

# **Characteristics of non-native English-speaking teachers’ English development: Voice from Vietnam**

Khoi Ngoc Mai

*University of Languages and International Studies, VNU, Vietnam*

## **Abstract**

This research was conducted in Vietnam, responding to a practical situation as most teachers of English failed to attain the B2 standard of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It presents findings regarding the characteristics of these teachers’ process of English proficiency development. From the analysis, four themes emerged: the spontaneity of teachers’ learning, three motivational factors driving English proficiency development, the dominance of traditional over internet-mediated learning activities and the popularity of individual rather than collaborative learning activities. The paper conceptualizes teachers’ development in a model with four continua which can cater for the differences between individual teachers and also allow shifts on these axes as the English proficiency development activities and motivations change over time. The paper ends by emphasizing the need to listen to teachers’ voice to understand their English development before long-term and meaningful support programs can be drafted.

**Keywords:** teacher language proficiency, professional development, non-native teachers, teacher education, Vietnam

## **Introduction**

In Vietnamese, the verb “to teach” is “*đạy học*” which comprises of two verbs “*đạy*” and “*học*,” “to teach” and “to learn” respectively. In this sense, these two processes are inseparable. In the implementation of the current educational reform in Vietnam, studies regarding teachers’ English development as life-long learners are still scarce. This study argues that it is crucial for non-native English speaking (NNES) teacher trainers and policy makers to recognize that teachers are also continuous learners and due attention needs to be paid to understand and support their life-long English development.

As acknowledged by the Deputy Minister of Education Nguyen Vinh Hien, the biggest problem in English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam is the lack of teachers who are proficient in English (Vietnamnews, 2012). The result of a nationwide survey of primary and secondary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers’ English proficiency indicates that approximately 80,000 EFL teachers need further English training because 97, 93, and 98 per cent of in-service EFL teachers at primary, lower secondary,

and upper secondary schools respectively are not fluent enough in English to function effectively as teachers (Nguyen & Dudzik, 2013). One goal of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (hereafter Project 2020) which was set up in 2008 with a budget of around 9.5 trillion VND (approximately 4.5 billion USD) is to promote and improve ELT by providing training to help teachers attain the appropriate level of English proficiency specified by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The appropriate levels are: C1 for upper secondary teachers and B2 for lower secondary teachers and primary teachers (MOET et al., 2012).

This study responds to the practical situation in Vietnam as thousands of EFL teachers are struggling to reach the B2 standard. It fills a gap in the literature by investigating teachers' perception of their English abilities, responses to the English proficiency standards imposed by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (hereafter MOET), and descriptions of their English proficiency development. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions: (1) How do the participants describe their English proficiency development? and (2) What are the characteristics of their English development? It is found that the majority of teachers are working in difficult, under-resourced circumstances with inadequate payment and limited support. Therefore, much still has to rely on individual teachers' initiatives, determination and self-efforts to pursue professional development, including improving their English proficiency.

### **NNES teacher language proficiency**

Teacher professional competence (TPC) is a multifaceted construct that has been defined in various ways (e.g., Nicholas, 1993; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). In all definitions of TPC, there is one common component: teacher language proficiency which refers to the proficiency in using the target language. There is a consensus in the literature regarding the importance of teacher language proficiency as an important component of TPC (e.g., Berry, 1990; Briguglio & Kirkpatrick, 1996; Lavender, 2002). For the NNES teachers, this component is critical due to its influence on teachers' confidence and teaching practice. Evidence supporting this can be found in the early literature concerning the dichotomy between native and NNES teachers and the studies concerning teachers' confidence (e.g., Murdoch, 1994; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Tang, 1997). In short, it is generally agreed that NNES teachers' proficiency may influence their teaching practice including the choice and use of teaching methods as well as the quality of input teachers provide for their students (Farrell & Richards, 2007). Since rich input is fundamental to language development, and since teachers' language output might be the only input available for students in EFL contexts, the NNES teachers need to attain a high level of language proficiency. It has been even stated that NNES teachers' most important professional responsibility is to

make improvements in their English proficiency (Medgyes, 2001). While native-like pronunciation or intonation might not be necessary, these teachers need a sufficient mastery of English to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals (Davies, 1991).

