

# 8 | Teachers' Beliefs about Curricular Innovation in Vietnam: A Preliminary Study

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of curriculum innovation has in recent years been undergoing an important transformation. Emphasis has shifted from a focus on curriculum planning to determine what changes are prescribed in the new curriculum to an attempt to understand the formation and modification of teacher thinking, their dispositions, knowledge and beliefs. Markee's (1997) model of primary curricular innovation shows the reciprocity between three dimensions of change: (a) changes in pedagogical values; (b) changes in teaching materials; and (c) changes in methodological skills. The importance of Markee's first dimension is emphasized by several authorities. For example, Hargreaves (1989) has asserted, "change in the curriculum is not effected without some concomitant change in the teacher" (p. 15) because it is the teacher who is responsible for delivering the curriculum at the classroom level. He goes on to argue that teachers' thoughts, beliefs and assumptions have powerful implications for the change process, and for the materialization of the curriculum policy into curriculum practice. According to Louden (1991), teachers "don't merely deliver the curriculum. They develop it, define it, and reinterpret it too" (p. iv). Underlying such views is the assumption that the beliefs individuals hold are the best indicators of the decisions they make during the course of everyday life (Bandura, 1986), and that teachers' beliefs guide their classroom behaviors (Stern & Shavelson, 1983). In effect, there has been an increasing interest in the study of teachers' instructional beliefs and their influence on curriculum implementation in the last few decades. The low degree of success in many educational reforms has been seen as a major reason why teachers' instructional beliefs need to be considered (Fullan, 1993). The present study aims to ascertain a sample of Vietnamese EFL teachers' beliefs about the new English textbooks for the upper secondary

school students as well as to understand their self-reported implementation of the new textbook in the light of the contextual constraints they face that may influence their beliefs on the implementation of the prescribed curricular innovation. Following the work of Deford (1985) and Richardson, Aders, Tidwell and Lloyd (1991), I have adopted a constructivist perspective in which teachers are seen as knowing, meaning-making beings, and their construction of knowledge and meaning influences their action. This perspective recognizes the role of the teacher as an active mediator of innovation, constructing and reorganizing a personal pedagogy, rather than a passive consumer of innovative ideas imposed on them by 'experts' or curriculum developers.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Interest in teachers' instructional beliefs and the impact of those beliefs on teaching and learning has constituted a major area of research in teacher education since the mid-1970s (Borg, 1999, 2003; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Freeman, 2002; Lovat & Smith, 1995), and it has been argued that teachers' beliefs have an influential, if not central, role in the implementation of curriculum innovation and change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fullan, 1982; Stenhouse, 1983). Teachers' instructional beliefs reflect their conceptions, practical knowledge, personal theories of knowledge and experiential knowledge (Anderson & Bird, 1995), and are conceptualized as a set of assumptions that teachers hold on various educational processes such as curriculum, schooling, students, teaching and learning, and knowledge (Lovat & Smith, 1995). In this study the teacher's beliefs are defined as the teacher's professional and practical knowledge as well as the teacher's goals, values, and assumptions (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Cuban (1993) has argued that "The knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that teachers have ... shape what they choose to do in their classrooms and explain the core of instructional practices that have endured over time" (p. 256). In the same vein, van Driel, Verloop, Werven and Dekkers (1997), and Trigwell, Prosser and Taylor (1994) claim that curriculum innovations are doomed to fail if the emphasis remains on developing specific skills, without taking into account the teachers' cognitions, including their beliefs, intentions, and attitudes. For these reasons, Pajares (1992) claims that the investigation of teachers' beliefs "should be a focus of educational research and can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research

agendas have not and cannot" (p. 307). According to Lovat and Smith (1995), the beliefs that a teacher holds act as mental models driving his/her practice and processing of new information. These beliefs seem to play the role of a mediator between the goals of curricular innovation and their actual implementation of such innovation. For these reasons, teachers' instructional beliefs need to be confronted and re-appraised, or changes will only be 'cosmetics' or 'travesty' of the original innovation goals as it has happened in the past with a large number of large-scale innovations (Burkhardt, Fraser, & Ridgeway, 1990). Cuban (1990) also suggests careful examination should be given to the role of teacher beliefs so that the problems and past failures in educational reform can be identified and remedied. It might be noted at this point that there is some controversy over the extent to which the construct of beliefs overlaps with attitudes, values, perceptions, theories, and images, all of which are beliefs in disguise (Pajares, 1992). As Borg (2003) has suggested there is a need for the development of unified conceptual framework within which present and future research can be located.

While many studies on teachers' beliefs about teaching and their classroom practice have been well documented (e.g., Allen, 2002; Borg, 1999; Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Burns, 1992; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Farrell, 2005), little has been done to explore teachers' beliefs about curricular innovation in the context of Vietnam, where curricular innovation has always been top-down in nature with the prime focus solely on what to change rather than on the impact that changes would have on students, teachers, and the school itself as a whole (Nunan, 1988; Richards, 1990). This preliminary study is an attempt to begin to fill the gap.

