Curricular innovation behind closed classroom doors: A Vietnamese case study

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ABSTRACT
Analysts of curricular innovation identify two different versions: the documented curriculum, or the intended innovation, which presents idealised innovative prescriptions, and the realised version, which is actually implemented in classrooms (Sakui 2004). This distinction reflects the complexity of curricular innovation, which has been acknowledged by many researchers both in mainstream education and in English language teaching (eg Fullan 1993; Karavas-Doukas 1996; Markee 1997; Carless 2001; Adamson and Davison 2003; Wang 2008).

The small-scale study outlined in this paper explored how teachers implemented a curricular innovation in a Vietnamese secondary school. It was an attempt to address and, to a very limited extent, narrow the perceived gap between curricular rhetoric and classroom reality. The aim of the study was to explore the implementation process of a new curriculum in one specific context through an interpretation of qualitative data derived from classroom observation and post-observation in-depth interviews with teachers. The intention is to provide an opportunity for readers to consider the extent to which the same constraints to curricular innovation might occur in their own teaching and learning contexts.

Curriculum innovation – models in theory and practice
When considering how educational authorities might implement a curricular change in schools, Chin (1967) identified three models.

1  In the power-coercive strategy, governments mandate a change that schools are obligated to implement.

2  The empirical-rational strategy is based on persuading teachers and schools to adopt a change by using reason and rationality to show that the change is for the better (Hoyle 1969).

3  The normative re-educative approach ‘emphasises the need for curriculum developers to understand the way people respond in organisations, as with teachers in schools’ (McGee 1997: 263).

Within the education community, the tendency has been to recommend a move from the first through to the third model of curricular innovation, but it remains the case that in practice a balance is drawn between the three approaches, depending on the impetus for, and perceived urgency of, the intended reform.

The impetus for curricular change comes from various sources, but in a national education system the impact of international trends on national economic, social and educational development policies cannot be overstated. Thus a major reason for the reform of the English-language curriculum in Vietnam is the need to adjust education policies in response to the globalisation of English. Vietnam’s recent adoption of a market economy, together with its entry into the ASEAN bloc and World Trade Organisation, has stimulated the national government to increase the number of people who can communicate effectively in English. To meet the challenges of operating successfully within an international economy hegemonised by a global language, ‘English must be taught both as an integrative discourse and an empowering discourse through a curriculum that reflects the cultures, values, and lives of students and provides them with knowledge of the cultural values and daily lives of the people with whom they are likely to interact’ (Canh 2003: 40).
In reforming the English-language curriculum for secondary schools, a political decision was made to adopt a communicative approach to teaching. This has led to the top-down imposition of a renewed curriculum that promotes learner-centred communicative task-based teaching, targeting English communicative competence.

Educators recognise that curricular innovation is an extremely complex matter because of the need to take into account the perceptions of the key stakeholders within specific sociocultural contexts. Of these stakeholders, teachers play the key role in the success or failure of a planned innovation (Nunan 1989; Markee 1997; Carless 2001) because they are the executive decision makers in the actual setting in which the intended innovation is to be realised – the classroom.

It is the quality of the teachers themselves and the nature of their commitment to change that determines the quality of teaching and the quality of school improvement. Teachers are, on the whole, poor implementers of other people’s ideas. Teacher development therefore is a precondition of curriculum development, and teachers must play a generative role in the development of better curricula (MacDonald 1991:3).

It is important that the knowledge and attitudes of teachers regarding centrally driven curriculum innovations are taken into account before, during and after the implementation phase. This means that their opinions need to be reported and their voices heard, not only by educational policy makers and curriculum designers, but also by the wider language-teaching community. While there are some studies on teacher attitudes to, and beliefs about, the value of intended curricular innovation (eg Kennedy and Kennedy 1996), there has been little research into how teachers implement innovation behind the closed doors of their classrooms (Morris 1995; Carless 2001). No research has come to light with regard to English-language teachers in Asia, apart from one very detailed case study carried out in Japan (Sato 2002). This fact is critical given the empirical evidence of the frequent incongruence between teacher beliefs and their actual practices (Borg 2006). It is within this research space that the present study is located with a preliminary investigation of the beliefs and practices of a small number of language teachers facing the introduction of a communicative English-language curriculum in Vietnam.