One important question is what level of language proficiency NNES teachers should have. Many countries have established standards suitable to their own contexts of English teaching and learning. Yet, due to limited research on the language proficiency for the specific purpose of teaching, it is often the case that global language proficiency tests are used to measure teacher language proficiency. The levels required for pre- and in-service teachers to attain are also regularly set according to such global scales. In Vietnam, the English teacher competency framework created by MOET as part of the NFL Project 2020 prescribes that:

Teachers demonstrate proficiency in the target language at an appropriate level on the Common European Framework of Reference—Upper secondary teachers, C1; Lower Secondary teachers, B2; Primary teachers, B2 (MOET et al., 2012, p. 23).

Although administrators in many contexts propose specific standards of language proficiency, the literature indicates that NNES teachers very often fail to meet such requirements. Research conducted in many EFL contexts including mainland China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Japan all provide evidence concerning NNES teachers' lack of proficiency (e.g., Bryson, 2004; Butler, 2004; Coniam & Falvey, 2013; Nunan, 2003; Tang, 2007; Wall, 2008). Therefore, as the lack of qualified EFL teachers is not unique to the Vietnamese context, educators and policy makers in other countries facing the same challenge to the improvement of EFL teachers' English proficiency can benefit from this exploratory study concerning the nature of teachers' English development.

### **Problems with NNES teachers' professional development**

It is agreed that language teachers should continue to pursue professional development throughout their lives. Peyton (1997) argues that foreign language teachers should maintain proficiency in the target language and consider such maintenance an on-going process regardless of their current skills and knowledge. It is also agreed that both pre- and in-service teacher education programs should help teachers improve their English proficiency as well as their professionalism (e.g., Barnes, 2002; Berry, 1990; Chacón, 2005; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Lavender, 2002; Liu, 1999; Murdoch, 1994; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). Despite this consensus, the literature suggests that in-service EFL education programs do not offer many opportunities for language teachers to improve their language skills but instead focus on pedagogical knowledge. The language proficiency development of these teachers is often

taken for granted. Indeed, TESOL programs often do not formally teach speaking and listening since they tend to assume that the teachers already have a high proficiency level (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004, p. 166).

Medgyes (1999) comments that language training is ignored in many TESOL programs; consequently, their pre-service teachers do not attempt to make linguistic improvement. He argues that in order to prepare NNES teachers to be “effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals,” pre-service education needed to include language training program (Medgyes, 1999, p. 179). Similarly, Liu (1999) and Shin (2008) both argued that many TESOL programs overlooked NNES pre-service teachers’ need to have the English proficiency required for success in their future teaching as most programs focused on enhancing students’ explicit knowledge of how the language operates rather than their ability to use the language. They called for training programs to incorporate a language improvement component and support teachers to develop their English both during the training courses and outside the classroom.

Fraga-Canadas (2010) surveyed non-native teachers’ language use outside and inside the school setting and found that most teachers experienced difficulties maintaining their language proficiency once they were in the profession, especially when confined to teaching lower-level classes for a long period of time. They also believed that their university language coursework had failed to provide them either with an adequate proficiency level or meaningful professional development.

In summary, the literature shows that despite the acknowledged importance of language proficiency development for NNES teachers, most teacher training and development programs have not yet given due attention and efforts to help teachers maintain or improve their language skills. In Vietnam, plans are being carried out as part of the NFL Project 2020 to “standardize” those teachers’ English proficiency. However, there is limited research investigating the actual English development process of these teachers while they should be considered lifelong learners with all the difficulties, anxiety and needs typical of language learners. It is therefore crucial to understand the characteristics of their English development before meaningful and effective support programs can be drafted.

## **Methodology**

To answer the research questions (How do the participants describe their English proficiency development? and what are the characteristics of their English development?), this paper reports the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 42 in-service EFL teachers. These teachers were recruited for the interviews while they were attending MOET’s compulsory professional development courses to improve English proficiency and teaching methodology. They were chosen on a voluntary basis from a pool of 298 participants who previously completed a self-assessed English proficiency

survey which was published in 2014 (Mai, 2014). The large number of participants allows the voices of various teachers who are working at both primary and secondary levels in four Northern provinces of the countries to be heard. In addition, the chosen teachers also have different lengths of teaching experience ranging from two to more than twenty years.

