

Teacher development: A real need for English departments in Vietnam

By Pham Hoa Hiep (Vietnam)

“Although teacher development has been a familiar notion in the ELT profession for the last few decades, it is relatively new and receives insufficient attention in Vietnam. This article will examine teacher training and teacher development in Vietnam. It will also suggest ways to promote professional development amongst EFL teachers there, which may be applicable to similar situations in other countries.”

What is teacher development?

Brown optimistically remarks: “[o]ne of the most interesting things about teaching is that you never stop learning” (1994:425). Put simply, teacher development is the process of lifelong learning in the teaching profession; it involves any activities aiming to achieve personal and professional growth for teachers. Development activities can range from observing colleagues' classes, reading academic journals and books, and attending conferences, to collaborating with other teachers in classroom research or other professional projects (Brown 1994; Crandall 1991; Diaz-Rico 1998).

Why is teacher development necessary?

The need for teacher development arises from the inadequacy of training courses, which alone cannot fully enable teachers to be dynamic and competent in their job. Any training course, either pre-service or in-service, long-term or short-term, can be criticized for shortcomings. Training courses, even the lengthy ones, such as those needed for a graduate degree in TESOL, cannot satisfy all trainees' needs, nor can they solve most of the problems occurring at the trainees' home institutions. The course itself is not the end of a career; after the course there is still life and trainees must face reality at home (Spratt 1994). Therefore, along with teacher training, teacher development must be a vital component in teacher education. Development fills the gap in training by giving teachers opportunities to reflect on classroom practice, gain insight into teaching experiences, view education as a long-term process, and deal with change and divergence.

Problems in teacher education in Vietnam

Inadequate teacher training

In 1986 Vietnam decided to open its doors to catch up with the economic boom in other Southeast Asian countries. This policy caused a tremendous growth in the number of English as

a foreign language classes and a severe shortage of teachers of English. To meet the great demand for English teaching, a considerable number of young teachers of English have been recruited in haste, without undergoing careful consideration of their skills or abilities. It is a universal problem at most institutions in Vietnam that university graduates become teachers overnight without adequate preparation in TEFL methodology. Many young, unqualified teachers are given demanding teaching schedules and do not have much opportunity to get involved in any activity for professional development. Many lack confidence in teaching methodology. This problem is understandable because their undergraduate courses were often based on linguistics and literature and dealt very little with teaching practice. In general, Vietnamese teachers of English have little opportunity to obtain further training in teaching methodology after graduation (Pham 2000).

Older and more experienced teachers are not much better qualified than their younger counterparts, nor are they well trained in teaching methodology. Many of the older teachers undertook training in the past, when modern approaches and methods had not reached the country yet, and were deprived of the knowledge of modern teaching methods. Due to the political changes in 1975, Le (1997) points out, in the 1970s and 1980s, English was not considered an important language in Vietnam. As a result, little attention was paid to teaching and learning English until 1986. For the teachers who were trained before 1986, their preferred method is grammar- translation because they are most confident using it.

It should also be noted that most of the former teachers of Russians are now working as teachers of English in Vietnam. Before 1986, Russian was a compulsory language at universities, and at many institutions the teachers of Russian far outnumbered the teachers of English. The collapse of the Soviet Union made a great number of teachers of Russian redundant. These teachers were retrained, usually for a two-year period, to become teachers of English. They started the retraining programs as beginners or false beginners in English. A few made fast progress in learning English and have become confident with their new positions. The majority of them, however, despite their background in language teaching and learning, have reported that they have barely benefited from the two years of retraining in terms of English language skills and new teaching methodology. Many former teachers of Russian lack confidence and consider themselves not qualified to teach English (Pham 2000).

Inadequate teacher development

The concept of teacher development is quite new in Vietnam. Many teachers express their wish to go abroad to study for a degree or attend training workshops organized by foreign aid agencies. Not many mention the possibility of autonomous learning or learning from their own colleagues. The notion of organizing in-service development in the form of class observations, seminars, workshops or even informal talks that give colleagues from the same working context the opportunity to exchange ideas and share experiences and innovations, seems uncommon in Vietnam. One teacher commented, "The staff of our English department meets a couple of times a semester. We just meet for administrative work but rarely for professional development purposes" (Pham 2000).

In most English departments, there are several staff members fortunate enough to have obtained a firm grounding in ESOL teaching through graduate training abroad. Unfortunately, these

qualified lecturers seem not to be very efficient in training their younger and less experienced colleagues. Upon returning home from successful graduate TESOL courses, such fortunate individuals are often assigned to teach the high-level, challenging academic content courses, such as American civilization, English literature, or linguistics. This probably gives them more prestige, but limits the opportunities for helping less experienced colleagues develop their professional skills.