**Communicative language teaching in Asian schools**

The aim of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), is the acquisition of communicative competence via student engagement in meaningful use of language at discourse level. To achieve this, the teacher facilitates communicative activities by managing the classroom environment, providing resources and acting as a communicator. ‘Classroom activities are often designed to focus on completing tasks that are mediated through language or involve negotiation of information and information sharing’ (Richards and Rodgers 2001:165). One of the most frequently discussed methods within CLT in recent years is task-based language teaching, an essential feature of which is learner-centredness. According to Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2004), language is best learned through meaningful and communicative interaction between learners engaged in purposeful tasks. Such tasks provide both the input and output processing, and the motivation, needed for language acquisition.

In recent years, national curriculums based on CLT principles have been introduced into school systems in many Asian countries but the results have not always been successful. South Korea was one of the first Asian countries to adopt a CLT approach in its schools but teachers developed a range of misconceptions about its nature due to a lack of appropriate training opportunities. Their low English proficiency and a lack of motivation on the part of their students raised serious difficulties for teachers (Li, D. 1998: 687) and, more recently, Yoon (2004) has identified a number of limitations in attempts to introduce CLT into the Korean school system. The high-school teachers in Jeon and Hahn’s (2006) study had a high level of understanding of task-based language teaching, but expressed negative views about implementing it in their classrooms. In 1987, Mombusho (the Japanese Ministry of Education) proposed a curriculum shift from the long-established grammar-translation methods towards teaching for communicative purposes (Lamie 2001: xv) but Pacek (1996: 336) reported that this ‘top-down innovation … might not [have brought] about the expected results’. The same constraint of a lack of appropriate professional development has been reported in a detailed case study of high-school teachers in Tokyo, where ‘lacking support for learning, these teachers continued to avoid implementing innovation’ (Sato 2002: 80). Avoidance of communicative
methods in Japanese schools is reinforced, according to Nishino and Watanabe (2008), by teacher and student concerns about university entrance examinations, which do not seek to measure communicative competence (Gorsuch 2000).

In China CLT has been promoted by the government since 1992 and, although it has its adherents among the teaching community (e.g. Li, X. 1984; Liao 2000, 2004), there have been those who question its appropriacy for Chinese educational and cultural norms (e.g. Kao 1996, 2002). The eventual adoption of CLT in Chinese schools has been referred to as ‘high investment but low output’ (Chen, Jiang and Lu 2004), not least because large-scale non-communicative testing continues to be the norm, in spite of calls for change (Yu 2001). Wang (2008) reported a wide gap between the principles of textbook designers, which emphasise the adoption of a learner-centred approach and the entire use of English in instruction, and the classroom reality, where teaching remains textbook-based, test-oriented and teacher-centred, with extensive use of first language in instruction. The biggest constraint to the implementation of the intended curriculum is, according to Yu (2001), a lack of qualified teachers in schools. Thus the promotion of CLT has proved counterproductive and a mere ‘matter of paying lip-service’ (Hu 2002: 94).

Even in Hong Kong, where educational facilities are generally better than elsewhere in the People’s Republic, there is a wide gap between the curriculum intentions and the practical realities (Ruffell 2006). This is due, not least, to inadequate teacher preparation and insufficient resources, leading to a lack of understanding about, and belief in, the principles of CLT. Primary teachers have reported that there is not enough time in the syllabus to implement task-based learning, causing them to ‘finish the book with little regard to the ability of the students’ (Carless 2003: 493), a point reinforced in a later study of high-school teachers (Carless 2007).

In Thailand, too, teachers have different interpretations of typical CLT activities. Although they reported using activities such as role-play and information gap, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks, ‘grammar explanation, vocabulary explanation, translation and whole-class drills and repetition’ were commonly observed in their classes (Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf and Moni 2006: 6–7), leading these authors to conclude that the inadequate facilities, resources and learning environments have made ‘the policy goals unrealistic and all but impossible to achieve’ (Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf and Moni 2006: 8).