The study was designed to explore the three following questions.

- a) What beliefs do teachers hold about the new textbook in the context of the recent curricular innovation?
- b) To what extent is their self-reported delivery of the new textbook consistent with their articulated beliefs about the new textbook?
- c) What socio-cultural factors that may shape teachers' instructional beliefs on the implementation of change?

Participants were upper-secondary school teachers who had been using this new textbook, and who were attending a short in-service teacher training workshop organized by the Ministry of Education and Training

(MOET). Quantitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire, containing both closed and open-ended items in an attempt to explore teachers' attitudes towards the new textbook. A sample of respondents were then chosen among the volunteers for interviews to clarify issues that arose from the questionnaire data, and to obtain in-depth information about their beliefs and their perceived constraints in using the new textbook.

## **BACKGROUND**

The issue of quality in English language teaching in Vietnam has been a matter of concern. After years of learning English at the secondary school, students find themselves unable to use English for day-to-day communication although most of them pass the English examination as a requirement for the General Education Diploma.

To meet the needs of socio-economic, scientific and technological development, as well as international economic integration of the country, the Government of Vietnam recently requested the Ministry of Education and Training to reform English language teaching at the secondary school toward greater emphasis on students' ability to use English for communicative and academic purposes. After three years of development, a new English curriculum for all national lower and upper secondary schools was officially approved in May, 2006, under which instruction time for English increased starting from Grade 6, instead of from Grade 10 as previously. Actually, the new curriculum had been put into use for four years in the lower secondary school before it was institutionalized.

The new curriculum defines English as 'a compulsory subject,' which is "instrumental to the access of world science and technology as well as world cultures" (MOET, 2006, p. 21). Methodologically, the new curriculum adopts a "learner-centered approach and the communicative approach with task-based teaching being the central teaching method" (*English 10, Teacher's Book*, 2006, p. 12). The aims are to equip students with communicative ability and competence to perform basic language functions receptively and productively, using correct language forms and structures. Besides developing the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as the accompanying grammar, sound system and vocabulary, it also adopts an intercultural communication perspective in an attempt to educate students into both good national and international citizens who are knowledgeable about the target culture as well as their own national culture (MOET, 2006).

The new syllabus content is arranged according to themes and in a cumulative and spiral manner. The themes to be covered in each grade (year) of the secondary school are specified. Themes are drawn from the contexts of the students' daily life including their home, school, health, recreation, community and the natural and social world. The themes provide the context in which four language skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing, and their sub-skills) and linguistic input (vocabulary, phonology, syntax, etc.) as well as cultural values are taught and developed in an integrated manner. These themes are recycled from grade to grade. In recycling, some of the themes stipulated for one grade are repeated in the higher grades, but are dealt with from different perspectives and at different levels of difficulty to cater for the intellectual and cognitive maturity level of the students. Table 1 illustrates the recycling and cumulative manner in which themes are introduced in the new syllabus.

**TABLE 1**  
**Themes Covered in the New Syllabus (MOET, 2006, p. 6)**

Themes	Grades						
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. You and me/Personal information	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2. Education	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3. Community	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4. Health	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
5. Recreation	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
6. The world around us (I)	√	√	√	√			
7. The world around us (II)							
- Nature and Environment					√	√	√
- People and places					√	√	√

Unlike the previous syllabus that emphasized only the learning of linguistic knowledge, the new syllabus specifies the learning objectives in terms of language skills. (For the structure of the new English language syllabus for the secondary school, see the Appendix.)

In operationalizing these approaches to English language teaching in Vietnamese lower and upper secondary schools, a set of textbooks was written by a group of hand-picked Vietnamese EFL professionals to replace the existing structure-based ones. This group is divided into two sub-teams, one for the lower secondary school, and the other for the upper secondary school. It is claimed that the new books, mandated by MOET (2006), embody communicative principles such as the organization of language teaching materials through the use of themes, the emphasis on all four skills through the use of task-like activities based on the promotion of

communicative fluency, and the use of audio visual materials. The student's book is accompanied by the teacher's book. In general, the new book series is claimed by the writers to have three novel principles, as shown below.

*A skill focus.* Each thematic unit includes speaking, listening, reading, and writing designed to be taught separately (i.e. each language skill is taught in one separate 45-minute lesson). This is followed by the teaching of phonics and decontextualized, mechanical practice dealing with language forms such as phonics, vocabulary, and grammar. This section comes under the label 'Language Focus,' and is prescribed to be taught in one 45-minute lesson.

*Context.* Meaningful context is created by organizing language materials through themes.