Table 1.  
*Interview participants*

Location	Level of teaching		Teaching experience			Total
	Primary	Secondary	≤5 years	5-10 years	> 10 years	
Hanoi	4	4	2	2	4	8
Nam Dinh	7	5	2	3	7	12
Thanh Hoa	5	5	3	4	3	10
Hai Phong	6	6	4	3	5	12
Total	22	20	11	12	19	42

The interviews were conducted during the lunch break or after the daily training was concluded. See Appendix 1 for questions. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that misunderstandings were minimized and the participants did not worry about their English proficiency being assessed. Each interview was between 30 and 45 minutes duration and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The interviews were transcribed and translated from Vietnamese to English by the researcher and then checked by the interviewees for accuracy or for any further clarification.

The data analysis embraces three characteristics of qualitative analysis discussed by Dörnyei (2007) as a broad framework: being iterative, emergent and interpretive. The interview data analysis moved back and forth without a clear separation between data collection and analysis, allowing data analysis to be emergent. After each interview was conducted, I immediately transcribed and conducted preliminary analysis, especially before moving to another data collection site. The interview questions therefore were repeatedly refined. The list of the final interview questions is attached with this paper. The analysis was interpretive as the outcome was the product of my own informed interpretation of the data. Meanwhile, in order to limit these and guarantee that the findings and interpretations are trustworthy, I have taken due care to argue critically and support the interpretations with facts and relevant evidence.

## Results

Participants started by introducing themselves and their working context. Next, they were asked to describe their current plan and purposes for English development, the time they allocated weekly to English practice, their favourite and frequently used learning activities, personal and professional difficulties that hindered English development. From the analysis, four themes emerged as the dominant characteristics of the participants' English proficiency practice.

### *Teachers' spontaneous language learning*

The most significant feature is the spontaneous nature of the participants' English development. Participants seem to lack specific and either short- or long- term plans to continuously hone their English skills. Despite the well-articulated awareness of the importance of lifelong learning, they were quite hesitant to discuss their actual plans for English improvement. Most participants agreed that passing the B2 standard test was their current and important short-term plan while claiming a vague goal of having "better English proficiency" as their long-term plan. Yet, when probed with questions regarding how that goal would be realized, almost all the participants admitted that they did not have specific objectives for English improvement apart from participating in the compulsory teacher development courses or pursuing postgraduate programs. Participants often attributed this lack of plan to the time-consuming tasks and responsibilities related to teaching and other commitments. To illustrate this, one newly graduated teacher shared some thoughts about her lack of clear plans to spend time purposefully on her English.

I am kind of lazy [giggle] so ... No, I don't have a plan or weekly schedule. As a newly employed teacher, I have many responsibilities to fulfil, many tasks to do during working hours. It is quite demanding. Then I have to tutor at home for some extra income. If I have some free time by the end of the week, I would rather spend it with my boyfriend.

Other participants, while not directly stating that they had no specific plan, evaded the matter and supplied vague and formulaic phrases about the importance of having detailed schedules for language improvement. Most participants (39/42) however explained that while they did not spend time purposefully and solely on developing English proficiency, their learning often happened by chance as narrated in the following excerpt.

I don't have a specific plan, but I know I need to improve. It is not because of the B2 standard test a few months ago. I always know that I need to keep improving. It is for my students, my colleagues, my school,

and me. Yet I really don't have a plan. I did try to make schedules for language learning, but as a teacher, a wife, and a mother, there are so many things, little unnamed but very time-consuming tasks, to do. I just can't keep up with the deadlines. What's the point of making plans only to abandon them? So now I don't rely on plans anymore. If I have free time, I will sit down and learn some new words, read an article, or do some exercises.

This spontaneous nature of teacher learning is further highlighted by the teachers' responses regarding the weekly average time devoted to English proficiency practice. Many participants refused to quote an approximate amount, explaining that it varied greatly from one week to another. A typical answer was that it depended on their teaching schedule and available time. Others explained that learning was a natural process as a part of their teaching profession. They believed that their English practice was entailed in their everyday life rather than a separate activity. As English learning could happen during various activities including teaching, it would be impossible and inaccurate to quote an average amount spent on it.

