

# **ACTION RESEARCH TO BUILD TESOL TEACHER CAPACITY IN VIETNAMESE MASTER-LEVEL PROGRAMMES**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper contributes to TESOL curriculum studies by suggesting applied action research is appropriate and valuable as a pedagogical and curricular component of a Master of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) in a Vietnamese-Australian transnational programme. The study backgrounds the need for such a practice-based TESOL programme in Vietnam and shows how service teachers studying in this vocational programme apply the principles of action research over the period of a year, during which three research-led units are taught. Drawing on reflective memoranda from their final assignments, the project identifies reported benefits from a curriculum focusing on action research for professional and curricular development. This report applies the method of qualitative descriptive analysis to offer detailed insights into the action research journeys of four teacher/student/researchers. The study argues that real-world interventions such as those enacted during action research investigations are more impactful and meaningful in developing the capabilities TESOL-teaching professionals need in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century: willingness to innovate, freedom to evaluate reflectively, ability to act.*

*Keywords:* action research, TESOL curriculum, transnational education, Vietnam

## **Action research in a Master of TESOL (MTESOL) curriculum in Vietnam**

This study uses four narratives to describe the benefits for service teachers, that is, teachers already employed but requiring further education, as opposed to pre-service teachers, of applying and enacting action research within their Master-level TESOL programme. Its curriculum sets out to build learners' capacities as researchers and agencies as new researchers. The study brings the lived experiences of participants into focus by presenting four narratives of teacher/student/researchers engaged in action research, starting with identifying research problems, leading to developing lines of enquiry and ultimately evaluating their projects reflectively. This action research-focused pedagogical approach not only foregrounds crucial needs for operating as a leading teacher in

Vietnamese institutions; it also articulates the idea that the best people to know what innovations are required in Vietnamese educational contexts are the teachers themselves.

Let us begin with some background. In 2008, Vietnam's Government introduced its ambitious "National Foreign Languages Project 2008-2020" and supported it both with programmes run by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and with international and local expert input into transnational TESOL programmes. This impetus for innovative educational change (Nguyen, 2011) and transformation (Le, 2015) in response to a need to increase the number and quality of English language teachers at all levels brought about a focus on innovative pedagogy (Le, Nguyen & Burns, 2017). The need for teachers to be innovators in the goal of enhancing learners' communicative competence and agents of curricular change afforded opportunities for transnational suppliers of language teacher training to create curricula with innovation and agency as embedded outcomes. The background is complex (Le, Nguyen & Burns, 2017); for the purposes of this study I emphasise that a Master-level qualification, co-badged by an Australian university, both met the edicts of policy and conferred sufficient status.

This research, then, occurred within the context of a 20-year collaboration in teaching and learning TESOL between Hanoi University and Victoria University, Melbourne, one of several Vietnam-Australia programmes within an emerging but competitive market. Responding to changing student, institutional, local and national policy-defined needs while heeding the current impact of real-world pedagogies informed by problem-, activity- and task-based communicative learning, the curriculum developed into one focusing on Vietnamese educators gaining the capability to become novice action researchers: curious, critical, reflective and, hopefully, agentic. Across three intensive Masters units over a one-year period, learners considered applications of a range of methodologies, with a particular emphasis on action research, identified a research problem and question in their contexts and created a literature review (Unit 1); studied a range of local and international contemporary innovations in English Language Teaching and produced a research proposal (Unit 2), and implemented and evaluated a small-scale action research intervention within their educational contexts. Each individual project was subject to ethical appraisal. The research itself, supported by local university staff, took place in the three months between the end of Unit 2 and the start of Unit 3. Within this curriculum, the range of interrelated experiences in action research stages from exploring, identifying and planning, through data collection, analysis and reflection, to intervening, observing and presenting (Burns, 2010) were embedded within the programme.

This meant that not only did the students, who are serving teachers from tertiary, secondary and primary state and private institutions, learn to identify their students' and institutions' immediate needs, they also acquired the research skills and reflective techniques to be able to implement further projects in their current and future educative environments. In the process, they drew on their own experiences of pedagogical and curricular problems and their perceptions of possible and viable interventions to generate new knowledge relevant to their contexts. The learning gains reported here spill over into professional gains. Some service teachers who are students on this programme become research leaders, establishing practitioner-based action learning cycles for colleagues.