In a more recent study, Segovia and Hardison (2009) similarly reported teachers and supervisors being sceptical about the feasibility of the proposed move from teacher-centred to learner-centred instruction. Littlewood (2007) reviewed CLT and task-based language teaching across a wide range of Asian countries and identified all the issues outlined above, as well as a mismatch between the tenets of CLT and local cultures of learning, reinforcing the point made a few years earlier by Nunan (2003: 606), in his discussion of CLT in six Asian countries, that ‘rhetoric rather than reality is the order of the day’.

Communicative language teaching in Vietnam

Vietnam introduced CLT into its school system rather later than its neighbours. Prior to the introduction of the new curriculum, three articles were published for an international readership (Ellis 1996; Kramsch and Sullivan 1996; Lewis and McCook 2002). These articles expressed reservations about the readiness of school teachers in Vietnam to adopt a communicative approach and the voices of Vietnamese teachers have remained largely unreported, other than in a few unpublished theses (e.g. Ellis 1994; McCook 1998) and in concerns raised in the local English-language teacher’s magazine, Teachers Edition, now sadly defunct. For example, Bock (2000: 25–26), after a study of the implementation of CLT by expatriate teachers in Vietnamese universities and language centres, reported that students were not interested in achieving communicative competence or working in groups, being more motivated to pass examinations, sometimes referred to as ‘required’ motivation (Warden and Lin 2000: 535).

Other factors operating against CLT were large class sizes of mixed-level students (between 40 and 105), the lack of conducive facilities such as flexible seating and consistent power supply, and the difficulties of testing communicative competence. Bock (2000: 28) concluded that Vietnam ‘should produce its own research on the usefulness of CLT in attaining its educational goals’ before embarking on widespread adoption. A similar point was made by Hiep (2000: 23) when, after considering the importance to curricular innovation of learner motivation and learning styles, he stated that ‘modern teaching methods should be applied with a close and careful consideration of the cultural values of Vietnam’. Le (2004),
a Vietnamese teacher trainer, emphasised the need for cultural sensitivity, and another experienced Vietnamese teacher educator (Canh 2002: 33) reported that, despite the strong promotion of CLT, the lack of appropriate in-service professional development meant that ‘teachers are generally incapable of teaching English communicatively in their real-world classrooms. Instead, they spend most of their lesson time explaining abstract grammar rules and guiding their students in choral readings.’

A survey by Tomlinson and Bao (2004: 217) demonstrated that many teachers do not wish to change their methods, with more than half the respondents not wishing to participate in intervention for change, and some refusing to believe that the learners were willing to participate and refusing to believe in the potential of learners to express themselves fluently in English. Such findings are supported by a study of 100 Vietnamese university students. More than 90% of the respondents had studied English for at least eight years before completing the survey that focused on causes of demotivation in learning English: ‘The largest source of demotives was related to teachers … [a]nd within the four demotive categories related to teachers, teaching methods provided the largest source of demotives’ (Trang and Baldauf 2007: 100).

**Background to English curriculum innovation in Vietnam**

The newly documented English language curriculum in Vietnam (MOET 2006: 5) aims to enable school pupils to:

1. communicate in English at the basic level in all modes of communication ie listening, speaking, reading and writing
2. master the basic formal knowledge of the English language
3. have general understanding of, and a positive attitude towards, the cultures of English-speaking countries.

The documented curriculum also states that ‘communicative skills are the goal of the teaching of English at the secondary school while formal knowledge of the language serves as the means to the end’ (MOET 2006: 6). The curriculum is promulgated by the Ministry of Education and Training, and is prescribed for all grades and school types nation-wide from Grade 6 through to Grade 12, with a weekly class time of 135 minutes, split into three lessons of 45 minutes each. In order to operationalise this intended innovation, a set of textbooks was locally written and effectively constitutes the national English curriculum. Although a new textbook was introduced in 2002 for Grade 6, the new curriculum was not approved and institutionalised until 2006.