It is rather spontaneous and, I guess, natural as well. I pick up new things here and there all the time without having to sit down and consciously working to improve my English. Just yesterday, I was watching a movie with my family and acquired a lovely word "serendipity". It is the name of the movie and means a nice thing that happens only by chance. I often learn new words that way.

The participants who disclosed their amount of time spent on English development provided different numbers, ranging from half an hour up to eight hours a week. Even for these participants, there were also no particular plans or regular routine language learning activities. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the participants' English development is characterized by irregularity and extemporaneousness driven by personal and sudden interest as expressed in the following quotation:

I don't have any particular plan. If there is an interesting broadcast, I will watch it. If I happen to have a magazine or a new novel written in English, I might read it. Uhm, I do not make plans for language learning. It is sort of improvisation on the situation.

### ***Motivational factors driving teachers' English proficiency development***

The second characteristic pertains to three main motivational purposes behind teachers' efforts to improve. These three goals are to satisfy their personal interests, to meet MOET's requirements and maintain face, and to improve their teaching.

Firstly, the participants' language learning is prompted by their personal interest and self-improvement needs. One teacher explained that she learned many words related to astrology because this is her favourite topic to read. Similarly, another teacher explained how her hobby, embroidery, contributed to expanding her English vocabulary as she regularly surfed the Internet to teach herself new embroidery skills. Other teachers explained how their daily life shaped their learning as in the following excerpts.

My husband often asks me to help him with all sorts of paperwork. He is an engineer, and is not very good at English. As I help him with his documents, I become familiar with the terminology.

The second reason motivating participants' English development is that of passing the requirements specified by MOET and thereby maintaining face. They needed to study in order to pass the B2 standard tests, score higher on proficiency tests such as TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL, or postgraduate program entrance examinations.

If I fail to achieve B2, I may face dismissal. MOET said that no teacher would be dismissed, but who knows. Their policies keep changing every year. I have been teaching English for thirteen years. If that worst-case scenario happens, I will feel very ashamed. I have to study hard.

The third and also the most frequently mentioned reason driving teachers' English development is that of improving themselves in order to better help their students to learn English. All participants agreed that as their English improved, their students would be the ones to benefit the most. One participant succinctly expressed this popular belief as follows:

If I am a better English user, there is no doubt that my students' English will improve as well. I am the living model of the language in the class. Not all students are lucky enough to have frequent access to the Internet or cable television. So they learn from me. If I am getting better, they will learn more. It is just that simple.

Participants strongly believed that having a higher proficiency level would enable them to improve their teaching, make it more interesting and fruitful by employing various teaching methods, techniques and more diverse support materials. The following excerpts present some typical voices.

I know when my students feel bored, and they also know when I feel tired, bored or angry. There is no way to hide it. Students secretly, sometimes even openly, judge and compare one teacher with another. If you are not as good as the teachers who are teaching in other classes, students will feel unmotivated to learn. If you are better, they will

respect you, and more willing to pay attention.

If you are confident to use English frequently in class, students will be motivated to learn. You can be more flexible, and don't have to rely too much on the lesson plan or the textbook.

When asked to clarify what they meant by “getting better,” participants mostly referred to both their and their students’ performances in different tests and exams as a standard. In other words, success is interpreted as passing tests with higher results.

My students will score higher on the final exams at the end of the year. Some might get through the district or even provincial round of student English competition. The class ranking will be higher. These are successes. There is nothing more tangible and practical than that.

Indeed, the various exams and tests in Vietnam not only target the students but also are used to assess teachers. The participants struggled to improve English proficiency not just to develop communicative competence, but rather more importantly to score higher in MOET standard tests and to help their students perform better in similar examination. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that teachers’ English development is mainly exam-driven in addition to the participants’ personal interest in the language.

### ***The dominance of traditional over internet-mediated learning activities***

The learning activities participants employed to practise English were broadly categorized into two types, namely traditional and internet-mediated activities.

Table 2 shows an overwhelming dominance of traditional activities over internet-mediated activities (The numbers in brackets indicate the number of participants who mentioned each activity during the interviews). One explanation for this preference is the participants’ lack of access to the Internet, which is directly related to both economic and administrative reasons. Vietnam is a less developed country, and most rural teachers, especially those located in economically disadvantaged areas, have difficulties in accessing online resources and support.