### **Review of action research in local contexts**

As applied to the curriculum, action research is defined as “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention” (Cohen & Manion, 1985, p. 174). For the service teachers, the real world is their teaching and learning environment, the social situation to which they might bring improvement (Elliot, 1991). Improving practice, or taking risks that may lead to better practice, is key. These risks in the form of small-scale interventions lead to testing new pedagogical and curricular innovations and evaluating their appropriateness to the institutional or national environments where our service teachers are employed. McNiff and Whitehead's (2006) definition of action research allows for the reflective application that curricula demand:

Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, ‘What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?’ Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning and influence the learning of others. (p. 7)

The curriculum is motivated by authenticity, criticality, reflectivity and the building of agency. It draws on studies by international and local scholars and practitioners. Wyatt (2001) argued that empowering teachers in ELT contexts by enabling them to become action researchers and reflective practitioners is a key strategy in building criticality into the service teacher's learning trajectory. It should be noted that Wyatt's argument fits aptly alongside the Vietnamese imperative to enhance innovation and teacher agency in language education as part of a teacher improvement programme. In applying action research, the participants develop situated knowledge about their professional work new to their personal contexts (McIntyre, 2005), often applying innovations that have worked elsewhere. Burns (2010) more broadly validated its value in English Language Teaching (ELT) education. Reason and Bradbury (2001) maintained

action research contributes “to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities” (p. 2). This happens because the identification of the problem and the project are the result of local teachers working with local communities.

Theoretically, the study is informed both by people-centred capacity building via educational development (Sen, 1999), second language and teacher identity construction (Norton, 2000; Phan, 2008) and theories of socially situated language socialisation (Duff, 2007; Mickan, 2013). It is the Discourses of and ways of being (Gee, 1991) in action research that socialise the service teachers into becoming researching ‘actors’ in their environments, making spaces there as potential change agents, all the while understanding the situatedness of their action research projects, and hence the constraints. This engages with language teaching at three discursive levels: ideological (e.g. policy, belief systems), institutional (e.g. university regulations, affordances of the workplace) and classroom levels (e.g. the range of resources, repertoires, pedagogies), while allowing the service teachers to harness and develop their own professional histories as language educators.

This application of action research as a situated pedagogy articulates the close connection between language curriculum and the language socialisation required to activate the learning meaningfully (Mickan, 2013). Crucially, curricular delivery of transnational programmes should not merely follow precepts from Western practice. For interventions to impact on learners in Vietnam, those closest to students need to identify the lines of enquiry. Le (2011) wrote: “without adequate understanding of what shapes their teaching practices, any coercive intervention to change teachers, including formal training, would be of limited impact” (p. 238). While studies of specific pedagogical and curricular innovations in Vietnamese contexts are emerging, including such studies as Barnard and Nguyen's project on an attempt to implement task-based learning (2010), space requires me to limit this literature review to the socio-political context and the affordances of action research. Certainly, though, there is consensus among modern action researchers that to equip professionals such as educators with action research skills is to invest in the future and ongoing improvement of the community, culture and organisation.

The work of Vietnamese researchers within Vietnam and overseas informs the curriculum and this study. Teacher-led research is described as progressive and informing. Pham (2006) wrote: “Research, especially classroom research...plays an important role as it can help generate classroom practices which are appropriate to the social, cultural and physical contexts in which they work” (p. 2). Tran (2009) argued participatory action research allowed teachers “to learn about their teaching at the same time as they improve their teaching” (p. 105).

Utsumi and Doan (2010) argued that teachers *wanted* to change to meet learners' needs using collaboration, project work and discussions to stimulate "high order thinking" (p. 14) and impact autonomy. More broadly, the aim is to foster professional development by enhancing service teachers' agency, hence transforming practice (Somekh, 2006). To be impactful, a curriculum revolving around action research needs to give the service teachers autonomy and enable them to become agents of their own research and contributors within their pedagogical communities. The feature of action research Kemmis (2007) emphasised most was its bottom-up potential to place control over reform, or at least communication about its potential, in the hands of those close to the action.