Although the opportunity for Vietnamese teachers to learn about new teaching methods has increased over the past few years, this has often brought about negative effects. Due to time constraints, the short-term workshops (lasting from a day to a week) organized by aid agencies have not given teachers a complete knowledge of communicative methodology. It is often the case that many teachers, after having obtained their knowledge of communicative language teaching through a short-term workshop or training course, attempt to use the methodology in their classes. However, their attempts are formulaic in that they strictly adhere to the processes that they have recently learnt at the workshop. When they realize that not all of the ideas of the new methodology can work for their students, they lose confidence and decide not to use any of it. As a result, many teachers develop a belief that communicative methods are only applicable in other countries, where the teaching and learning contexts are different. In other words, the concept of a flexible, empirical approach to teaching has yet to be grasped by many Vietnamese teachers.

A teacher's life and career hinder development

The heavy workload of many teachers of English is a challenge to the improvement of teaching quality. While the official workload required by the Ministry of Education and Training is only 10 to 12 hours a week, everyone does more work to supplement the modest state salary. This situation can be easily understood: a teacher's salary in Vietnam is extremely low in comparison to other occupations. After the mandated teaching hours to maintain their positions at the university, many teachers use the rest of their time for additional teaching at other institutions, where their work is paid by the hour. Consequently, the teacher of English works like a "teaching machine." It is not uncommon to find a teacher who teaches five hours in the morning, five hours in the afternoon, and two more in the evening. Many teachers even give private classes on Sunday. With an overload of teaching hours, many have no time to plan their lessons before class. They usually bring to class a course book, such as Headway or Streamlines, along with the teacher's book. They try to follow the teacher's book and finish a unit in the textbook by the end of the lesson. For many teachers, any alteration to these "instant lessons" is considered risky.

What is the solution?

Given such unfavorable conditions, many teachers in Vietnam believe that change will not take place in their lives and careers until there are major changes in the national educational system. It is true that the government needs to invest more in education, plus the current examination system and curriculum need revision. However, teachers and their institutions still can improve the situation while they wait for change.

It has been my experience doing teacher training at the Vietnam-Australia Training Project in Hanoi that there are two kinds of teachers. The first kind of teacher always believes that the new

methods and techniques introduced at a training course will not work at all in their home institutions. These teachers tend to immediately reject new ideas suggested by colleagues or trainers. They make excuses such as "This technique is impossible because I have impassive students" or "My class is too large" or "I lack materials." They always attribute the implacability of a new technique to various sociocultural conditions at home. They assume that nothing can be done to improve their teaching situation, so they are reluctant to try anything. The second kind of teacher is different. Like the first kind, they are aware of the unfavorable factors at their institutions, but unlike the first kind, these teachers want to try new ideas. Rather than letting themselves be totally shaped by the context in which they work, they try to change it, even though the change they can make is small.

What follows are six examples of the second kind of teacher among my trainees at a teacher in-service education program. After their course, many teachers often wrote to me and told me what happened at their home institutions. These are only small events in their English departments, but I believe they have helped a great deal to improve the teaching in many English classes. (The names given are not the teachers' real names.)

1. Nguyen taught speaking to pre-intermediate students. He was very busy and felt that he did not have enough time to develop good speaking tasks for his students. Nguyen realized that his colleagues had the same problem. When Nguyen and other teachers met during tea breaks, Nguyen suggested that they organize a shared teaching folder. They decided that after each one developed a task sheet for use in class, a copy would be put in a folder that would always be available in the department office. Nguyen's idea worked well. The folder got thicker and thicker week by week. All of the teachers were happy because they could not only save time preparing task sheets, but also share ideas with each other for teaching speaking.

2. Ly had a problem getting students to do group work in her class. Every time she asked students to sit in groups, the students were not willing to move. They wanted to stick with their classmates who were friends and talk in Vietnamese. She mentioned the problem to a more experienced teacher, Tam, who suggested that instead of simply saying "Now work in groups" and pointing at the students, Ly should give each group a name of an animal, then assign individual students to groups. For example, she could say, "Students in the first row: you are a cat, you are a dog, you are a rooster, and you are a monkey. Now the second row, you are a cat, you are a dog, you are a rooster..." Then she would ask all the "cats" to sit together, all the "dogs" to sit together, and so on. Ly decided to try this technique in her class and learnt that it worked quite well. "The students had fun. Now they are willing to move anywhere in the class," Ly commented. Ly developed another version of the same technique. Because some students do not want to have animal labels, she gives students numbers or nationalities, such as French, English, and Chinese. At the end of the semester, Ly published her ideas in the department newsletter.