*Audio-visual aids.* Pictures and other illustrations (most of them in color) are used extensively in the textbook. Also, audio tapes are provided to accompany the textbook. (Hoang, Hoang, Do, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2006)

A particular structure is adopted for all the books at each of the two levels (lower secondary and upper secondary): all the books have five lessons in a unit, of which four focus on skills and the fifth on the practice of language forms including pronunciation of discrete sounds and discrete grammar items and vocabulary. A number of these points occur in the previous reading and listening texts, but others are decontextualized. All the books were piloted and evaluated by the writers themselves in selected schools before they were institutionalized.

It is worth mentioning that the only two sources of input for the vast majority of Vietnamese secondary school students are the teacher and the textbook. Upper secondary school teachers are trained in a variety of university departments or four-year colleges where the methodological component tends to be rather theoretical and where up-to-date and relevant materials and resources are scarce. During the training program, they usually have six weeks of teaching practice in local secondary schools where experienced teachers supervise and assess their teaching. Subsequently, they have few opportunities for their professional development in the form of 'fly-in-fly-out' in-service workshops run by university teachers or textbook writers commissioned by MOET. While these workshops are useful to some extent in introducing new ideas to teachers, they are not long or frequent

enough to develop a full understanding of practical application in the classroom. With regard to the textbook, it is mandated by MOET, and therefore prescribes what is taught, what is to be learned, what is assessed, and how much time teachers should spend on the delivery of instruction. Put simply, the textbook becomes the curriculum, and it is understandable that instruction is largely, if not completely, textbook-driven.

## THE STUDY

### Participants

Data for this study were gathered during a short in-service teacher training workshop organized by MOET in Hanoi. Participants were in-service teachers ( $N = 249$ ) representing upper secondary schools located in 11 northern provinces of Vietnam who had experience in using both the old textbook and the new one. There were 85 males and 164 females. All were considered to be more open-minded, and key teachers, selected by the local educational authorities to attend the workshop. Their teaching experience ranged from 1-3 years of teaching to ten or more years of teaching. (See Table 2 for the participants' profile.) Most of these teachers are expected to go back and pass on to other teachers – the 'cascade' model – what they have learned in these workshops.

**TABLE 2**  
**Participants' Profile**

Gender	Years of Teaching Experience				Total
	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-9 years	10 years +	
Male	19	31	24	11	85
Female	44	32	43	45	164
Total	63	63	67	56	249

As can be seen from the table, females were almost twice as many as males. This fairly accurately reflects the situation in Vietnam, where female teachers outnumber males. With regard to their teaching experience, the distribution was quite equal.

All the participants were teachers of Grade 10, the first Grade of the upper secondary education. Their students had been learning English under the new syllabus with the new textbooks for four years (from Grade 6). The

textbook for Grade 10 is, therefore, a continuation of the innovation introduced in the lower secondary school.

### **Method**

The primary purpose of this study was to tap into teachers' beliefs about the new textbook in the context of curricular innovation, the way they delivered the textbook content and the contextual challenges they were faced with in using the new textbook. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a mixed method approach (Cresswell, 2003; Cresswell, Trout & Barbuto, 2002) was adopted in this study. Specifically, after the questionnaires were returned, six teachers were chosen randomly by means of number-drawing among volunteers for semi-structured interviews, which aimed to provide an insight into statistical findings made from the questionnaire, and to elicit teachers' views of the constraints or challenges facing them in using the new book so that interpretation of the impact of educational factors on their instructional beliefs could be made. The combination of the qualitative data emerging from the questionnaire and interviews strengthens the validity of the inferences to be drawn from statistical analysis of the quantitative data.

### **The Questionnaire**

A four-point Likert-scale questionnaire was employed in this study to explore teachers' beliefs about the new textbook and how they implemented innovative ideas underlying the new textbook according to their self-report. A Likert-scale questionnaire is "effective for gathering respondents' views, opinions, and attitudes about various language-related issues" (Brown, 2001, p. 41). The questionnaire was composed of three parts. Part I aimed to elicit information about the respondents' biodata and their teaching experience while Part II would gather information on teachers' beliefs about the new textbook. Part III used the same format as Part II, and aimed to obtain information on teachers' self-reported use of the new textbook. Both Part II and Part III were limited to the use of questions asking for degree of agreement on statements related to beliefs about the new textbook and the way the textbook was used. There were four options for each statement from strong agreement to strong disagreement for the respondent to endorse according to their beliefs. The choice of an even number of options was to force respondents to 'jump one way or the other,' rather than to 'sit on the fence' by choosing a neutral

non-opinion option (Brown, 2001, p. 41). Two open-ended questions asked the respondents to list two main strengths and two main weaknesses of the new textbook. These open-ended questions were aimed at eliciting richer data from the respondents, in further exploration of their beliefs about the new textbook. At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. If they were willing, they just gave their mobile telephone number, if not they left this blank. The questionnaire was written in Vietnamese to assure that respondents did not have any language problems in understanding the questionnaire items.

