



Autonomy in teaching practice: Insights from Vietnamese English language teachers trained in Inner-Circle countries



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers lacked agency to apply knowledge from overseas training to local contexts.
- Teachers re-adapted to the local context and exercised agency where possible.
- Teachers had some autonomy in classroom-related matters.
- Teachers' autonomy in curriculum-related decisions was often minimal.
- The mismatch was rarely addressed during overseas training.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the degree to which TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) training in Inner-Circle English-speaking countries impacted on the autonomy in teaching practice of Vietnamese teachers of English. Using an online survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and classroom observations, the research explored tension faced by these teachers when attempting to exercise their autonomy after returning to their local institution, and revealed how they managed to operate within constraints. This paper has significant implications for a range of stakeholders involved in the professional development of non-Inner-Circle TESOL teachers trained in Inner Circle contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), recent decades have witnessed an increasingly popular social phenomenon called international student mobility (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009), whereby TESOL teachers from what Kachru (1985) termed Outer and Expanding Circle countries (where English is not the first language) seek opportunities for professional training in institutions in the Inner Circle (e.g., UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). The relocation of TESOL practitioners to Inner-Circle countries for study does provide them with immersion in an Anglophone milieu, but it also raises issues concerning the applicability of gained knowledge and skills and the overall impact of overseas training (Li & Edwards, 2013, 2014;

Liyanage & Bartlett, 2008), which are not easily assuaged. These issues are located in the schism between the local linguistic, pedagogical and sociocultural settings where teachers live and work, and those in which they undergo their training (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2012; Freeman, 1991; Johnson, 2009). Teachers undertaking these programs are normally trained in Inner-Circle contexts where an *integrationist* approach to education is usual (Holliday, 1994): Teaching tends to be learner-centered and skills-based, and there is maneuverability within the curriculum. But post-training, their local educational context is more frequently *collectionist*, characterized by subject-centeredness, structured learning and strict adherence to a curriculum. While these two approaches to education are neither mutually exclusive nor geographically bounded, elements of the collectionist approach are more frequently represented in non-Inner-Circle contexts (Nunan & Lamb, 1996), creating a challenge to implement integrationist teaching approaches and techniques (Butler, 2011; Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

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The growing body of research investigating the efficacy of Inner-Circle TESOL teacher education programs in relation to the teaching practice of non-Inner-Circle English teachers upon return has, on the one hand, reported these teachers being able to implement certain aspects of the knowledge and skills learnt from teacher training in their day-to-day teaching. This impact is often reflected through teachers' adoption of learner-centered teaching methods such as the communicative and task-based approaches (Chowdhury & Phan, 2008, 2014; Li & Edwards, 2013, 2014; McKnight & Turner, 1995; Pham, 2004). On the other hand, existing research has revealed tensions in applying learnt knowledge due to a considerable mismatch between theory (what non-Inner-Circle teachers learned in their Inner-Circle programs) and practice (the extent to which they could implement that knowledge in situated pedagogical contexts that they returned to after training) (see Chowdhury & Phan, 2014; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2008; Macalister, 2013; Pham, 2004). In this respect, Benson (2010) argues that the gap between theory and practice in teacher education is irreconcilable if teachers lack *autonomy*, which he defines as 'the freedom and internal capacity to exercise discretion in matters of curriculum implementation' (Benson, 2010, p. 260) (The construct of autonomy is further unpacked in Section 3.2.). While these studies shed light on the teaching reality of non-Inner-Circle teachers who returned from training in Inner-Circle contexts, they have tended to cast a broad net, eliciting data on teachers' general experiences rather than more specific foci that characterize teachers' teaching practice. A more nuanced understanding of autonomy as it relates to language educators, and the variables which impact it, would do much to illuminate the post-training experience of non-Inner-Circle teachers and the associated tensions therein.