According to its authors, the textbook is theme-based and skill-based, with the adoption of the ‘two currently popular teaching approaches, i.e. the learner-centred approach and the communicative approach. A focus is on task-based teaching as the leading methodology’ (Van et al 2006: 12). Within the task-based framework of the new textbook series, students are expected to engage with each other in meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning within a specific context.

Teachers organise classroom activities and provide guidance so that learners participate actively in the learning process through individual, pair and group work … Learners are responsible for their learning. They should participate in communicative activities actively, creatively and cooperatively (Van et al 2006: 10).

The specific contexts, or themes, covered in the textbook series include education, community, nature and environment, and recreation. In terms of skills development, each of the 16 didactic units follows a standard pattern comprising five sections: reading, speaking, listening, writing and language focus. The last unit explicitly focuses on key grammatical structures and phonetic features, some of which have been previously introduced in the reading and listening texts and practised in the speaking and writing sections. Each of these sections is to be dealt with in one 45-minute lesson.

The curriculum does not define the testing methods to be applied, except that ‘learners’ learning outcome should be measured in terms of four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and linguistic knowledge (including phonetics, lexis, grammar)’ (MOET 2006: 18). However, the Ministry has institutionalised multiple-choice tests as the only testing method for standardised high-stake tests. In these
tests, pupils are tested in terms of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Speaking and listening are not tested.

In 1986 Vietnam re-emerged onto the world stage and reduced its dependence on the Soviet Union. In the following years the nation faced a serious shortage of English-language teachers, and the vast majority of Russian-language teachers, who had previously taught 60% of high-school students (Do 2000), were no longer needed. The Vietnamese Government adopted two strategies: retraining of teachers of Russian and the encouragement of universities to offer off-campus extension English-language courses throughout the country to secondary school graduates who had failed the national university entrance examinations. After completing these extension courses, the students were employed to teach English in lower- and upper-secondary schools. However, many of these courses were not properly delivered and the result was low-quality teachers (Canh 2007). Thus, when the new curriculum, which requires teachers to have reasonably good communicative competence in English, was first introduced, many teachers were not sufficiently competent to deliver the curriculum.

After the new textbook series had been piloted, revised and institutionalised, in-service teacher-training workshops were organised through a cascade model. Initially, the curriculum developers led short workshops, over two to three weeks, with key participants nominated by provincial educational authorities as being more experienced. During the workshops, the participants were introduced to the structure of the textbook, the underlying methodology and the classroom techniques that teachers were expected to employ in delivering the textbook. The effectiveness of these workshops has not been formally evaluated. However, anecdotal evidence derived from informal conversations with the participants suggests that too many issues were raised in the short time available and a talk-and-chalk approach by workshop leaders dominated the process, rather than hands-on, experiential learning. The key teachers then went back to their provinces and ran in-service workshops for other teachers, usually over ten days during the summer break.

The study

Given the complexity of understanding the ongoing process of realised innovation, the adoption of a case study approach seemed particularly suitable. This approach ‘enables the development of an understanding of the phenomenon from the teacher’s view’ (Carless 2001: 266). The research questions that guided the study mainly focused on the following issues.

• What were the teachers’ understanding of, and attitudes towards, the intended syllabus innovation?
• To what extent did the teachers implement the intended innovation in their actual classrooms?
• What was the rationale underlying their implementation of the intended syllabus innovation?

The study involved English-language teachers working in an upper-secondary school located in an economically underdeveloped rural area of North Vietnam. It is a relatively small school with about 500 pupils in the three final grades (Grades 10 to 12), mostly the children of farmers. The average class size in this school is around 40 and the classrooms are cramped with very basic furniture. There are three English-language teachers, with teaching experience ranging from three to eight years. All are female and have university degrees in teaching English as a foreign language and they have twice participated in textbook training workshops run by key teachers.