For each statement in the questionnaire, teachers were invited to respond with their level of agreement. As all the statements were consonant with principles of communicative learner-centered approach, and reflected the pedagogical orientations of the new textbook. Each statement was scored 4 for 'strongly agree' down to 1 for 'strongly disagree.' A higher mean would mean a higher level of agreement with a statement.

Of a total 300 questionnaires distributed to 300 participants in the workshop, 249 (83.0%) were returned. (For the profile of the participants, see Table 2.)

### **The Follow-up Interviews**

After the questionnaires were returned, 21 teachers volunteered for the interview. Each of these volunteers was given a code-number, then a number drawing was made to select randomly 6 teachers (4 females and 2 males) for the semi-structured interviews which aimed to provide an insight into the responses made in the questionnaire and to elicit teachers' goals, values, assumptions as well as their perceived constraints in using the new textbook in their own teaching context. All the interviews were conducted informally in local places such as cafes or tea shops near the workshop venue. They were conducted in Vietnamese so that there was an ease of communication and that teachers could express their attitudes fully without the hindrance of doing in a second language. The interviews, which lasted around 45 minutes each, were audio-taped, fully transcribed verbatim and thematically categorized. Information from the interview was used to interpret the questionnaire data as well as to investigate teachers' perceived constraints or challenges in using the new textbook.

## RESULTS

### Teachers' Beliefs about the New Textbook

It was revealed from the questionnaire data that the teachers appeared to reflect positively on the new textbook. Most strongly agreed that the new textbook was more communicative than the old structured-based textbook ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) (see Table 3). With regard to the input, the topics covered in the textbooks seemed to be relevant and motivating to the students ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) while teachers agreed that language activities helped their students to be more active in the classroom ( $M = .81$ ,  $SD = .61$ ). Grammar and vocabulary were perceived to be adequately treated ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) though they assumed that language forms needed to be introduced in a more meaningful context ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = .77$ ). Finally, the textbook did not seem to cater for the mixed-ability students and teachers

**TABLE 3**  
**Teachers' Beliefs about the New Textbook (N = 249)**

Item	Mean	SD	Mode	Min/Max	Un-answered
1. The new textbook is more communicative than the old one.	3.49	.52	3	1/4	0
2. The new textbook motivates my students to learn English better.	2.71	.61	3	1/4	1 (.4%)
3. Activities in the new textbook help my students to be more active in learning English.	2.81	.61	3	1/4	2 (.8%)
4. The new textbook provides adequate practice in vocabulary and grammar.	3.03	.63	3	1/4	0
5. The linguistic input and topics covered in the new textbook are interesting to my students.	3.02	.62	3	1/4	0
6. The new textbook allows me to easily re-design tasks and activities according to my students' level of English.	2.51	.67	2	1/4	0
7. The new textbook helps my students to study grammar in a more meaningful way.	2.43	.77	2	1/4	1 (.4%)

felt that they could not be as flexible as they wished in adapting the textbook ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .67$ ). It is interesting to note that each item in the questionnaire elicited a full range of responses – i.e., from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). This suggests that the teachers felt free to express their opinions.

In general, teachers were quite positive about the new textbook. In other words, the textbook was seen as an improvement over the old one in the sense that the new textbook helped their students to be more active in learning English communicatively.

### Teachers' Self-Reported Use of the Textbook

A general observation from the questionnaire data indicates that teachers' beliefs and reported classroom practice seemed to be consistent with the communicative orientations of the new textbook. For example, they used group work and pair work more often in the classroom ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .57$ ), and they appeared to spend more time on communicative activities ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) (see Table 4). Grammar seemed, on the whole, to be dealt with in context, rather than in isolation ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = .63$ ), but it seemed not many of them used English frequently in the classroom ( $M =$

**TABLE 4**  
**Teachers' Self-Reported Use of the New Textbook (N = 249)**

Items	Mean	SD	Mode	Min/Max	Un-answered
1. The new textbook helps me to spend less time preparing the lesson.	1.74	.68	2	1/4	0
2. I always follow closely the teacher's book.	2.68	.63	3	1/4	0
3. I always give my students more time to do communicative tasks.	2.99	.56	3	1/4	1 (.4%)
4. I use group work and pair work more often.	3.18	.57	3	2/4	0
5. I spend less time explaining grammar rules.	2.55	.74	3	1/4	1 (.4%)
6. I always help my students to learn grammar through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.	2.83	.63	3	1/4	2 (.8%)
7. I use English extensively in the classroom.	2.43	.69	2	1/4	0
8. I use other materials to supplement the textbook.	2.74	.71	3	1/4	1 (.4%)

2.43,  $SD = .69$ ). Although teachers reported that they used supplementary

materials in their teaching ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = .71$ ), it looked as if their teaching was rigid and adhered to the guidance in the teacher's book ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = .63$ ). The new textbook could be challenging to them because they did not believe that the new textbook helped to reduce the time they spent preparing for their teaching ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = .68$ ).

