level policy implantation find conflicts between their professional and managerial functions, “stranded between their responsibility to sustain the school mission and their sensibility to teach a foreign language” (Nguyen, Hamid & Renshaw, 2016, p.75).

There is a growing literature exploring the gap between policy rhetoric and pedagogic potential in Vietnamese language curricula. Pham (2006) and Wadell (2009), among others, noted the gap between macro-level intention and micro-level implementation. In the past decade, many Vietnam-based innovation case studies have evidenced the impact of those structures and the resistance to such interventions as communicative teaching of form, problem-posing pedagogies or task-based learning (Le, 2001; Le & Barnard, 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2013; Van Canh & Barnard, 2009a, 2009b). More recently, researchers have shifted the emphasis onto the possibilities for agency in challenging teachers to become policy implementers (Nguyen & Bui, 2016). Teachers are, for instance, challenged by the idea of learning being mediated by more than textbooks (Nguyen, 2013). These studies suggest that at a local level, agency is needed to enable teachers to become agents of curriculum. Thus, the recognition of agency at the local context is critical for implementing macro-level policies and policy goals” (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). With these factors in mind, the ‘Evaluation’ program was delivered to build agency as capacity.

In the next section, I examine the VFLF. This leads into a description of its implementation and elements of its curriculum.

### **The VFLF and the Implementation of ‘Evaluation’**

The VFLF took effect on March 16, 2014, and all foreign language programs inconsistent with it were repealed. This meant that all curricula that did not accord with the framework were technically illegal. Most institutions represented by the key teachers in ‘Evaluation’ represented institutions struggling with the implementation. The VFLF, developed using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a benchmark, was intended as a purposeful descriptor of curriculum for teachers, learners and transnational partners. It operates across six levels, two each at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels, corresponding to the six CEFR levels.

The VFLF conveys three themes challenging for foreign language providers, teachers and students. First, the emphasis on autonomy is remarkable, with learners expected to manage more out-of-class learning and to self-assess. This, while understood in theory by most teachers, requires critical shifts in micro-level pedagogical philosophy, learning culture and

teaching practice. To convince both students and teachers of the value of autonomy requires rethinking the dominant assessment ideology: Neo-Confucianist examinations. Secondly, the goal of developing criteria for testing, assessment and evaluation across all levels indicates a need for a paradigm shift from positivism. Thirdly, the document's emphasis on moving from conventional quantitative testing to holistic, qualitative real-world modes of assessment implies the need for change in understanding and implementing assessment methods. This brief analysis supports Nguyen, Hamid and Renshaw (2016) who wrote that "a critical barrier to CEFR-based policy enactment process in Vietnam lies in the conflicting policy positions taken up by each participant involved at a higher level of decision-making process" (p.72).

Considering the policy context of *Project 2020* elucidates why 'Evaluation' was commissioned. Its broad goal was "to turn the Vietnamese people's language competency into a competitive advantage for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country" (Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2011). Such programs as 'Evaluation' are seen as necessary to provide fixes for policy shortcomings. The policy identifies a need to "compensate for shortcomings of the official education system" by diversifying "methodology and levels of training in order to meet the need of multiple learners" (Section 'Tasks'). If methodologies, situational factors, learning habits, and low proficiency are responsible for Vietnamese students' reported passivity in classrooms (Tran, 2003) then to diversify pedagogical and assessment by 'renovation' may be effective. The commissioning of 'Evaluation' exemplifies the imperative of renovation. A broad task of renovating learning via information technology ('Task 7', 2020 document, 2011) is reflected in blended mode of delivery required of 'Evaluation'. Other reasons for the commissioning of 'Evaluation' include the policy's emphasis on international "partnership" and "recruiting foreigners/experts inland" (point 5).

The verb "renovate" recurs from the policy, *Đổi mới*, open door, free-market educational reform (1986) (Harman, Hayden & Pham, 2010). It reappears in 'item d' of the policy's 'key objectives':

*To renovate the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the regular education program with contents and training curriculum suitable for different learning and training levels. This aims to positively contribute to the enrichment and upgrading of language capacity for human resources; to diversify types of training courses in order to meet learners' needs.*

This abstract description of the renovation agenda also pinpoints a core tension: the purpose of training for "human resource" value coexists uneasily with the imperative of meeting "learners' needs". It also indicates the need for such programs as 'Evaluation'. The section 'Solutions' (point 2) articulates how MOET envisages 'Evaluation' working to fulfill the modernization and renovation agenda:

*Promote the renovation of teaching methodology and continuation training. Encourage teachers to take up international trainings either inland or abroad that are internationally accredited.*

### **Applying Policy to Curriculum**

In the light of the VFLF, the F2F sessions were divided into ten key areas. These were: *Introduction to evaluation, Evaluation in the Vietnamese classroom, Evaluating Vietnam's*

*foreign language policy, Evaluation methods, Quantitative evaluations, Qualitative evaluations, Program evaluation, Materials evaluation, Teacher/tutor evaluation and Program review.* The final lecture functioned as revision, summary, consolidation, and reflection on the program and its evaluation.

Analysis of MOET suggestions led to curricular decisions. Firstly, the course would use authentic materials and case studies to harmonise theory and practice. Second, encouraging participants to reflect on their individual pedagogical and institutional environments would emphasise the significance of context in generating evidence-based studies. The purposes of these studies would be to inform judgments on how well programs and their associated materials and pedagogies were working; and to identify areas for future improvement.

The online lessons would be structured temporally around five stages, each requiring ten hours of reading, analysis and participatory discussion. Pre-delivery would be a module on program evaluation. Mid-delivery would be one on pedagogic context; during the delivery and in reference to lecture content would be one on critical materials evaluation, making the bridge from theory to practice. After the delivery would be two staged modules focusing on Teacher evaluation and evaluating practice in the context of *Project 2020*. The pedagogic goal was to build reflection for, in and on action into the program to provide planning, thinking and reflective learning space and to elongate the learning time limited by the necessity of a burst delivery mode.

Adjunct to these curricular considerations were decisions about assessment. Participants would be required to submit a reflective learning portfolio incorporating an evaluation of their own programs, including associated materials and pedagogies, and recommendations for future improvement. For the online module, they would participate in cued online discussions by writing texts comprising conversation starters (the first post in a chain) and conversational responses (replying to others' discourse). Both types of post are intended to maximize reflection on key readings and application to practice. The curriculum itself was rich in authentic materials (evaluation-focused case studies, sample units from commonly used textbooks, evaluation instruments from a range of contexts, the VFLF, extracts from research).

The teaching of the program also reflected the freight of the MOET initiatives. Lectures, for instance, were characterized by opportunities for self-questioning, group questioning and reflection. Across the F2F and online modalities the delivery was largely task-based and included such activities as:

- Implementing surveys to elicit how students currently understand and use evaluation;
- Using a selection of authentic evaluation models to create one applicable to students' contexts;
- Reading a representative selection of research texts on a key aspect of evaluation and creating a text demonstrating how they apply to their teaching environments;
- Applying group-made evaluation models to units of work from textbooks students use;
- Group discussion evaluating their curriculum content and assessment modes in light of the VFLF document;
- Evaluating new materials some teachers had created for their contexts and volunteered for use in group analysis.

In summary, the ‘Evaluation’ program aimed to arm ‘key’ teachers in the North of Vietnam with theory-informed strategies for evaluating their current curriculum and teaching materials in line with the English language descriptors documented in the VFLF and equip them with ways forward in bringing their current curricula into tune with aspirations conveyed in policy. The main way forward is articulated as empowering key educators with new abilities to evaluate programs, materials, curricula, teachers and contexts.

## **Methodology**

This study is an interpretivist, naturalistic one grounded in the world of the teacher-participants and their policy contexts as described above. It uses stretches of text elicited from students on ‘Evaluation’ as the basis for four narratives. These narratives are impelled by the themes of three questions 20 participants answered two months after the program ended.

1. What were the impacts of the program on your work as a teacher and your role within your institution?
2. What has been the value of learning the principles of evaluation to your work, workplace and your language learning materials?
3. In what ways have you applied the VFLF language curriculum to your current educational practice? In what ways do you intend to apply the curriculum in the future?

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The responses were obtained by email, a method capturing key advantages of interviews (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009) while drawing on the participants’ desire to support the researcher. Academic staff at the host university encouraged the 40 participants in the program’s iterations to complete the questionnaires to assist in a study evaluating ‘Evaluation’. The response rate of 20 (50%) was positive and due to the recruitment process being instigated by local staff rather than the experts themselves.