Data collection methods used for the study were classroom observations and post-observation in-depth interviews. The teachers were observed over three weeks (six lessons per teacher). The teachers were not comfortable with their lessons being video- or audio-recorded, and so extensive field notes were made of all the observed events in the classroom. Each teacher was interviewed after the last classroom observation. The semi-structured interviews lasted 25 to 35 minutes and were recorded. They focused on critical issues arising from the observed lessons, as well as issues related to the teachers’ understanding of, and attitudes towards, the innovation. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that the participants could fully articulate their views without being constrained by the use of a second language. The interviews were then transcribed, translated and analysed by the authors to identify emerging themes.
Findings

Observation data

The observations showed that the CLT innovation was not being implemented in the way outlined in the official curriculum document. Classroom teaching remained traditional, teacher-fronted and textbook-centred. Discrete grammar points were presented in minimal contexts (ie in isolated sentences), while grammar rules were provided explicitly, almost always in Vietnamese. Although the teachers did ask a lot of questions, they answered all of them themselves, with the pupils hardly involved in the classroom discourse. When the teachers gave the pupils a chance to speak, they kept silent, as is clearly illustrated in Extract 1.

Extract 1: Grammar lesson (Cam)

01 T: (writes on the board) My father stopped smoking a year ago.
02 T: (in Vietnamese) Now we analyse this sentence. What is the subject? What is the object? What is the adverbial?
03 T: (underlines all these elements in the sentence and says in Vietnamese) Today we learn a new structure.
04 T: (writes on the board) It was my father who stopped smoking a year ago.
05 T: (explains in Vietnamese) Remember that the relative pronoun who is used for persons. Also remember that it is a formal subject. Now look at the second sentence.
06 T: (writes on the board) Her silence makes my brother afraid.
07 T: (explains in Vietnamese) What is the subject? Now the subject is not a person, but a thing. The verb is not used in the past tense, but in the present simple. We have a new sentence like this: (teacher writes the new sentence on the board). It is her silence that makes my brother afraid.
08 T: (continues in Vietnamese) Now the subject is not a person, so we use that. Who can tell me the structure of the two sentences on the board?
09 Ps: [SILENCE]

(Observation 1: Unit 13, Grade 11)

For the skills lessons, teachers were preoccupied with finishing the textbook with little regard to how much the pupils learned, or to what extent the pupils could use English for communication. Vietnamese was frequently used, even for basic classroom instructions. During the skills lesson, the teachers gave the pupils a chance to practise reading aloud the texts written in the textbook, rather than helping them develop their language skills, or encouraging them to negotiate meaning among themselves, or with the teacher. These issues are illustrated in the following extracts from reading comprehension lessons taught by two different teachers.

Extract 2: Reading comprehension (Quyt)

10 T: (reads aloud the reading text and pauses to write new words on the board)
11 T: (writes on board a sentence from the text: ‘… it was not until 1915 that the cinema really became an industry’)
12 T: (translates the sentence into Vietnamese)
13 T: (reads the new words on board and the pupils read after her – 13 words)
14 T: (in Vietnamese) Now you read the text silently in five minutes.
15 T: (three minutes later) Stop reading. Do Task 1 in pairs. You have five minutes to finish the task. (in this task the pupils have to match words with their definitions given in the textbook – most pupils do this in silence)
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Extract 3: Reading comprehension (Mo)

24 T: Now you move to Task 3 in the textbook (a true/false task). You read the text again and decide which statements are true, which are false. Who can translate the instruction into Vietnamese? (asks one boy to read aloud the translation)

25 T: Now you read and do the task in three minutes.

26 Ps: (read silently and individually)

27 T: (three minutes later) Ready? Now the first sentence.

28 Ps: (in chorus) True.

29 T: The second.

30 Ps: (in chorus) False.

31 (The same procedure is repeated for the remaining sentences)

32 T: Now let’s do After You Read Activities in your textbook.

33 T: (in Vietnamese) Who can translate the instruction?

34 T: (points to a girl)

35 P: (reads aloud the translation)

36 T: Now you do the activity in groups (puts pupils in four groups)

37 Ps: (sit in groups but do the task individually and silently)

(Observation 3: Unit 16, Grade 10)

Interview data

Following the final observations, the teachers were interviewed to explore the rationale behind their teaching behaviours. The following six themes emerged from the data.