The action research-focused curriculum negotiated by the Vietnamese and Australian English Language Teaching professionals encourages students to consider what might both aid and constrain them in achieving their aspired classroom innovations before designing a project, and to evaluate the success of their interventions after its first cycle, with a view to implementing improvements iteratively. The focus is less on introducing new teaching methodologies, but on embodying capability and fostering a reflective and agentive way of being and becoming a teacher.

### **The socio-political environment**

Any curricular or pedagogical innovation – including the interventions promised by action research as a capacity builder – runs the risk of failing without understanding the socio-political environment (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). Vietnam's 2020 policy (National Foreign Languages Policy, NFL2020, 2008) stresses the need for social and individual aspiration through improvement. Government Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg set a future-focused goal for language education:

To renovate thoroughly the tasks of teaching and learning foreign language within the national education system, to implement a new program on teaching and learning foreign language at every school level and training degree, which aims to achieve by the year 2015 a vivid progress on professional skills, language competency for human resources, especially at some prioritized sectors; by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities are to gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently (MOET, NFL2020, 2008, p. 1).

Further, the 2014 iteration of the Vietnamese Language Proficiency Framework (VLPF), benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), set out minimum levels of language proficiency required by teachers in

primary, secondary and tertiary education, with the Master of TESOL service teachers striving to reach, and remain at level C1 or C2, 'Advanced'. As well as being an instrumental spur, this is also a national motivation since, as Nguyen (2017) maintained, the quality of English teachers remains a critical issue for the effective implementation of NFL2020, and many teachers operate below the expected level of competence, though the trend is improving. A factor is that access to 'foreign language' ('English') is a crucial integrative motivator in terms of students' desires for future recognition, promotion, leadership opportunities and other forms of social and cultural capital. The action research-inflected curriculum aims to provide the kind of 'vivid progress' the policy outlines and to empower its students to work on professional skills independently.

The curriculum emphasises a central action research project giving learners power to act and ability to work critically together. It is important, Pham (2006) maintains, "to investigate how English language teachers think the context in which they work shapes their aspirations, research practices and outcomes" (p. 8). In collaboration with lecturers and with their peer community, students design an initial research question, which is developed into a line of enquiry. The pedagogy draws on critical friends' group (CFG) protocols (Vo & Nguyen, 2009) and Le's (2011) belief that the best approaches harness "Vietnamese collectivism" (p. 244) and the desire for "social harmony" (Nguyen, 2011, p. 26). Vo and Nguyen (2009) write: "Through the social interaction of discussion, active learning evolves, and each participant interprets, transforms, and internalises new knowledge as a result of collective thinking" (p. 207). From this dialogic, community-based position, students design and propose an innovation that can be implemented ethically and manageably within their workplaces. Throughout their projects, they frequently discuss the general process and their own roadblocks and triumphs, as in professional practice and experiential learning. At the same time, the urge for social harmony means individuals want peers to succeed.

There are, then, opportunities in introducing learners to a bottom-up system of practitioner enquiry via action research, but there are also constraints. Pham (2006) noted there is difficulty in resisting top-down, power-coercive structures in institutions: chiefly a combination of an assessment system so immersed in positivist summative assessment that there is no room for innovative pedagogies; and deans unable to tolerate much more than grammar translation, unwilling to allow teachers agency to teach what they know would motivate their student to achieve the communicative interactivity seemingly demanded by the policy (Wedell, 2009). Our service teachers, like those known to Nguyen, Hamid and Renshaw (2016), appear empowered by the possibilities for teacher identity and innovative pedagogy. We know there are gaps between "intended" innovations in TESOL teaching "and the realized version" (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010, p. 77).

While teaching them ‘what’ may have led to slippage, we believed teaching them ‘how’ and creating spaces for agency fostered capability.