Therefore, the present study examines the autonomy in teaching practice of Vietnamese teachers of English who took Master's level TESOL courses in the Inner Circle and returned to teach at tertiary level in Vietnam, a context which is still typically described as belonging to the Expanding Circle (Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006; Denham, 1992). Given that language teaching is highly context-specific (Lamb, 2008), it is important to explore specific polities, particularly under-represented contexts such as Vietnam. The paper investigates the extent to which these teachers can exercise autonomy in their day-to-day practice, and explores the role that teacher training courses play (or perhaps fail to play) in promoting this autonomy. The research findings benefit not only Inner-Circle-trained teachers themselves in terms of allowing them to critically reflect on their professional autonomy, but also teacher educators and Inner-Circle TESOL program coordinators regarding the efficacy of teacher training for practitioners based in Expanding Circle countries.

Before continuing, we acknowledge the criticism surrounding Kachru's 'concentric-circle' framework of world Englishes which we have adopted. As Pennycook (2003) points out, the model conceptualizes world Englishes primarily by national boundaries, whereas the worldwide spread of English and its myriad domains of use both as a first and additional language have clearly blurred these boundaries, particularly among Expanding Circle countries (Kirkpatrick, 2012). We therefore confine our use of Kachru's terms Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle to broadly differentiate the contemporary status of English in communities where teacher-training was conducted and those where graduates later returned to practice.

2. The context of English education in Vietnam

2.1. Overview of English teacher education in Vietnam

Since the Doi Moi economic reforms starting from 1986 when

Vietnam began to open its doors to attract foreign investment, English has replaced Russian as the predominant foreign language taught across all educational levels (Hoang, 2010; Wright, 2002). This in turn has focused a spotlight on how English teachers are trained. English language teachers in Vietnam are officially trained in teacher's colleges that offer three-to four-year training programs designed to enhance their English language skills and equip them with foundational knowledge of language teaching methodology. Masters-level TESOL programs are also offered by national public universities. Besides domestic training, Vietnam's economic reforms have also brought about greater international cooperation in English teacher education. Scholarship schemes exist to support Vietnamese English teachers to pursue Master's and PhD studies in TESOL in Inner Circle countries. Some popular schemes include bilateral aid programs with Australia (AusAID) and New Zealand (NZ Aid), and the Fulbright Student Program, overseen by the US Congress. Additionally, the Vietnamese government has administered scholarship projects to fund tertiary-level English teachers to study in English-speaking countries (Vietnam International Education Department (VIED), 2016). The number of Vietnamese English teachers pursuing higher degrees in Inner-Circle institutions has therefore increased in recent years, particularly among tertiary-level educators.

2.2. English teaching and learning at tertiary level in Vietnam

Students majoring in English can study for a bachelor's degree in English linguistics or English teaching. Students may also learn English as a minor, accounting for 10–12% of their total credit hours (Hoang, 2010). Vietnamese students' motivation for studying English is often instrumental: to study abroad, and to improve their employment prospects after graduation (Do, 1996; Ngo, 2015). Unlike primary and secondary institutions, where textbooks are stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Nguyen, 2011), at university level materials are selected by individual universities and departments. Those chosen are often commercial materials by well-known ELT publishers (Nguyen, Fehring, & Warren, 2014).

One governmental education policy has affected English language education at university level: the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL 2020), which aims to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system by 2020. The project has created an English competency framework based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to ensure that Vietnamese teachers and learners of English are assessed against international standards (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015). It has also created a network of flagship regional foreign language centers at five national universities to provide professional development programs to 80,000 teachers of English in public schools country-wide. Despite these outcomes, the NFL2020 project has met with criticism: questions have been raised about the appropriateness of the CEFR-based framework for non-European educators (Nguyen & Hamid, 2015), and the pressure to replace existing language learning materials with CEFR-based resources. Given the current state of teacher mobility and the importance attached to English education in Vietnam, the Vietnamese context promises to be a fertile ground for research into the impact of overseas TESOL training on teachers returning to local practice.

3. Review of the literature

3.1. The impact of overseas training on returned teachers

Previous studies with teacher-learners from Outer and Expanding Circle countries undergoing TESOL training in Inner-

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