Of the traditional language learning activities, the most popular are the study of grammatical and phonetic materials. Forty participants stated that their main learning activity was to study these materials to prepare for their teaching, various exams and language tests. English education is mainly driven by test wash-back as its ultimate aim seems not to improve students’ communicative competencies but to help them score higher in achievement and proficiency tests. This purpose makes the teachers’ English development also exam-driven rather than communicative.

Table 2.

*Teachers' language learning activities*

<b>Traditional learning activities</b>	
Study English textbooks (Grammar textbook and EFL learners' resources)	40
Watch analog or cable television broadcast in English	40
Listen to radio programs broadcast in English	38
Read written materials in English including newspapers, magazines, and novels	31
Do practice sample tests	31
Converse in English with colleagues, students, friends, and family members	24
Pursue further education in English	14
Organize a study group to prepare for particular tests (IELTS/ TOEFL/ B2 Standard tests)	5
<b>Internet-mediated learning activities</b>	
Watch online news, movies, or other video materials in English	27
Read online English written materials (electronic versions of newspapers, novels, etc.)	20
Listen to online podcasts in English	7
Participate in online language learning courses	3
Exchanging emails in English with friends or colleagues	2

The second most popular learning activities are reading traditional paper-based English –written materials, and watching/listening to programs broadcast in English on television or radio. However, when asked to clarify these traditional and old-fashioned ways of learning English (e.g., regarding the frequency of listening to or watching news programs), participants provided very vague answers, such as the following quote.

It depends if I have free time or in the mood to do so. Some weeks I watch the news almost every night. Some weeks I hardly watch television.

When asked to name some of their favourite television programs, radio channels, or asked to specify the English language newspapers to which they were currently subscribed to or the novels they were reading, nearly all participants hesitated and appeared uncomfortable. The most frequently listed radio programs are those of the BBC and VOA channels. The most popular websites for reading and watching news are [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) and [www.bbc.com.uk](http://www.bbc.com.uk). However, given their current A2 or B1 level of English proficiency (as revealed in the results of the national survey), one would question how they could comprehend these materials which seem to require a proficiency level of English significantly higher than theirs.

Regarding speaking skills, 24 participants reported that they sometimes conversed in English with colleagues, friends, and more often with their children and students. Following is a typical voice acknowledging the benefits of using English in class as a way of practicing listening and speaking skills.

Last semester I changed the 15' written test into a 5' speaking test. Every week I tested three to four students. I gave them a list of topics at the beginning of the semester so they had time to prepare for it. It involved much more work and responsibility, but the students had an opportunity to use the language and I could practise mine.

Interestingly, no participant explicitly mentioned any language learning activities related to writing skills. One teacher shared that:

I can't remember the last time I sat down and practised my writing. After graduation [from pre-service training], I just don't do it anymore. Now, in this course, I have to re-learn to do it properly, in an academic way. I haven't practised writing for a long time

Perhaps participants neglected writing practice because they did not feel the need to do it. The following participant explained that all the school reports were written in Vietnamese because the headmaster and most school officials were often not fluent in English.

We hardly write anything in English. We, English teachers, are the minority in this school. The headmaster doesn't speak English. Of all the reports and records we have to prepare, only the lesson plans should be written in English. This is because the officials from DOET [Department of Education and Training] might examine our lesson plans. Yet, some of us only prepare these [English written lesson plan] a few days before the officials' visit.

The unavailability of access to the Internet and the lack of need to use English result in the dominance of traditional learning activities, which in turn might affect the way participants teach English. Most participants, especially those working in rural areas, explained that they were the main source of the target language beside the textbooks. They reported that old technology such as cassette players, despite being obsolete in more developed countries, still prevailed over CD-players and computers in their schools. One teacher who was working in a mountainous school complained that even electricity was a rare commodity there.

Fourteen years into the twenty-first century, we are teaching English, a language of development and a key to modern and successful life, but some of us still have not touched a computer keyboard. Some even don't

know how to turn on and off a CD player. These are the luxuries we don't have.

The participants who were fortunate enough to have access to some multimedia facilities criticized the fact that the administration and management of these technologies left much to be desired. The following teacher shared her discontent regarding how the school's controversial policy discouraged her from using the internet-connected computers.