## **Methodological approach**

This paper is a tiny part of a larger naturalistic project involving 40 graduated students from the MTESOL investigating the impact of the action research pedagogical approach on the students’ current and future spheres of endeavour and their developing identities as teacher/researchers. These 40 students comprised 32 women and 8 men, aged from 25 to an undisclosed age ‘close to retirement’, and those included in the study were tertiary-level educators, often in specialist universities. All were from Hanoi, in the north of Vietnam, and its surrounding provinces and smaller towns. The data were collected between 2015 and 2018. Research stories were co-constructed from the learners’ reflective writing from Units 2 and 3 by two lecturer/researchers and checked by the learners for accuracy. The learners, of course, also participated in an ethical process. The four stories presented here are the most representative of those approved by students who also completed ethics. In addition to their pseudonyms, they are denoted here by the letters ‘AR’ for action research and their number in the sample.

Here, then, I retell the stories of four learners’ engagement with action research. This study draws on narrative and reflective autoethnographical data in the manner of Nunan and Choi (2010). The aim is to validate the service teachers as genuine contributors to discourse, locate them in time and space as those best placed to research within their own known contexts, and engage critically in their own trajectories as emerging action researchers, potentially empowered to share and teach others within their teaching and learning communities.

This study draws on narrative methods, enabling the telling of the human, individual and personal aspects of experience in a way that understands the roles of time, memory and cultural context in the construction of a definitive version of lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, methodologically, the paper presents a descriptive qualitative analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) or “interpretive description” (p. 335), informed by reflective autobiography (Nunan & Choi, 2010). It is subjective because epistemologically and ontologically this author’s own story is inseparable from those of his students. The researcher represents and retells learner stories, reconstructing their reflections into integrated tales. Riessman (2008) argues interpretation is inevitable because narratives are by their very nature representations. I follow the ethos of Ellis (2000), imparting in my research stories the qualities of balance, flow and experiential authenticity while portraying a real-life likeness, capturing the voice of the service-teacher-as-action-researcher whose story I retell. Mindful of

Richardson (2000), I aim for a dialogical, accessible, and truthful relationship between myself as researcher-writer and the service teacher-participants, without claiming epistemological generalisability.

## **Implementing action research: Four narratives**

### **Narrative 1: Phuong (AR-3; female, 33, urban specialist tertiary university)**

I chose as my topic ‘Improving the English-speaking competency of low-level adult students using task repetition: A case study at Vietnam Air Defence and Air Force Academy’. With this topic in mind, I decided my research question should be: ‘In what ways can *task repetition* improve my learners’ accuracy and fluency in their English oral performance?’ I designed and carried out a qualitative action research study focusing on corrective feedback because it was an intervention pertinent to my specific context. It’s relevant because my research problem is, I wrote in my reflection, “although various solutions were suggested in...articles, only *task repetition* is believed to be able to possibly minimize these two major facets of my EFL students’ oral imperfection”. I believe that, given Vietnamese traditional ways of learning, the rote learning of repetition is unlikely to be resisted, and, although it is a pedagogical innovation in my context, it still reflects something of acceptable ways.

Let me describe the implementation of my study. I have my students narrate a story and video-capture them, with full ethics permissions. My students then transcribe their stories, correct their errors autonomously, peer correct with other students, and, finally, I correct the transcription myself. I believe this process allows for both individual learning and for critical friendship, and the fact that I have the final say gives the students confidence in the process.

In the next stage, I have the students repeat the process, this time attending to self-correction, a skill I had attempted to describe by using a YouTube video of an L2 speaker and stopping it when there was an error and asking ‘What should she have said?’ To enhance students’ awareness of task repetition as a strategy linked to self-correction, I encouraged them to keep a reflective e-diary all the time, detailing the times they had observed or used task repetition. I wish I had given them a clearer layout for this diary in advance.

I believe that my awareness as a researcher has developed. For instance, as I write now, I realise that I wasn’t sufficiently prepared for the technophobia and unfamiliarity with what ‘reflection’ looked like. I can now see these problems needed proactive pre-teaching, and as a researcher in the future I can think through the process more rigorously and create a map for myself. I can also see that there was a need for me as teacher to model both the speech and transcription



and also what the text of the ‘reflective’ journals might look like, and how deep it needed to be.