1 Learner-centred teaching and time pressure

The textbook writers state that learners ‘should participate in communicative activities actively, creatively and cooperatively’ (Van et al 2006: 10). However, in her interview, Quyt acknowledged that the new curriculum did not influence the way she taught. Her primary concern was how to finish the prescribed syllabus, rather than how to organise the class to develop communicative skills.

The [new] textbook has a minimal role in changing our way of teaching. Teachers still keep to their traditional way of teaching, covering everything in the textbook without being sure that our teaching
could help the pupils to communicate in English better. We put the pupils in groups, in pairs, but they speak Vietnamese.

Mo echoed Quyt’s concerns when she stated that there were too many tasks to be completed in a 45-minute lesson.

The pupils’ English is very limited while the prescribed lesson is so long. For example, there are three tasks in the textbook, but the time is enough just for two tasks. We have to push the pupils all the time, otherwise we will have the lesson plan burnt [leave the lesson unfinished].

Mo also believed that explicit grammar instruction was necessary for the pupils, as their level of English proficiency was too poor for doing communicative tasks.

Grammar is attended to in any lesson because the pupils’ level of proficiency is very low and they need to be supported in terms of grammar and vocabulary. The teacher presents the new grammar item on the board through examples, then elicits the rules from the pupils. If the pupils know nothing or very little about the item, the teacher tells them the rules. The pupils write down the rules and the models in their notebooks, then do the exercise [in the textbook].

Time was a matter of concern for all the teachers because they were mandated to finish the textbook according to the time allocated. Cam said that time constraints and the limited English of her pupils prevented her from using more communicative activities. Therefore, she just tried to cover the prescribed content of the lesson.

I follow the PPP [presentation–practice–production] model. I present grammar in real situations. However, the effectiveness of teaching methods is determined by the learners’ level of proficiency. Most of my pupils are of limited proficiency, and I usually do not have enough time to give them free practice [production]. What I manage to do is just to focus on presentation and practice.

2 Use of Vietnamese

Teachers are advised by the curriculum developers to ‘use English appropriately and effectively in teaching’ (MOET 2006: 18). However, the terms appropriately and effectively are not clearly defined. All the lesson extracts showed that first language was used far more than English. In the interviews, teachers explained that they had to use Vietnamese simply because their pupils would not be able to understand the lessons if they spoke English.

When I started teaching, I was very keen to use English in the classroom and to encourage the pupils to communicate in English. But it was the pupils who discouraged me from using English simply because they didn’t understand at all. Most of my pupils are from the rural area, and they are not aware of the importance of English. For them, English is just a compulsory subject. (Quyt)

The other two teachers shared Quyt’s concern that extensive use of English would probably lead to frustration in their pupils because of their limited language ability.

My pupils’ English is very poor. They would be unable to understand if I spoke English to them. Sometimes when I did try to use English in the classroom, my pupils just laughed. After four years’ learning English at the lower secondary school, a few pupils remain unable to use ‘to be’ correctly. (Cam)

Due to their limited exposure to the target language environment, my pupils are hopeless at understanding spoken English. If I speak English frequently in the classroom, the pupils will be making noise for they don’t understand. That’s why I sometimes have to speak English first then repeat everything in Vietnamese, which is really frustrating. Then I fall into the habit of using just Vietnamese in the classroom. (Mo)

3 Lack of motivation to communicate

The textbook writers warned that the curriculum innovation would fail to bring about the desired outcome in terms of communicative ability if teachers did not change their teaching behaviours and learners were not sufficiently motivated to learn the language (Van et al 2006: 17). This is no longer a warning but a fact in the classroom. Pupils appeared to have vague communicative needs and, like the Taiwanese students in the survey by Warden and Lin (2000), were mainly motivated by the requirement to take English as a compulsory examination subject.
Once the pupils pass the examination successfully with their knowledge of grammar, teachers are tempted to focus more on grammar instruction. How can we implement innovation if our pupils do not have well-defined goals of learning English, but just passing the two examinations: General Education Diploma Examination and University Entrance Examination? (Quyt)

Pupils from the countryside hardly ever have opportunities for real-life interaction, so the classroom is the only place where they use English. According to the curriculum, the time allocation for English is three 45-minute periods per week, multiplied by 35 weeks, which is obviously inadequate for pupils to develop any deep and lasting communicative proficiency. The inadequacy of instructional time plus the lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom inhibit the internalisation of linguistic input.