The open-ended questions in the questionnaire asked the teachers to list two major strengths and two major weaknesses of the new book. The commonly elicited strengths of the new book included the coverage of the four distinctive language skills and beautiful illustrations while weaknesses were linguistic difficulty, and overloaded vocabulary and grammar structures as well as the unfamiliarity of the topical content to the students. According to teachers' comments (translated by the author, as are all the interview quotations which follow) the new book has the following strengths.

- beautifully illustrated and communication-oriented
- separation of four language skills: reading, speaking, listening, writing
- interesting and relevant topics

With regard to the weaknesses, they all point out that the new book

- is too difficult;
- has some topics which are not relevant or suitable to my students; and
- reading texts have too many new words.

These ideas of the new textbook were supported by the teachers in the interviews. For example, one teacher asserted that

The new textbook is underpinned by the communicative approach. It prescribes every lesson, so students know what language skill they are going to learn for the day. It also helps teachers to know the objectives of each lesson as to what communicative skills that need to be focused on.

However, another teacher was quite frank in claiming that

If permitted, I'd choose the old textbook for the reason that it is more suitable to linguistically weak students. Despite the teacher's strenuous effort, only the linguistically stronger students can benefit from the new textbook. Because of its linguistic difficulties,

the effectiveness of the new textbook is quite limited.

While the overall reception of the book was positive, statements such as the above revealed divergences in the teachers' views of the intrinsic quality of the new textbook. The comments also showed their willingnesses to express critical opinions. These factors were also present when teachers were asked about the practical implications of using the new materials.

### **Teachers' Beliefs about Contextual Constraints on the Implementation of the New Textbook**

While the questionnaire data shows that most of the teachers agreed with the communicative orientations in teaching English which were embedded in the new textbook, the interview transcripts revealed their beliefs about a number of constraints on the practical application of the underlying methodology of the new textbook. These include the washback effect of tests and exams, student proficiency, student motivation, lack of resources, teacher factors, etc., namely, a learner-centered communicative approach.

Two major constraints were the current assessment approach, which uses the multiple choice technique, and the students' limited proficiency in English. In the interview one teacher said that

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

Similarly, one teacher sounded quite frustrated in implementing innovation on account of her contextual constraints. She said that

Successful implementation of innovation depends on how to help students in lower grades to achieve the intended level of proficiency, and on how to support teachers so that they actually change their way of teaching in the classroom. Upon their return from the training workshop, they try to apply new ideas in their classroom, but their students' level of English is quite limited. This makes them resort to the old way of teaching. Moreover, once their students 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

students do not have well-defined goals of learning English, but just passing the two examinations: General Education Diploma Examination and University Entrance Examination.

The pressure of preparing the students for the examination plus students' limited English confront the teacher with their old ways of teaching. As one teacher described the situation:

The new textbook requires the teacher to change her methods of teaching and to be more dynamic. However, students have great difficulty participating in communicative activities 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.

Students' motivation was another concern. Lack of exposure to the target language as well as the absence of a well-understood English language education policy affected negatively the students' motivation. "They don't know what they are learning English for, except for the examination. Quite few of them or their parents are aware of the importance of knowing English," one teacher said in frustration. The limited resources and the absence of a target language environment were the obstacles to the development of students' communicative skills. The teacher expressed her concern that

In the rural area, the teacher is both a dictionary and a grammar book. The lack of communicative opportunities in the target language makes it impossible to teach grammar communicatively. In the classroom, the teacher has the feeling that the students have well mastered the structure, but in the tests they demonstrated their very limited knowledge of grammar.

Such socio-cultural factors discouraged teachers from innovating their teaching. Even when the teachers had positive attitudes towards innovation, they failed to translate the intended methodology of the textbook writers in their classroom practice. For example, one teacher said that

Although the new textbook is intended to develop students' ability to use English communicatively, such a goal may be for the future, not for now. If we follow communicative orientations, our students

won't be able to do the multiple-choice examinations. In addition, because not all teachers are aware of the need to innovate, and the school resources are quite limited, innovation remains rhetorical.

It is understandable that teachers, while appreciating the innovative ideas underlying the new textbook, did not consider the book as an 'agent of change.' Teachers claimed that nothing could change their way of teaching except themselves. In the interview, one teacher explicated that

The 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 students to communicate in English better. We put the students in groups, in pairs, but they speak Vietnamese.

Overall, therefore, the qualitative statements derived from the interviews clearly flesh out the statistical data and thereby provide a thicker description of the realities facing the teachers when implementing the new textbooks, and enable a richer interpretation of their beliefs.

## **DISCUSSION**

Three major issues emerged from the findings of this study. Firstly, there is a discrepancy between teachers' articulated beliefs about the value of the textbook and their self-reported delivery because of the conceptual mismatch between the teachers and the textbook writers. Secondly, the view of the textbook as an agent of change is challenged. Finally, success of curricular innovation depends more on factors such as teachers' and students' motivation, attitudes and beliefs, and other socio-cultural factors than on the textbook.