I feel my work as a researcher was valuable. Specifically, I aimed to analyse the sets of transcripts and read the reflective logs thematically, applying constant comparison and reading for synonyms. I was continually aware of applying the theory from the classroom to my practice. I can see that these methods helped to add rigour and made the work more valid. Yet, I’m also aware of the limitations of such an approach because my students’ data was largely self-reported. The limitations and complexities were increased by the fact that the students in my class were multi-level and all male, and here am I, a female, younger teacher, hoping they will value task repetition.

When I return to my own evaluative reflections on my study over these two semesters, I can feel my growth as an action researcher. I had written: “The influence of task repetition on accuracy could have been more effective if the students had been presented [with] and had practiced those linguistic features more profoundly earlier in the course”. This directs me as to what to change in my next iteration. I also evaluated, “some minor decrease in anxiety was also observed, yet there should be more similar practice in the future in order to achieve significant improvements in this affective variable”, and realise how nervous my students were at first when faced with a teaching innovation; next time I’ll prepare them better. I can also see how strongly invested I was in my own possible future as a capable researcher within my university. The hopes that I wrote of are both for my own identity and those of my students:

It was hoped that this small-scale study would set foundations for my future innovations, and that by means of gaining such little changes over the course, my students would consequently make substantial gains in the foreign language.

I enjoyed this dual role of teacher and budding researcher and feel myself ready and willing to learn from this action research sub-cycle and to work as a teacher/researcher with future interventions to improve the spoken accuracy of my students.

**Narrative 2: Duc (AR-11; male, 40, urban specialist tertiary institution)**

In my reflections, I describe an innovation, characterise a goal, specify a context and identify a target group. My topic outlines all of these aspects quite specifically: ‘Using group work with peer assessment to improve the English-speaking skill of second year non-English major students at [City] University of Business and Technology’.

I've learned that research questions have criteria too: they result from contextual analysis; are related to my practice; are contextualised by recent literature. I've come to understand the importance of communicating with the full range of stakeholders in the project, including those in power in my institution, and have learned that research projects should be potentially generalizable, though I recognize mine is specific. It is also very typical of contexts in my city, and, indeed, Vietnam.

My research question focuses my line of enquiry for my action research: 'In what way does group work with peer assessment affect sophomores' participation and interaction?' To address this enquiry, I used an initial action research sub-cycle to understand both the people and the phenomena with a focus on the impact of peer assessment. My choice of question emerged from my observation of a problem among my students: students lack critical or reflective insight into the metalinguistic aspects of lexical and phonological improvement and exhibit passive behaviours.

As I reflect on two semesters' action research implementation, let me describe how I implemented this action research. I observed weekly group work activities – either case studies or role plays over a five-week period, and after each session I interviewed students who had volunteered to take part and who had signed consent forms.

In the next stage, I organised the students to participate in peer assessment using a form commenting on other students' engagement, speaking time, turn-taking and other forms of involvement. While I was implementing this intervention, I became aware that one problem was the difficulty of 'investing' individuals in group work when the assessment structure was necessarily individual. As a teacher, I found I needed to encourage my students to be natural and not forced during interviews.

In my role as a researcher of action research around a problem detected in my context, I aimed to analyse the sets of observation data and read the interview transcripts thematically. To ensure 'interpretative validity', I organised for a colleague to check my questions. I was positive and passionate about the possible impact of the intervention but feared my current class may have been lacking in linguistic proficiency, partly because they are non-English majors. Specifically, I feared a backlash against me, a concept we call "*tôn sư trọng đạo*", *respect for elders*.

My main fear was that students may experience difficulty in generalizing from my sample. At the same time, I was profoundly aware of the possible perceived

ethical conflict of teacher as interviewer and assessor. Because the students had been brought up to expecting teachers to be in total charge of marking, I feared these learners may not be equipped for an intervention that may lead to autonomy. This fear is cultural-historical rather than related to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, I want to stay positive in my evaluation of my intervention, while at the same time showing a learned awareness of what I need to do differently next time.