Pertinent parts of the responses were drawn out and their core ideas were coded thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by the author and checked by the second lecturer on the program. This allows similarly coded stretches of text to intersect with core ideas, so that the narratives are constructed methodically while affording the researcher creative leeway to discuss issues arising in the process of telling. Because the data is intensive rather than extensive and the mode of presentation of data postmodern and narrative, triangulation is achieved via crystallisation (Richardson, 2000), affording a deep, comprehensive, understanding of the topic. Understanding the interconnectedness of the stories of the participants and the lecturer allows for meaningful narratives that are deeply rooted in the subjectivities of both (Sandelowski, 1991). The stories are informed by both thematic analysis and lived experience (Rowlands, 2005). According to Polkinghorne (1995), this form of data presentation as analysis “results in descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings” (p. 12).

## **The Participants**

The twenty participants agreed to complete a questionnaire and consented to being cited under identifiers and numbers. In the contract document they are described as “key English teachers that are qualified at C1 under CEFR and have taken part in building syllabus and course books for university-level English training”. Many of them were Deans or in positions of

responsibility and all were aged between 30 and 50. In reporting the data, we refer to all respondents as ‘Teacher’, regardless of their decanal or other status.

## Findings in four narratives

### Program impacts

Eighteen of the twenty participants evaluated the program as useful, valuable, effective or as having impact. Participant 6 quantifies the impact concisely: “it provided us with necessary theories about evaluation as well as the effective methods to make accurate judgement on our curriculum and pedagogic context”. In broad brushstrokes, participant 19 links the program with his work in words reflective of the wider sample:

*My knowledge about evaluation was improved which has helped me improve the teaching job. In my position at work, I can apply the principles of evaluation to give my opinions to construct the evaluation work in my department.*

While these responses are representative of the broad sweep of evaluations, participants’ comments on impacts fit into four subthemes. The comments relate to four aspects of the program. First, they relate to its ability to impart understanding of the importance of evaluation and its principles (a broad theme taken up further in the next narrative). Next, they pertain to its potential for improving teaching by encouraging enhanced awareness about materials, and, thirdly, its provision of opportunities to think about bringing existing curricula more in line with the VFLF and the European framework. Fourth, comments are passed on the program’s potential to present an opportunity for professional development.

All of these four sub-narratives are underpinned by recognition of the need for a rigorous analysis of individual contexts and present practices, and participant 5, a Dean at a specialist university, was one of many who wrote that she was now aware of “the shortages [shortcomings] of our courses and the need to conduct changes to the course”. Describing the program’s potential to develop understandings about evaluation, key teacher 13 emphasised that colleagues found the importance of program evaluation was to improve teaching and learning, “not just to measure”.

Responding to the question cues, many of the teachers showed understanding of the purposes of evaluation, as in participant 17’s comment:

*Particularly, it helps reveal specific strengths and weaknesses of a curriculum and its implementation, offering critical information for strategic changes and policy decisions, acting as inputs needed for improved learning and teaching as well as reliable indicators for monitoring.*

Gaining such understandings of evaluation and its purposes also made an impact on the institution of participant 18:

*Learning how to apply the principles of evaluation to our university and our language learning materials helps boost our confidence in making changes, in creating new things for our students; and from this needed base enhances the quality of English learning and teaching in University [name removed].*

Increased awareness about criteria for materials evaluation was another impact. Participants reported not only examining curricula critically in terms of representations of identities and authenticity of communication, but also, significantly, the need to create workflows beyond the classroom and towards the ideal of autonomy. Participant 7, for instance, wrote: “all of us wanted to study and design more relevant materials to motivate students to participate willingly and enthusiastically in learning English inside and outside class.” This statement conveys an understanding that materials need to be relevant, motivating, authentic and leading to learner autonomy. Similarly, for participant 13, appropriateness became a key evaluative principle: “Through the program, I had explored a lot of the importance of using the appropriate materials and teaching methods to certain students’ levels and motivation”. Referring to a reading materials checklist on the curriculum, key teacher 13 emphasises, “to evaluate materials or textbooks more efficiently and reliably, it is important for educators or researchers to master the strengths and weaknesses of research methods”. The issue of how to evaluate material was a vital deliverable. Participant 18 reflected on learning the steps needed to implement evaluations and the principles “we should embrace evaluation in order to bring out the most appropriate learning materials which are able to cater for the benefits and expectations of students, future employers, society and parents”.