A majority of pupils in my school are country-born and they are not aware of the importance of English. They just see English as a compulsory subject and learn just what is taught in the classroom. Once they are outside the classroom, they forget everything. This creates a gap between their actual proficiency and the requirements of the textbook. When the gap widens they become demotivated to learn the subject. (Mo)

Because the pupils do not have enough time to internalise the linguistic input, they soon forget most, if not all, of what they have been taught. When they do not see any progress in learning English, they are unlikely to invest time and energy in improving their language proficiency.

They forget what they were taught in lower grades and therefore become lazy. They spend very little time learning English at home. They are not aware of the importance of English though they appear to be keen to learn English. (Cam)

4 **Washback effect of examinations**

As noted earlier, in contrast to the communicative intent of the curriculum, the Ministry (MOET 2006: 18) has institutionalised multiple-choice tests as the only testing method for standardised high-stake tests, with speaking and listening skills not tested. The teachers described this conflict.

Although the new textbook is intended to develop learners’ ability to use English communicatively, such a goal may be for the future, not for now. If we follow communicative orientations, our pupils won’t be able to do the multiple-choice examinations. (Mo)

The new textbook requires the teacher to change her method of teaching and to be more dynamic. However, pupils have great difficulty participating in communicative tasks due to their English deficiency. Therefore, they just pay attention to grammar learning. Given this fact, together with the multiple-choice testing, teaching has to be grammar-focused. (Cam)

The consequence is that only lip-service is paid to communication. Teachers just mention communication in their lesson plans for the sake of cosmetics, as Quyt is quite frank in stating.

The lesson objectives stated in the lesson plan are to develop the pupils’ communicative skills, but our actual classroom teaching just emphasises how to help the pupils to do well in the multiple-choice tests.

5 **Lack of appropriate resources**

The textbook writers point out that ‘the learner-centred approach and communicative approach require that both teachers and learners know how to use teaching aids and equipment such as cassettes, videos, CD-ROMs, pictures, computers, language labs’ (Van et al 2006: 16). However, in reality most Vietnamese schools, except for a few elite ones, are poorly resourced and only basically equipped.

To have an interesting lesson requires the availability of teaching aids and much of teachers’ investment, but besides teaching, teachers have to attend to so much paperwork. (Mo)

Vietnamese classrooms, from the primary to the tertiary level, are not sound-proof and noise concerns teachers. In many schools, teachers are not daring enough to allow pupils to play language games for fear of interfering with other classes.

The new curriculum and textbook are not appropriate given the physical capacity of the school. Classes are crowded. When we teach listening we have to turn on the high volume, which affects the neighbouring classes. If the volume is low the pupils cannot hear clearly. (Cam)
Professional competence

With physical and technical problems and low salaries, teachers can lose any incentive to improve their teaching by following the innovation policy.

Pupils’ motivation is low, while teachers have to be concerned with many non-teaching things. Low salaries disallow teachers to be fully dedicated to teaching. (Quyt)

The limited opportunities for professional development were noted earlier (Canh 2007) and these teachers considered that they were not sufficiently competent for the delivery of the intended curriculum.

We are not familiar with the new teaching method, so we tend to teach the way we were taught with the traditional method. (Cam)

This wider issue was acknowledged by all the teachers and one-shot in-service training courses were seen as failing to help them to teach the communicative approach.

Many teachers in my school are not competent enough so they encounter great challenges in teaching the new textbook. Many of them were retrained Russian teachers or were trained in ‘extension’ courses. This affects negatively the quality of the lesson. (Quyt)

Honestly, teachers are not competent in using the new teaching method, while the in-service training does not help much … We have to manage everything on our own. (Mo)

These six themes reflect the reasons why communicative teaching methods were not applied in the observed lessons and suggest that significant demotive factors relating to teachers (Trang and Baldauf 2007) are likely to continue to affect pupil proficiency and motivation to learn English.