In the first place, the findings of this study showed that all teachers had quite a positive attitude towards the new book. They all believed that the new textbook was more communicative, more interesting, and more motivating to their students than the old one. This is both supported by their responses to the questionnaire and in the interviews. However, when asked in the interviews what they meant by 'communicative teaching,' they answered that communicative teaching included the use of games, pair work, group work, and the teaching of four separate language skills:

listening, speaking, reading and writing. Obviously, the teachers' conceptions of communicative language teaching did not correspond to the views either of the textbook writers or of the applied linguistics authorities upon which the new curriculum was based. This was evidenced in the way the teachers explained the way they taught grammar. Although in the questionnaire, teachers stated that they taught grammar through the development of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, it was revealed from the interviews that grammar instruction was not integrated in language skills development tasks, rather grammar was taught explicitly in these skills lessons. One teacher explained that

Grammar is attended to in any lesson, including the skills lesson because the students are linguistically weak 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 elicit the students. If the students know nothing or very little about the item, the teacher tells them the rules. The students write down the rules and the models in the note-books, then do the exercises.

Typically, the teachers felt that attention to form could not be restricted to the 'language focus' lesson. In other words, they taught grammar at all stages of the unit.

Grammar was obviously the teachers' greatest concern. All of the teachers in the interview complained that the new book did not treat grammar adequately and the time allocation for grammar instruction as prescribed in the syllabus was insufficient. They needed more time for grammar so that they would be able to prepare their students for the examinations. The concept of 'communicative grammar instruction' was understood by the teachers as the presentation of the new grammar item in a simulated situation either in English or in Vietnamese which was followed by the teacher's explicit explanation. The students were, then, set for practice. This approach to grammar was explained by one teacher in the interview as follows.

We use situations or story-telling to present the structure, then we explain the meaning of the new structure, then we ask the student to repeat the new structure and translate it into Vietnamese.

Evidently, the teacher here was blending elements of the PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) approach with the Grammar-Translation Method, which was not the intention of the textbook writers.

One interviewed teacher explained that the students mastered grammar well in the classroom, but the test revealed their deficiency in grammar as described above. When I asked her to clarify how she had the feeling that the students had mastered the grammar structure, she indicated that she followed a PPP model, but she acknowledged that there was no time for production. She stated that

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

Thus, teachers' beliefs about curricular innovation were not consistent with their reported delivery because there is, among other things, a mismatch in their conceptual understanding of the intended innovation and that of the innovation advocates. To be more exact, teachers appeared to have a surface and somewhat cosmetic understanding of learner-centered communicative language teaching. This point necessitates the clarification of conceptual meanings in innovation. Otherwise, innovation tends to fall back on vague, utopian, or idealistic impressions (Carless, 1998; Hadley, 1996, cited in Hadley, 1999; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986). Also, this raises the question of validity of using only questionnaire data in evaluating the textbook, and heightens the importance of obtaining more in-depth information, such as by interviewing.

Next, with regard to the role of the textbook as agent of change (Hutchinson & Hutchinson, 1996), research literature suggests that curriculum support materials, particularly textbooks are highly influential in molding the nature and effectiveness of curricular innovation (Fullan, 1991). The problem of Markee's (1997) model of primary curricular innovation is that while the reciprocal relationships between the three components – pedagogical values, teaching materials, and methodological skills – are acknowledged, it is not clear which component leads to change in the other two. Findings from this preliminary study show that curriculum innovation underpinned by the new textbook is one thing, the delivery is quite another. The textbook alone can by no means help innovation to take

off. In other words, the good textbook can support change but cannot be the sole prerequisite of change. Thus, the belief that textbooks have enormous influence, and can somehow bring about significant change, or the assumption that much will automatically follow curricular changes has to be questioned. As revealed in this study, teachers still taught the new book in their accustomed way. Also, all teachers in this study believed that the textbook's input was irrelevant and inappropriate to their students' proficiency and also that the linguistic input was overloaded. Obviously, these teachers did not "get adequate preparation in how to use textbooks in appropriate ways" (Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1998, cited in Richards, 1998, p. 136). Teacher training should therefore focus more on how to help the teachers to tailor the materials more closely not only to their students' needs and their own teaching styles (Richards, 1998, p. 135) but also to their students' level of proficiency, rather than on the transmission of general teaching techniques. Additionally, the goals of professional development should extend beyond merely 'training' them to achieve specified and limited objectives, but should be anchored in teachers' knowledge of the current situation and in a vision of the future for both the curriculum and the students (Edge, 1996).