Another impact on the key teachers was their increased confidence to bridge the gap between their current evaluative knowledge and the impetus of the VFLF. Key teacher 19 simply wrote: “I want to adapt the 2020 language curriculum to build our internal curriculum” and claimed the program provided practical tools to this end. Participant 8 wrote: “The evaluation program was very important to my work because it helped me know how to evaluate the curriculum, materials, teachers and students based on the detailed criteria of European framework”. Similarly, participant 9 argues: “it helps me see the strengths and weaknesses of my current teaching materials and training program in my institution and know how to adjust them appropriately to meet the requirement of the 2020 language curriculum.” Participant 16 regarded as impactful her enhanced awareness of the “deficiencies” of current practices in contrast with the edicts of 2020. As we see in the second narrative, the “how to” knowledge, the practical material and their applicability were valuable.

The fourth impact is the potential to build a teacher-researcher’s agency via professional development, with Participant 2 mapping for herself a new specialist curriculum and Participant 1 announcing that he will offer a professional presentation on evaluation within his workplace that month. Participant 13, an ambitious key teacher with a goal of studying for a PhD overseas, valued the program’s experiences for her “future professional development ... It also strengthens my foundation to carry out future research on English language teaching and learning”. For participant 11, an English department Dean, the program offered both immediately practical input on applying the 6-level framework and value for future publications: “These are necessary for my current research paper, which I would like to publish in the near future”.

Not all reports were glowing. Two participants denied the program had been impactful: Participant 11 wrote “*The program has little impact on my teaching career as well as my role within my institution*” and participant 16 concurred: “*To tell the truth, the program didn’t have a strong impact on my work as a teacher and my role within my institution*”. To them it was simply “necessary”.



## Value of evaluation principles

The teaching and learning of the principles of evaluation led to broad impacts, discussed above, but also, more specifically, to forms of capital. These derive from the program's

- communication of the skills of designing and evaluating language programs and curricula;
- building capability in the area of evaluating textbooks and supplementary materials and
- ability to promote discussion and conversation both among participants and in the workplace.

These three points were explicitly recorded by Participant 4. Hence, these subheadings afford further development of this narrative.

First, participants valued the opportunity to apply criteria and models enabling them to become evaluators of programs in their own contexts. Participant 13, a leader in an important university, values the fact that they now “can understand or improve lots of the crucial knowledge in order to apply concepts that we learnt for the practice of evaluation and curriculum design and management”. She is one of only five key teachers who make an explicit attempt to demonstrate as well as describe her learning. Explicitly using a metaphor of capital, participant 3, another head of department, writes:

*Learning how to apply the principles of evaluation to our work, workplace and our language learning materials has brought us priceless value which enhances the quality of education and future educated workforce to meet the requirements of modern society in general and demands of The National Foreign Languages 2020 Project in particular.*

Half the 20 participants used the phrase “how to” (as in “I learned how to”) to define the program's value in the building of their capacity as evaluation practitioners. Typical in this is participant 15: “I as well as many other students in this class, have a precious chance to fill our limited understanding of what to teach, how to teach, and especially what to evaluate and how to evaluate”. Key teacher 9 concurs: “I know how to evaluate the teaching materials as well as the training program and have made some changes to improve the materials used”. Participant 4 sums up the theme:

*Learning how to apply the principles of evaluation to my work, workplace and language learning materials has provided me with the practical ways of evaluating programs, materials in English language teaching.*

Key teacher 16 lists three outcomes of this new procedural knowledge: an improvement in the quality of the teaching-learning process; an enhanced ability to meet the needs of students and society, and the opportunity for students to enjoy more well-organized, up-to-date and interesting materials. For participant 10, the value of learning how to apply the principles of evaluation are, firstly, seeing the satisfaction of students towards the program; second, being able to identify the deficiencies in comparison with the 2020 language curriculum and thirdly, offering ways to implement what should be improved. Bringing enabling procedural knowledge to the teachers gave them space to perceive ways forward. Clearly, participants appreciated the opportunity to apply evaluation strategies to their materials, and to consider creating customized ones to meet the needs of students as defined in the VFLF.

Third, the program brokered togetherness and enabled dialogue between and among key teachers. As participant 12 wrote: “The program gave me a good chance to interact with other teachers from different universities who have similar problems like mine”. Further discussion, “preparing...together”, is also the key to improved implementation, she argues. Key teacher 8 appreciated the opportunity for collaboration in taking a more selective approach to curriculum: “After the program, my colleagues and I work together to evaluate the materials used last semester and decided what to be used and not to be used for the new coming school year.” Participant 15 brought her knowledge to curricular collaboration and renewal at her medical university. The program enabled the key teachers to return to their universities and work with their staff in an atmosphere of dialogue and shared enterprise with participant 15 reporting on her college’s new ability to select a new textbook for the coming semester and better target her institution’s expectations and strategic objectives.