Discussion

Findings from this study are consistent with those of other research into Asian contexts that have indicated that a wide gap exists between what is intended by teaching innovation designers and what is actually implemented by classroom teachers (eg Carless 2001; Sato 2002; Wang 2008). While curriculum developers and textbook writers emphasise the adoption of a communicative approach to teaching, classroom pedagogy has remained textbook-based, test-oriented and teacher-fronted (Wang 2008). The teachers in the present study appeared to be primarily concerned with how to cover the syllabus by finishing the textbook, which is the normative way of teaching in Vietnam. Hence, they emphasised reproduction of knowledge instead of creating opportunities for pupils to use the target language for genuine communication. The result is that ‘spontaneous discourse was rare’ (Tomlinson and Bao 2004: 99) and the observed interactions between the teachers and the pupils were limited to giving and checking understanding of instructions and display and direct-reference questions. Teachers focused on explaining the rules of grammar in Vietnamese and placed their emphasis on the extraction of explicit information provided in the textbooks. There was an absence of restructuring activities, and little attention was paid to developing individual thought processes or the negotiation of meaning among pupils. Unless teachers have sufficient English proficiency, they tend to resort to traditional grammar-based teaching and use Vietnamese extensively in the classroom. The teachers, like English teachers elsewhere (Li, D. 1998; Yu 2001; Sato 2002), knew only some basic English grammar and vocabulary, and observations revealed that even when the teachers spoke minimal English in the classroom, their English was not always comprehensible.

From the interview data, and from what can be reasonably inferred from the observed lessons, the learners struggled to understand and use English, and seemed to lack any motivation for communicative competence. Instead, they were likely to be demotivated by the teaching methods employed (Canh 2002; Trang and Baldauf 2007) and motivated mainly by the requirements of tests and examinations (Warden and Lin 2000). In a teaching and learning culture, where teacher performance is measured by learner test scores (Canh 2000) and learners do not have any incentive for developing communicative competence, teaching understandably apes the testing procedures. When non-communicative testing remains the norm of assessment, appeals for communicative teaching remain rhetorical (Gorsuch 2000; Nunan 2003; Littlewood 2007).
Top-down curriculum innovations initiated by ministries of education tend to adopt power-coercive strategies, which oblige teachers to adopt changes. Such strategies are reinforced by persuasive rationalisations from decontextualised, theoretical perspectives, rather than careful consideration of how similar innovations have fared in other relevant contexts, such as neighbouring educational systems. Moreover, as MacDonald (1991) has pointed out, those responsible for curricular innovations need to take into account key factors in the local contexts in which the innovations are to be operationalised. These factors involve, among other things, the existing levels of pedagogic knowledge and skills of teachers, and the beliefs they hold about the changes that are expected of them. If requirements of the intended curriculum are too far removed from teachers’ present levels of understanding, then effort needs to be expended in a normative re-educative approach to curriculum change (Chin 1967; McGee 1997), in which teacher knowledge and skills can be enhanced and their belief systems adjusted. Expecting teachers to comply with a top-down introduction of new materials or strategies, without taking steps to provide for an appropriate change in beliefs, results in mere lip service (Hu 2002) and surface change (Fullan 1993) behind the closed doors of classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper presents a one-off snapshot of the attitudes and practices of a small number of Vietnamese high-school teachers and no firm generalisations can be drawn from the study. However, despite these limitations, this small-scale study provides further insights into the complex process of implementing curricular innovation. It highlights the need to bridge the gap between the idealised world of innovation designers and the realistic world of teachers, who are essential to the implementation of innovation. To develop a more comprehensive picture of the role of teachers in implementing innovation in Vietnamese settings, large-scale studies, using multiple methods of data collection, are needed.

Notes

1 Transcript conventions: T = teacher, Ps = pupils, *italics* = field notes.

2 In this paper the teachers are referred to as Cam, Quyt and Mo, which are all pseudonyms.

References