My school has Internet connected computers. If we [teachers] want to get online, we have to ask for permission from the school management board. Every time we use the Internet, we have to write in the record notebook our name, the date, duration, and our purpose for using the Internet. We decided not to use the Internet to avoid all these hassles. Who knows? It might bring us trouble.

Although most participants did not report such authoritarian policies being imposed in their schools, they acknowledged that there were rules and restrictions. It is unsurprising to learn that language learning facilities and other multimedia resources are used in many schools mainly for ornamental purposes.

### ***The popularity of individual over collaborative learning activities***

Another theme that emerged from the analysis is the strong dominance of individual over collaborative learning activities or activities that involve using English with other people.

As previously presented, the most popular learning activities are traditional learning activities which are all self-focused and conducted individually. In the following excerpt, two participants described their highly individual methods of practising speaking.

Every day while commuting to work, I talk to myself quietly. I always wear a hygiene mask while riding my motorbike, so no one knows what I am doing. The topic is based on the current news or whatever I am interested in that day. I think it is a good habit and a good learning technique. I often recite some monologues or read a piece of news while standing in front of a big mirror. This way I can see my mouth and also monitor my gestures for better performance. Sometimes I hold a piece of paper in front of my mouth to watch and control my breath.

Collaborative learning activities comprise practicing English with students in class, or with colleagues, and pursuing further education related to language teaching. While MOET officially requires schools to organize

professional development activities such as teaching competitions, classroom observations and teacher-group discussions, most participants pointed out that these activities were time-consuming and not tailored to develop their English proficiency.

This final characteristic is the most significant feature connecting all the other previously presented characteristics. Firstly, this preference for individual learning activities is intertwined with the participants' spontaneous language learning. Perhaps due to such an unplanned nature, an individual learning strategy is more practical. Secondly, the dominance of individual learning activities suggests that despite the stated communicative purpose of language learning, English is still taught and learnt as a content subject. The participants seem to equate practice with increasing their familiarity with the language system and sharpening their test-taking skills. They perhaps did not practise to use the language communicatively, but rather to improve their knowledge about the language. Thirdly, the preference for undertaking individual language learning also results in the prevalent choice of traditional learning activities over internet-mediated learning activities as evidenced in the way participants used the Internet. Rather than using the Internet to access on-line English-using environments, they simply regarded these as tools to enter a virtual library, a source of English-language texts on multimedia.

## Discussion

This paper reports four characteristics of participants' English development: the spontaneity of teachers' learning; three motivational factors driving English development; the dominance of traditional over internet-mediated learning activities; and the popularity of individual rather than collaborative learning activities. This finding deserves further investigation. Meanwhile, it is essential that MOET, teacher training institutions, and individual schools work together to promote cooperative learning strategies and establish language learning communities both online and off-line which are friendlier and more available to more teachers.

The paper proposes that NNES teachers' English development can be conceptualized as a model with four continua. These continua can cater for the differences between participants and also allow shifting movements on these axes as participants' English development activities and motivations change over time.

Spontaneous -----	Well-planned
Self-initiated -----	Externally-imposed
Traditional -----	Internet-mediated
Individual -----	Collaborative

Figure 1. *Characteristics of teachers' English development*

The first continuum describes two types of English development,

namely spontaneous and well-planned English development. As discussed previously, most participants did not have specific plans to continuously improve their English proficiency, and very few devoted a fixed amount of time in their weekly schedule for language development. This spontaneous nature of English development is due to participants' lack of self-study skills, heavy workload, and perceptions of English learning as a natural process as part of everyday life activities including teaching. The nature of participants' English development shifts along this continuum according to the different stages in their English learning history (e.g., before and after their pre-service training). The second continuum describes participants' motivations for learning. As motivation is complicated and changeable, this shift happens very frequently and it is hard to pinpoint it in a model. English development is self-initiated when participants' English learning is driven by their intrinsic motivations such as personal interests and the need to improve teaching. Participants' English development can also be imposed by external forces including MOET's English proficiency requirements and professional development programs. Throughout a teacher's English learning history and professional career, his/her English development can shift between two ends of the continuum while different motivations may move in the same or different directions. The third and fourth continua refer to participants' learning activities.