Sharing the knowledge acquired with colleagues and teachers down the line will be crucial to future successful implementation, and this involves skill sharing. Most crucial of all is the cascade-like dissemination of the ideas not only in a bottom-up fashion but also to the top-down managers, as key teacher 6 suggests:

After taking part in the program, I have shared the materials with my colleagues; they all find it very helpful to learn much more about evaluation in such broad aspects and criteria. I have also talked to the leader board of my department about all the experiences I have learnt from our classmates – about how they have successfully implied the project 2020 in their universities.

### **Implementation of VFLF principles**

Since the data was collected two months after the program ended, it is possible to see how teachers were implementing VFLF principles and to hear how their plans for the future were developing. Key teacher 10, a head of school, reports having adjusted listening materials to better cater to VFLF principles and attempted to align the skills descriptions in the VFLF with the institutional tests “so that they measure more effectively for each level”. He claims “we have trained teachers to use the skills description in the 2020 language curriculum to assess students’ proficiency”. Participant 14 is broadly aware of the need to produce students who can communicate interactively, not merely pass tests:

*In order to help my students to meet the requirement of CEFR, my teaching and assessment must focus on developing four main skills, especially developing communicative ability for students.*

The movement from summative skills-based quantitative tests to more authentic, real-world modes of assessment is clearly challenging, or a “big burden” in participant 12’s description of replacing TOEIC-oriented teaching materials, curriculum, lesson plans, testing banks and assessment system at B1 level with more realistic materials at A1 level. “We are facing burden of hard work”, he jokes, emphasizing his desire for his institution to meet society’s changing demands and to strengthen his institution’s competitiveness. An awareness of the shift from a local to a globally competitive context for language learning emerges throughout the data, but the above is particularly astute. This key teacher is not only aware of the impacts of the European framework on assessment structures, but also of the need to deliver key subjects in English in order to remain relevant. The Neoliberal notion of inter-university competitiveness has arrived.

The majority of participants report evidence of recent implementation and plans for the future, with emphasis on creating contexts to maximize student autonomy. Participant 3 claims she applied the 2020 language curriculum to her educational practice by carrying out various evaluations on educational training programs and materials “to identify problems and introduce some necessary changes”.

Giving concrete instances of applying innovative sociocultural principles based on enacting the program’s aims, Participant 6 writes:

*Fortunately, to actuate the movement of studying and using English in everyday life, many clubs and activities such as English clubs, and field trips have been founded and organized in the campus, so that the students get more opportunities to practice and use English inside and outside class.*

This trend is not isolated as it recurs in the data, as in Participant 15’s profession of encouraging students “to use English in daily activities with teachers and their friends, such as mails, small talks, text messages”. She adds, slightly tentatively, that her university’s policy to send exchange students to class with prepared schedules “has somewhat increased students’ communicative skills”.

Also offering detail (and an emphasis on “necessity”) participants 3 and 14 write typical reports of recent action, both involving the incorporation of opportunities for interactivity and communication into their curricula:

*Thanks to powerful and stressful 2020 Project, I have carried out a materials evaluation to identify problems and introduce some necessary changes to our program. For instance, I have reformed the curriculum by adding more interactive activities in class to enhance students’ communicative skills, providing students with more supplementary exercises and self-study materials and redesigning midterm and final tests with four skills in order to help our students reach their outcome.*

*I have adapted the common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in my teaching and assessment for students. In order to help my students to meet the requirement of CEFR, my teaching and assessment must focus on developing four main skills, especially developing communicative ability for students.*

While some key teachers had already started the process of implementing change to meet the targets of the VFLF, with two presenting materials they had already created as shared repertoire for the classes, the majority were yet to implement adaptations. Future implementation held challenges but there were also opportunities. The necessity for upgrading using technology accessible to remote areas was key for Participant 13. Linking to the outside world and making English learning experiential is central to the vision of the institution where Participant 15 has a key role:

*In the future, we intend to organize some English language competitions and events for students to show their English competence and to create a really wholesome environment for them to join. Having some field trips with the finance support from both the university and students’ families has significantly motivated students, so we are going to continue this activity for the future too.*