I want to share verbatim three observations from my reflective writing:

1. Using peer assessment in group work solved my students' problems of disengagement, poor interaction in group work and increased students' English talking time.
2. If I have a chance to do the research again, I will analyse the data as soon as I collect them weekly instead of waiting for all data to be collected.
3. In order to create and increase students' interest in taking part in activities, the activities should be interesting, familiar to real life and appropriate to students' level.

These are three of my learnings about myself as an action researcher, and about what I learned during the first iteration of my action research cycle.

**Narrative 3: Miriam (AR-24; non-Vietnamese female, 47, secondary context)**

I am a non-Vietnamese teacher teaching in a bilingual tertiary institution in Hanoi. I chose as my action research topic, 'Educational games: One answer to the vocabulary teaching and learning problem in an Urban Bilingual School.' As a cultural outsider, I felt I was able to work on an intervention for my action research that was based on a research problem I saw as being related to the Vietnamese mind-set that learning cannot be 'fun' and in opposition to principals in my college who were not familiar with language socialisation and social constructivism. During this study, I realised that my major beliefs as a teacher were related to students learning communally, in a space that goes beyond communicative language teaching and learning. The key problem I identified was the students' lexical shortfall, and I realised that this was a major obstacle to speaking. This resistance is also cultural, as it was mirrored in the attitudes of other teachers. I felt this ongoing resistance to new pedagogies limited the nature of appropriate innovations.

My action research was informed by theory. Communicative games replicate a Vygotskian sociocultural context where safe learning can occur. I posed two questions, both of which were open to what I learned was ‘naturalistic’ qualitative enquiry:

- In what ways do games impact vocabulary teaching and learning?
- What are the students’ perceptions of the use of games?

I aimed to use a consistent methodological approach. My methods involved qualitative analysis of observation sheets, student reflections and interview transcripts from interviews on two days of game-intensive lessons.

As a researcher, I aimed to analyse transcripts applying the insights from grounded theory covered in our Research Methods classes. Specifically, I read the reflective logs using the constant comparison method and elicited different perspectives from the perceptions of colleague teachers who had agreed to act as observers and interviewers. In my analysis, I was very concerned about interpretative validity, and so I maintained a focus on a “highly contextualized understanding of the phenomena.” This was a phrase that circulated in my head from my lecturer, and I knew it was achieved via triangulation and using my colleagues as interviewers. All the while, I was aware of ethical distance between the researcher and the participants, and of the common limitation of working with participants preparing for college. I was aware they might say what they believed I, the teacher/researcher, wanted to hear. With my researcher hat on, I triangulated this over-reliance on insider perspectives by using my colleagues as interviewers.

I was methodological about the procedure for the implementation of my project and expected it to be straight-forward. Let me explain what I did. Across lessons addressing all skills, I, the teacher introduced two periods of games-rich sessions over an eight-week period and collected contrastive data. Simultaneously, students kept journals as homework in response to narrative frames I had made and distributed. To prepare the students, I provided a pilot lesson to demonstrate the purpose of games and explained the procedures.

The reflective task demands that I draw both contextual and general conclusions from my study. I want to quote from my reflections here, to help me evaluate the intervention and my own work as an action researcher.

1. The innovation was a success because games created a potential change in the students’ mind-set from English language classroom and vocabulary lessons as boring to being interactive classroom.
2. Educational vocabulary games are capable of enhancing a learner’s

motivation in vocabulary acquisition.

3. Using vocabulary games in the classroom creates a relaxing, exciting and conducive atmosphere for learning.
4. The research tools used were not very effective, as it was hard to take notes as a participant observer and observe facial expressions in informal talks as well as write.

I realised I had proven something to my school about the value of fun in learning vocabulary, but I found that to observe and to write is complex. I had insufficient practice as an ethnographic researcher, I would use colleagues next time. I feel proud that my empirical findings bear out what literature on the use of games has long known. To me, and to my school, seeing the students engaged in a ‘funny’ activity changed perspectives on the line between study and play.