3. Nhan was just back from her three-month in-service course in Hanoi. She was full of new ideas and eager to share them with other colleagues. Encouraged by the department head, she decided to run a monthly workshop, hoping to transfer these ideas to the less experienced teachers. After several meetings, she realized that not all of the classroom techniques she learnt in Hanoi were welcomed by her colleagues, and some ideas were even considered weird, though

she assured her colleagues that she herself had tried them successfully in her own classes. Nhan decided to do a research project on the applicability of the new "foreign" ideas to Vietnamese classrooms. She found out that her colleagues' English language skills were not as good as hers. Instead of giving workshops on teaching methodology, she held workshops on language skills development. Then her workshops attracted more of her colleagues.

4. Hanh was assigned to teach English and American literature for third-year students. She had to follow a course book compiled many years earlier by a foreign expert in literature. She soon found out that the students were not very interested in the course, so she designed a questionnaire and gave it to them. She learnt that the two main reasons they did not like the class were that the language in the coursebook was too difficult and academic, and the authors and the literary works in the book were too unfamiliar in Vietnam. Hanh then talked about this issue with her colleagues in the Division of Culture and Literature. As a result, the head of the division was convinced that the course book needed to be rewritten by the teachers themselves, paying attention to the students' linguistic level and the inclusion of British and American writers whose works had been translated into Vietnamese. Her colleagues also agreed that language skill improvement should be another objective of the literature course.

5. Ha had been a teacher of Russian. She had to teach English now and always felt unqualified. She was very self-conscious of her speaking. Then Ha decided to be a regular observer of Nguyen's class. By the end of the semester, Ha said she was more confident in her language skills. She said that she had benefited from Nguyen's speaking class not only in language skills but also in teaching methodology.

6. Thanh realized that most students in her afternoon class, which started at 1 p.m., felt tired and unwilling to study because they could not take a midday nap—a cultural habit in Vietnam. Thanh mentioned this to some teachers in the staff room. A colleague suggested that a 15-minute interesting warm-up activity should be given at the beginning of each class. Thanh thought it was a good idea, but mentioned she was afraid she would run out of ideas soon. Hearing that, another teacher suggested that the teacher do warm-up activities for a week, then ask each student to plan a warm-up activity at home to lead in class. One teacher had done this before in his class and the students were quite happy. Thanh entered her class happily, knowing that she had found a possible solution.

Conclusion

If the purpose of teaching a language is to enable learners to establish good human relationships with each other and the world, then it is ironic that many language teachers have little or insufficient communication among themselves. How can English language teachers encourage students to communicate with each other, when we rarely communicate with our colleagues? The six examples above suggest that collaboration amongst teachers and action research are two important ways to promote teacher development. It is important for teachers to reflect on their current teaching practice to identify problems. Then they need to think what they would like to change and what can realistically be changed. Once these two steps have been taken, teachers may confidently work out possible solutions.

Furthermore, in the increasing professionalisation of ELT, it is easy to feel isolated from changes in theory and practice unless a conscious effort is undertaken to keep up-to-date. As Perren (1999) suggests, teachers need to always ask questions, such as: What will my colleagues think of my lessons and activities? Am I ready to share my ideas with others? How are they going to scrutinize my teaching? What do I have to offer another teacher? Can that teacher learn from me? How should we communicate with each other? What is effective teaching? How can I make my teaching more effective? These questions would be most useful for designing institutional professional development.

Finally, I would like to address the question of time. How can a teacher find enough time for professional development? This seems to be a dilemma very often associated with money, and therefore, I leave this issue to each individual teacher to resolve. However, I believe that all teachers can find some time in their busy schedules to engage in professional improvement activities. No improvement can be made unless teachers want to change, and as the old saying goes, where there is a will, there is a way.

References

- Brown, H. D. 1994. *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Crandall, J. 1991. *Keeping up to date as an ESL professional*. In *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed.), ed. M. Celce-Murcia, Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.
- Diaz-Rico, L. T. 1998. *Ethics and expertise in TESL professional development*. Paper presented at the 32nd Annual TESOL Convention, Seattle, WA:, March 1998.
- Le, V. 1997. *Day va hoc ngoai ngu-Nhung nghich ly. Giao Duc VA Thoi Dai Chu Nhat* (Teaching and learning foreign languages-The paradoxes). The Education and Time Newspaper, Sunday edition. 5th November, p. 6.
- Perren, J. 1999. *Lifelong learning, reflective practice, and teacher development*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Language and Development, Hanoi, October.
- Pham, H. H. 2000. *The key socio-cultural factors that work against success in tertiary English language training programs in Vietnam*. In *Partnership and interaction: Selected proceedings of the fourth international conference on language and development*. eds. Shaw, J., D. Lubelska, and M. Noulett. Hanoi, Vietnam.
- Spratt, M. 1994. *English for the teacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pham Hoa Hiep, currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, has taught EFL at Hue College of Sciences and has trained teachers of English at the Vietnam-Australia Training Project in Hanoi.