Grounded very much in the present and with an eye on the future, participant 4 identifies the challenges of empowering the students to become autonomous learners astutely:

*the biggest problem is still the teaching methodology. We are struggling in finding the way to enhance student autonomy and empower students in their learning. Students do not just need the course book and attend regular lectures at school; they need to be able to find additional materials for their learning and learn how to get the knowledge by themselves. In the future, we need to renovate our method of direction and method of grading in such a way that motivate student autonomy.*

Focusing on outcomes for students, participant 18 looks to the new teaching year:

*The biggest thing that we would like to apply directly within a short time ahead is to evaluate our current English material for first year students and also our ESP booklets for third year students. There have been many problems in these materials which if basing on criteria we shared and discussed in class need to be changed, updated or even got rid of in order to compose new books, helping our students better in their English acquisition and various goals.*

Again, there is the sense of a “big burden” required to accommodate the curriculum of the VFLF, the aforementioned “criteria we shared and discussed in class”. While it is understood that such innovation might improve students’ language acquisition, specialized programs such as ESP courses are likely to require considerable remodeling following evaluation. The case of participant 15’s university, which improved curricula following the implementation of evaluation principles, strongly points to positive outcomes for students as well as embedded professional development for teachers:

*By delivering intensive language courses for students, our university has achieved some significant outcomes. Students are now more conscious of the relationship between having good English language skills and having more chance to get a good job after graduation. Not only students can have opportunities to improve their English, but the teachers are also provided with some programs to enrich their knowledge and their teaching skills as well.*

Sharing the program’s approaches with colleagues enables teachers to build agency for themselves and encourage autonomy among learners, key teacher 13 suggests:

*It is likely that English teachers will be more proactive and ready to change their own teaching methods as well as to encourage their students’ engagement in active learning and actively update their knowledge in teaching pedagogies/ techniques in both traditional and virtual learning environment.*

Viewing the evaluation program as professional development, Participant 1 writes:

*The top-down constraints, combined with bottom-up incentives have contributed to the improvement of competence and confidence levels of teachers. I tend to build my own capability of dealing with multiple tasks.*

While other teachers may be battered by the demands of multiplicity, she resolutely builds her own capacity. Some teachers are able to claim a space for agency. For others, however, the challenges of implementation are huge, with participant 5, a leader in one of the biggest state universities, emphasizing that with huge numbers – a thousand students – and a low staff to student ratio, the most that can be done in the immediate future is to make tweaks:

*Because many of GE and ESP courses at [university name] do not meet the requirements of the 2020 language curriculum, my colleagues and I have analyzed the most problematic course, General English (GE). At [university name], speaking and writing skills are not equally focused in the teaching, learning, and testing of GE. We have made some modifications to make sure [university name] students have chance to study all the language skills.*

### **Constraints on implementation**

This section responds to my second research question. While most commentaries esteeming the usefulness of the principles of evaluation fit into the themes of the three narratives above, there are within the data individual voices of epiphany indicating underlying problems and constraints. “Limited budget,” “time limitation” and “undertrained and insufficient staff” are dominant and not unexpected refrains. However, examining the data, the main constraint is an ignorance, willful or not, of the policy’s demands.

Sometimes the issue is lack of agency as in participant 17’s lament, “We university of low ranking mostly can’t decide the evaluation criteria and procedures ourselves”. Sometimes it is having been too busy to consider the VFLF. Participant 10, a Head of Department, wrote: “I was kind of awoken. I hadn’t really examined the 2020 language curriculum carefully in evaluating our current English programs”. Lack of awareness about evaluation, a key motivator for the program itself, is also evidenced. For some participants, an awareness of what evaluation is in practice appeared:

*Until then I understood that evaluation is the process of collecting information about an education program; evaluation can help to reflect the students’ reason for failing and success; therefore, it is the way of improving the learning (Participant 12).*

Trying to understand why Vietnam’s educational quality is low “as claimed by Vietnamese people, scholars and managers”, Participant 12 realises:

*teachers who are in charge of giving formative assessment daily have not got comprehension about the process and consequently, results are ineffective and time-consuming which in turns affects quality of teaching and learning negatively.*