Thus, in-service teacher development needs to focus on how to change teachers' existing beliefs. It is not uncommon that in-service teacher training workshops or courses in Vietnam are fundamentally based on the assumption that teacher change is simply a linear process, which is rooted in changes in teachers' professional knowledge. Therefore, such workshops or courses tend to overemphasize the simple transmission – rather than develop a full understanding – of new techniques of teaching different language skills and language components such as grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc. Partly because of the limitations of time, little attention is paid to the underlying rationale of the new textbook and even less on considering how to change teachers' existing beliefs about language teaching so as to implement the new curriculum. It appears from the findings from this study that after picking and choosing selectively among the concepts introduced in the in-service workshops, the teachers were just able to find a group of ideas that supported their own preconceptions about language learning and teaching. Of course, it would be naive to assume that teachers' existing beliefs about language learning and teaching are sufficient for professional language teaching. It was revealed in the current study that some teachers seemed to have contradictory beliefs about the new textbook. On the one hand they said that the textbook covers interesting and relevant topics, but then they complained that the textbook

has topics that are not relevant or suitable to their students. To some extent, these contradictory attitudes may co-occur because the teachers have sets of beliefs in different mental categories; for example, they may have a set of 'ideal' beliefs which lead them to agree that certain topics are, in principle, relevant and useful for learners of English. This set may be held quite separate from a 'practical' category, in which the teachers' beliefs are focused on what is actually possible in their own classrooms. There is a need for teachers' consciousness of these distinctions to be raised, so that they could reconcile them both in their conceptual framework and in their everyday teaching. Such issues should be considered by teacher developers and educational administrators if successful implementation of curricular innovation is desired.

To achieve a goal of full professional competence, much more time and resources need to be devoted to teacher development so that curricular innovation can be effective. Moreover, key teachers, such as those who were the participants in this study, need to be shown how to be good mentors to less experienced teachers. As was pointed out in the introduction, language teachers cannot be considered as mere 'consumers' of a curriculum, but rather as the key executive agents of change in the school system.

Finally, it was indicated in this study that while teachers valued the new textbook in terms of its communicative orientations and they believed in the ultimate goal of developing students' communicative competence in English, educational factors such as students' low motivation and low level of proficiency in English as well as the existing testing approach seemed to affect their instructional beliefs. Such factors need to be considered in planning and managing innovation.

According to Swain's (1979) influential working model of second language acquisition (cited in Tollefson, 1989, p. 24), curriculum affects the proficiency of the learner – what is to be learned. Proficiency, in its turn, affects the type and quantity of input the learners receive, their attitude and motivation, and their learning process. Although the new curriculum had been implemented for four years in the lower secondary school before the new textbook for Grade 10 was introduced in the upper secondary school, students' level of proficiency remained very limited. Put another way, curricular innovation in the lower secondary school failed to bring about desired effect, i.e., improving students' ability to use English for basic communicative purposes. Their low proficiency led to their low motivation, and both affected negatively not only their learning process, but also the teacher's efforts to innovate their teaching. There seems to be a vicious

circle. Curricular innovation is introduced to improve the quality of the education process, but successful implementation of curricular innovation depends partly on the students' motivation and their learning quality.

Obviously, the theoretical bases and content are of lesser importance than the "educational and managerial issues" (White, 1988, p. 1) as well as social and cultural issues, which may contribute to the forming of teachers' instructional beliefs. In order to for the success of curricular innovation to be guaranteed, a careful analysis of the potential impact of those issues is needed (Richards, 2001). Put another way, complex problems of curricular innovation can by no means be tackled by simplistic solutions which address only one dimension of the educational process, for example, by advocating changes in the textbooks, teaching techniques, methods, learning styles, technologies, class contact hours, or assessment strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study, as it is entitled, is merely a preliminary study of the English curriculum innovation in Vietnamese secondary school. Findings of this study showed that there is a discrepancy between teachers' stated beliefs and their self-reported instructional practices. Such discrepancy may be explained by the influence of socio-cultural factors on teachers' instructional beliefs. Of those factors, the most powerful one that affects teachers' instructional beliefs appeared to be the approach to assessment, which adopted a multiple-choice testing technique. The current test format requires the students to answer multiple-choice questions on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and reading comprehension plus some controlled writing. Neither oral skills nor listening skills are tested. In such a test, test-takers' performance just show the similarities and differences between the language norms of the examiner and candidate; it tells nothing of the norms which the candidate himself would apply in a use situation. Changing the assessment system to support curricular innovation is sound logic, but as Henrichsen (1987) has suggested "proposing that the examinations be changed is easy, and many have done it. On the other hand, overcoming the barriers to change and actually modifying the exams are far more difficult tasks" (p. 179). The problem becomes more complicated in a society like Vietnam where education is for purposes of certification, and examinations are central in the selection process. Furthermore, what is implied in this study is that success of any innovation in classroom practice depends, to a large extent, on how the targeted innovation accommodates

teachers' beliefs as well as on how a harmony between the targeted innovation and teachers' enacted implementation of the innovation in the classroom is created. Central to the process of curricular innovation is the opportunity for teachers to reflect upon the evolving relationship between what they believe and what they do in the classroom.