**Narrative 4: Thang (AR-29; female, 29, specific-discipline university context)**

Vietnamese people love singing, and song is one of the primary ways our culture has been transmitted through history and is an important way of communicating to foreigners. I wanted to implement an action research project exploring how English songs might be used to promote student learning motivation and oral production in the English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) classroom at Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT), a large private university in central Hanoi, Vietnam, with more than 40 thousand students.

Grammar translation is the prevailing teaching approach at the university; communicative teaching is strongly promoted, but like in many other Asian countries, it does not seem to work effectively in Vietnam (Le, 2011). To help boost student motivation and oral production, I thought songs might be an interesting solution. My literature review revealed a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere can boost L2 motivation and I thought it was feasible to use songs to supplement the main ESP course book and change class dynamics after much time on grammar. My pedagogy involved song listening, lyrics pronunciation practice, ESP pronunciation practice, singing along, and song content discussion. Ninety-seven students from four classes took part over 18 days, and on the final day I administered a semi-structured questionnaire to help me evaluate the intervention. During the intervention, I encouraged students to write e- or paper journals and appointed a monitor to collect this data. This part of my design was unsuccessful: few students wrote reflections and even fewer wrote deep reflections. Next time I will incorporate short reflections into the

central curriculum as an integral part of the assessment, and next time I will demonstrate what I mean by ‘reflection’.

I felt I had followed the patterns of action research in my procedures and data collection, aimed to use triangulation, and employed the constant comparison method in my data analysis and deduced themes linked to potential changes in student learning motivation and potential changes in oral English production in the ESP classroom. These research themes showed instruction activities based on songs could significantly promote and enhance students’ learning motivation, engagement, and oral English production in the ESP classroom at HUBT. I found that students in the three classes I did not directly teach were less enthusiastic, because they were unable to see how the intervention fitted into the assessment-based curriculum. I also found most students enthusiastically engaged in song listening, singing along, and lyrics pronunciation practice, which they found enjoyable and relaxing. This did depend on how likeable the chosen songs were, as I chose clear and lyrical songs rather than complex rhythmic ones they might ordinarily listen to. Furthermore, I found most students developed positive attitudes towards and better engaged in ESP instruction before and after song-based activities. My evidence also suggests it can enhance confidence at pronunciation, but I realise I need to design a more detailed study to investigate this line thoroughly.

While the students in general were enthused by song in the classroom and reported confidence in their speaking, few enjoyed the part of my intervention involving analysing the songs, in fact 80% said they disengaged. This was disappointing. The activity could have brought about significant oral English production in an interesting way as suggested in literature. Also disappointing were complaints about the noisiness of my students, and some students disliked singing in stuffy rooms.

In terms of my learning as a researcher, I realised I had been over-ambitious in my scale and scope. Next time I would involve colleagues more closely as observers, and, perhaps, organise the song activity as a large group event to avoid complaints. I could also prepare the students for the task by sharing lyrics in advance of the class exercise. Most of all, I need to ‘sell’ to the class better the ways in which song has the potential to enhance their spoken capacity and their pronunciation.

## **Discussion**

Phoung, Duc, Miriam and Thang were not asked to nominate the advantages and drawbacks of an action research-focused curriculum or even to comment on them. Their stories, recreated to *show* not *tell* in the manner of Ellis’s autoethnography

(2000), illustrate and substantiate the proposition that a language teacher training curriculum involving an action research trajectory can be empowering and professionally valuable as well as being an assessment mechanism within the curriculum. Because of this act of showing, I will not unpack the themes of the narratives or laboriously recapitulate the journeys; they speak for themselves. All articulate the need to be explicit about reflectivity and meticulous in planning, and all are concerned with productive skills and most specifically speaking. Phoung emphasises the value of pre-teaching and Thang wishes she had supplied lyrics in advance of the song intervention; Duc, Miriam and Thang deal with acculturated factors, resistance to the unusual and ‘space’ in the crowded curriculum; Duc faces the very real fear of losing face.