The data suggests that different universities are at different stages in their ability to implement evaluations, and their ability to apply VFLF principles to their curricula. Key teacher 16’s statement that “we are doing research to persuade our university to approve the 6-level framework” suggests that the edict from 2020 policy is not enough to encourage management to move forward; internal persuasion from the teachers themselves is required. Participant 10 offers a frank assessment:

*To be honest, it may take many years to apply the 20/20 language curriculum strictly and widely in our university for some reasons:*

- *many students start from zero, so it’s a big challenge to upgrade them from zero to B1 with only 9 credits of English learning in class.*
- *half of students come from the countryside, which means limited investment on learning English.*
- *limited budget for creating English learning environment and English learning resources.*

*We are moving step by step.*

Participant 17 emphasises how valuable the program was at a personal level (“it marked a new page in my teaching life”), but she says, “pitifully it seems just a wind of change to my own work rather than a big difference within my institution”. She adds:

*as just the Head of English Division, I have few chances to have my voice raised with the School Board of Management. Besides, we are university of economics & business administration, thus English is not the first priority. However, in the near future, my division will try our best to organize a few institutional seminars and forums on this matter (evaluation) and hope that there will be certain enhancement.*

Participant 16, working in a smaller, newer, more regional institution, articulates the power differential between the management board and lowly-regarded teaching staff and hence disjuncture between those with the knowledge to implement change those with the desire and power to do so.

*We normal lecturers are not delegated the power to make any big changes or have our proposals approved by the Management Board. If possible, could you organizers come to our institution and deliver the program there with the witness and recognition of the Board so that they may consider accepting measures suggested by normal lecturers of English like us?*

The plea for the foreign experts to attend the university so the board may ‘witness’ the need to implement the VFLF is worrying, but the implication that such apparent expertise can have the capacity to change appears in many comments from the participants. Participant 12 writes: “expert lectures play the most important roles in motivating senior staff like us to remain our attendance and enthusiasm in long training classes”, while Participant 13 concludes: “Therefore, in the future, more workshops and training programs like this should be organized more often and delivered to more teachers in different parts of the country”. This is echoed throughout the data: “I hope that in the future I will have another chance to attend some useful programs like this” (Participant 8). For many, along with dialogue with other teachers, ongoing professional development is part of the solution.

### **Conclusion: Evaluating ‘Evaluation’**

This paper outlines the genesis, policy context, purpose, content, impact and value of “*The training course on evaluation and improvement of English teaching-learning programs and materials for key language teachers under the National foreign languages 2020 project, delivered at Hanoi University in 2015 and 2017*”. The program successfully engaged the majority of participants in understanding and applying and reflecting on the principles and forms of evaluation, particularly program, curriculum, materials and teacher evaluation. In particular, it examined the implications of the six-level framework in terms of increasing opportunities for communication, learning beyond the classroom, autonomous learning and forms of assessment other than quantitative tests.

The program communicated strategies for designing and evaluating language programs and curricula and provided workshops on evaluating authentic textbooks and supplementary materials. The pedagogies impacted on enhanced discussion and conversation both among participants and in the workplace and offered the opportunity for future communication. More specifically, the principles of evaluation were themselves applied effectively by a wide range

of key teachers across the north of Vietnam and many others have the frameworks and models required to continue further implementation in 2016 and the years ahead.

There is a sense that change and implementation cannot happen overnight, and that the year 2020 will certainly come too soon. The workload and time pressures are huge, and the support, such as that offered by this program, cannot immediately impact those who most need to hear the message: members of some management boards. However, the frustration expressed in the fourth narrative is not universal and appears most frequently in either state universities with large rolls or resource-poor rural and semi-urban institutions. Most participants are focused, even optimistic. There are teachers who describe having agency. Participant 8 says: “we have the authority to choose and decide what to teach in our institution.” There are teachers able to apply well-understood principles of evaluation for the good of their students and their futures. Participant 18 offers a case study of implementation:

*at the beginning of the new school year 2016, with the consent and approval of my bosses who I would think are very keen on this issue, we are targeting an English teaching and learning which puts our students' needs and expectations in the center, and heading to a curriculum which paves a way for students to the most favorable environment of practicing all 4 English skills through Vietnamese as well as international based context English materials.*

A clear suggestion for future research will be to examine how successful these and other teachers were in using the six-level framework to evaluate and revise programs and curricula. There is, too, a need for studies of promoting autonomy in Vietnamese contexts, and ways of developing teacher agency through professional development, assigning responsibility and offering opportunities to be creative.

## About the Author

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