By listening to EFL teachers' description of their English proficiency development, the study found that for the majority of participants, the lack of resources, environments for English use, and language learning communities results in the dominance of traditional and individual learning activities over online and collaborative ones. Their English learning is characterized as spontaneous with traditional and individual language learning activities. It is located on the left end of each continuum in Figure 1. Their motivations for English development, however, take the middle position and shift along the second continuum as they learn English to satisfy personal interests, improve teaching, and meet MOET's requirements.

It is vital to establish and promote language learning communities which provide environments for language use since English as a foreign language is not widely used in Vietnam, especially in the rural provinces. MOET, teacher training institutions, and individual schools can collaborate to encourage and further facilitate teachers' language development. They should not solely rely on standardized assessments and short-lived intensive training programs. Instead, it is more beneficial to aim for creating a learning culture in which teachers can freely learn from each other, reflect on their own practice to improve their proficiency and their teaching without risks of being assessed or shamed. Although the results of this study show teachers' preference for independent professional learning rather than professional development activities that involves engaging with other teachers, many teachers probably will seek out a balance between the two once a "no shame" and "no blame" learning environment has been created and promoted.

Still, teachers' initiatives play a crucial role because if they themselves do not think that they need a better English proficiency, no policy can persuade them to improve. Language development does not happen in isolation or without social interaction; therefore, joining a language learning community can both provide motivations for learning and environment for language use. There are numerous language societies founded by universities, colleges, private language institutes, non-governmental organizations, foreign volunteers, and individuals throughout the countries. They provide an environment for learners to use English, but often operate on a small scale in different local areas, for example in university campuses, with no communication and collaboration among societies. However, these language societies mainly aim at attracting the general learners but not specifically cater to the EFL in-service teachers' needs to improve English proficiency and share teaching knowledge and practices. While it is hoped that an official forum just for the language teachers perhaps in each district or province will be established in the near future, it is beneficial for teachers to actively look for or even start their own language learning communities.

Countless number of online blogs, podcasts, and forums are free and invaluable resources for English practice. In addition, blogging can be used both as a way of maintaining target language proficiency and to develop reflective teaching. For teachers to acquire the required language competency and technical skills to blog and maintain on-going online interaction with their colleagues, reflective blogging needs to be introduced and promoted as a professional development activity during teacher pre-service education.

Reflecting on teaching practices, conducting action research, and presenting findings in conferences or teacher meetings provide opportunities to use English meaningfully for communication and for improving teaching. Teacher training institutions in Hanoi such as Vietnam National University, and Hanoi University and non-governmental organizations like the US Embassy and British Council frequently organize teacher training workshops, conferences, and seminars. Social media like Facebook and LinkedIn also are active in connecting teachers with ELT experts, promoting events related to English learning and teaching in Vietnam. These events provide not only an environment for those who want to use English more, but also a chance to broaden the professional network and connects with other teachers and experts in the field.

## **Conclusion**

NFL Project 2020, a long-term project, shows the Vietnamese government's ambition and willingness to invest more in education, revising the curriculum and examination system. While waiting for these changes to take effect, each teacher and institution can contribute to improving the current situation. As they are at the centre of the educational reform, they play a very important role. Unless teachers recognize the need to improve their proficiency and want

to change, no improvement can be made. Each teacher needs to be more active and willing to make time in their busy schedules for English development activities. Meanwhile, the government, MOET and individual schools need to create and promote more favourable work conditions. It is essential for educators, policy makers, and researchers to get into individual teachers' shoes, to understand how different teaching contexts and various difficulties are hindering professional development. Without this knowledge, it is hard to formulate an appropriate working plan to support teachers' practical needs.