The stories show, too, how teachers explicitly put theory into practice, with each narrative making clear links to theoretical contexts and each researcher positioning themselves ethically and epistemically. The four narratives chart trajectories that touch on service teachers’ agency, but always within a context of constraint. Each story encounters Weddell’s (2009) gap between intention and implementation, but each service teacher, in the drive to be an action researcher, finds solutions by gaining a principal’s permission, enlisting collegial support, or patiently explaining potential benefits to students.

What these four retold narratives show are service teachers’ reflections on and for action. They create interventions based on their perceptions of student needs within contents of environmental and stakeholder analyses. They are aware of the scale and scope of their action research and show a measure of evaluative skill in relation to their interventions, always believing a second cycle would be done differently. Their action research contributes to a process of generating classroom practices appropriate to their social, cultural and physical contexts (Pham, 2006). They learn about teaching and their own identities as teachers (Tran, 2009). Their innovations enacted Cohen and Manion’s description of action research as “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention” (1985, p. 174). The situated nature of the projects makes them authentic as exercises in professional practice and development. The curriculum’s built in criticality and reflectivity enables the service teachers to see their improvement as meaningful and to gain a sense of contributing to the shaping of action research practices that can be used in their futures. Further research, of course, is required to learn if these participants did, in fact, implement further action research cycles, and to evaluate the impact of their interventions on both students and the shaping of their curricula.

## Conclusion

This study showed the value of an action research-led curriculum within a transnational Master of TESOL programme where service teachers learned about their potential capacity as reflective practitioners and action researchers while they examined teaching and learning practices reflectively and evaluatively. Some of the intrinsic features of action research – its potential to be authentic and its ability to provide possibilities for criticality, reflectivity and evaluative capacity – mark it as a valuable way of encouraging service teachers not just to create situated knowledge but to apply it in a way that may take risks, yet is pedagogically and contextually appropriate. It is non-coercive and bottom-up. It respects the idea that those closest to knowing the interests, discourses and aspirations of the learner are those best placed to recommend and implement curricular changes and pedagogical innovations (Pham, 2006).

The study supports the need for Vietnamese teachers to gain access to enhanced agency, not merely to implement the word of policy, but also to add to their own professional capital and their students' learning trajectories. Teachers' desire for self-betterment is compatible with enhancing their role as innovators in pedagogy and curriculum. It is also compatible with Vietnamese collectivism, that ethic where "human relationships are at the core of the care orientation" (Phan, 2008, p. 7) and where "belonging" (p. 13) is about having the power to create better classroom communities and communities of practitioners. The power of critical friendships can thrive in this pedagogy. Consciousness of duty to students, colleagues and stakeholders is clear in each story. By better aligning the present and future needs of students, educators, institutions and the wider nation, there is a better chance of reducing the gaps between rhetoric and action, intention and implementation (Thin, 2006). Indeed, recognising agency within local contexts is critical in implementing policies and policy goals at the macro-level (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

This small-scale study exemplified what can happen in Vietnam when we step outside conventional, instrumentalist, non-authentic modes of assessment such as examinations, and unite TESOL curriculum with authentic professional practice. It outlined a possibility for a Masters-level TESOL curriculum in Vietnam that goes beyond the content-based programmes generally regurgitated within transnational education. It articulates a method that can be tailored to the needs of individuals, institutions and indeed potentially to national policy. To re-evolve NFL2020 (2008), the four stories are narratives of "vivid progress" in professional practice towards independence.

This study also contributed rare insight into what happens in TESOL classrooms in Vietnam, a need identified by Barnard and Nguyen (2010) and offered rare



first-hand narratives of service teachers touching, yet never reaching, autonomy, agency and indeed the “independence” espoused by NFL2020 (2008). As Vietnam moves to the future, there are opportunities to stop blaming the under-training of teachers and harness the energies of global movements (Canh & Bernard, 2009) and the aspirations of teachers and students alike. There are opportunities to support such initiatives as the *English-for-Teaching* programmes with professional development opportunities fostering action, agency and indeed independence. This paper offered one possible pathway to achieving this.

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