## References

- Barnes, A. (2002). Maintaining language skills in pre-service training for foreign language teachers. In H. Trappes-Lomaz & G. Ferguson (Eds.), *Language in language teacher education* (pp.199-217). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Berry, R. (1990). The role of language improvement in in-service teacher training: Killing two birds with one stone. *System*, 18(1), 97-105.
- Briguglio, C., & Kirkpatrick, A. (1996). *Language teacher proficiency assessment: Models and options*. Perth: Curtin University of Technology.
- Bryson, M. (2004). *A report on English language instructions centers in the South of Thailand*. Thailand: British Council.
- Butler, Y. G. (2004). What level of English Proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 245-278.
- Chacón, C. (2005). Teachers' perceived efficacy among EFL teachers in middle schools in Venezuela. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(3), 257-271.
- Coniam, D., & Falvey, P. (2013). Ten years on: The Hong Kong language proficiency assessment for teachers of English. *Language Testing*, 30(1), 147-155.
- Davies, A. (1991). *The native speaker in applied linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farrell, T. S. C., & Richards, J. C. (2007). Teachers' language proficiency. In T. S. C. Farrell (Ed.), *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice* (pp.55-67). London: Continuum.
- Fraga-Canadas, C. P. (2010). Beyond the classroom: Maintaining and improving teachers' language proficiency. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(3), 395-421.
- Kamhi-Stein, L. D. (1999). Preparing non-native English speaking professionals in TESOL. In Braine, G. (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching* (pp.147-160). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Lavender, S. (2002). Towards a framework for language improvement within short in-service teacher development programs. In H. Trappes-Lomaz & G. Ferguson (Eds.), *Language in language teacher education* (pp.237-250). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Liu, D. (1999). Training non-native TESOL students: Challenges for TESOL teacher education in the West. In Braine, G. (Ed.), *Non-native Educators in English language teaching* (pp.197-211). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mai, N. K. (2014). Towards a holistic approach to developing the language proficiency of Vietnamese primary teachers of English. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 11(2), 341-357.
- Medgyes, P. (2001). When the teacher is a non-native speaker. In Celce-Murcia, M. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp.415-427). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- MOET, VNIES, & NFL Project 2020. (2012). *Competency framework for English language teachers: User's guide*. Vietnam: MOET.
- Murdoch, G. (1994). Language development provision in teacher training curricula. *ELT Journal*, 48(3), 253-265.
- Nguyen, N. H., & Dudzik, D. L. (2013). *Vietnam's English teacher competencies framework: Policies, context, basis and design*. Paper presented at the Teacher Competency Frameworks: Developing Excellence in Teaching, Kuala Lumpur.
- Nicholas, H. R. (1993). *Languages at the crossroads: The report of the national enquiry into the employment and supply of teachers of languages other than English*. Australia: National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in Asian Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 589-613.
- Pasternak, M., & Bailey, K. M. (2004). Preparing nonnative and native English-speaking teachers: Issues of professionalism and proficiency. In L. D. Kamhi-Stein (Ed.), *Learning and teaching from experience: Perspectives on nonnative English speaking professionals* (pp.155-175). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Reves, T., & Medgyes, P. (1994). The non-native English speaking EFL/ESL teacher's self-image: An international survey. *System*, 22(3), 353-367.
- Shin, S. (2008). Preparing non-native English-speaking ESL teachers. *Teacher Development*, 12(1), 57-65.
- Tang, C. (1997). On the power and status of nonnative ESL teachers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 577-580.
- Tang, T. (2007). *Investigating NNS English teachers' self-assessed language proficiency in an EFL context*. MA Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec.
- Vietnamnews. (2012, October 01). Local teachers of English not up to standard. Retrieved from <http://vietnamnews.vn>.

Wall, U. (2008). A needs assessment interview: The professional development needs of non-native speaking EFL teachers in Thailand. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 2(1), 47-64.

**Note on contributor**

Khoi Ngoc MAI is a lecturer at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, VNU in Hanoi, Vietnam. His current research focuses on the use of narrative inquiry and other qualitative research methods to explore aspects of teacher professional development and intercultural communication.

Email: [khoi.maingoc@gmail.com](mailto:khoi.maingoc@gmail.com)

### **Appendix 1: Questions used in semi-structured interviews**

- What do you think is the minimum level of English language proficiency needed to teach at your level (primary/ lower secondary/ upper secondary)? Why do you think so?
- Is it important for teachers to maintain and develop their language proficiency? How could teachers do so? What have you done?
- Do you think your pre-service teacher-training program has prepared you well (in terms of language proficiency) for the current teaching job? If not, how could such a program improve?
- Do you think it is necessary to provide in-service teachers with language improvement programs? What kind of program do you think will be effective? How can such a program help?
- What do you think are the possible reasons for the limitations of English language proficiency of Vietnamese teachers in general? And for you?
- Additional follow-up questions were asked on the basis of interviewee responses.