There are three major limitations of the study. One most obvious limitation is that it lacks information of the actual delivery of the textbook in the classroom by the teacher. Another limitation is that the study was related to teachers' beliefs about, and their self-reported delivery of, the new English textbook for Grade 10 only. Finally, participants were the key teachers who were representing various upper secondary schools located in 11 northern provinces of Vietnam. These teachers were regarded as the more open-minded in their schools and were appointed to take part in the short in-service training workshop by the Ministry of Education and Training.

Evidently, more research needs to be carried out in Vietnam to confirm the tentative findings of this initial study. More extensive surveys among a wider sample of teachers are needed, as is more in-depth exploration of their underlying beliefs through interviews. As just indicated, self-report needs to be compared with actual teaching practice, and therefore sensitive classroom observation studies are required, accompanied by post-lesson discussions with teachers to identify their reasons for classroom decision-making. In these ways, a fuller exploration of the interplay between the three dimensions identified by Markee – and others – can be facilitated. Despite these limitations, I hope that the findings of this small-scale study would provide useful information to textbook writers, teacher educators and administrators in Vietnam – and elsewhere that curricular innovation should be viewed as an integrated and interdependent set of processes that involves careful data gathering, planning, experimenting, monitoring, consultation, and evaluation. As Kennedy (1988) has warned of the hierarchy of systems which constrain innovation that innovations at the level of classroom have to operate within institutional, educational, administrative, political and cultural subsystems, all of which will affect the success of innovation. Unless these factors are considered, innovation in language teaching that only addresses the quality of innovation itself, be it a test, curriculum, method or textbook may be doomed to fail. Above all, we need to put the teachers, and their values and perceptions, in the forefront of our minds when designing and implementing curricular innovations.

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## APPENDIX

### Structure of the English Language Syllabus for the Secondary School (MOET, 2006, pp. 19-25)

Levels	Grades	Number of Hours per Weeks	Number of Weeks	Total Hours of Instruction
Lower Secondary	6	3	35	105
	7	3	35	105
	8	3	35	105
	9	2	35	105
Upper Secondary	10	3	35	105
	11	3	35	105
	12	3	35	105
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>735</b>

### Expected Outcomes in Terms of Expected Outcomes in Terms of Students' Competences: What Students Are Expected to be Able to Do with English by the End of Each Grade

Grade	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
6	Comprehending simple commands and classroom interactions. Comprehending simple statements, questions and answers of about 40-60 words about personal, family, and school information.	Asking and answering questions about personal, family and school information. Undertaking some simple interactions about topics like time, weather, or people, etc.	Comprehending accurately information in simple passages or conversations of about 50-70 words.	Guided writing some simple sentences with the total length of 40-50 words.

7	Comprehending main information in simple passages or conversations spoken with a reasonable speed.	Asking and answering questions about the personal life. Undertaking some simple speech acts like giving invitations, advice, making appointments, giving instruction, etc.	Comprehending the main information in simple passages or conversations of 80-100 words.	Guided writing of a paragraph of 50-60 words for interactional purposes.
8	Comprehending main information and details in passages or conversations of 80-100 words spoken with a reasonable speed.	Asking, answering questions and talking about the personal life. Performing some simple communicative functions like making requests, accepting or turning down invitations, etc.	Comprehending main ideas and details in passages of 110-140 words.	Guided writing of texts of 60-80 words for personal purposes like letters of invitations, or thank-you letters.
9	Comprehending main information and details of passages or conversations of 100-120 words spoken with a reasonable speech.	Asking, answering questions, expressing personal opinions about the personal life. Performing some basic communicative functions like describing habits, making suggestions, or persuading people to do things, etc.	Comprehending main information and details of passages of 150-180 words. Understanding the use of punctuations, and discourse markers.	Guided writing of texts of 80-100 words for personal purposes like form-filling, letter writing.
10	Comprehending main information and details of passages or conversations of 120-150 words spoken with a reasonable speech.	Asking, answering questions and performing some basic communicative functions like asking the way, asking for needed information, etc.	Comprehending main information and details in passages of 190-230 words. Developing skills in using the dictionary and guessing meanings from the context.	Guided writing of texts of 100-120 words for simple interactional and transactional purposes.

11	Comprehending main information and details of passages and conversations of 150-180 words spoken rather naturally.	Asking, answering questions and performing some communicative functions like expressing agreement/disagreement or (dis)satisfaction, describing factual information and expressing personal opinions, etc.	Comprehending main ideas and details of passages of 240-270 words. Developing lexical competence.	Guided writing of texts of 120-130 words for simple interactional and transactional purposes.
12	Comprehending main information and details of passages of 180-200 words spoken almost naturally.	Performing some communicative functions like expressing personal opinions, talking about personal interests, explaining, etc.	Comprehending main ideas and details of texts of 280-320 words. Distinguishing topical idea and supporting ideas. Using key ideas to summarize the reading passage.	Writing passages of 130-150 words for simple interactional and transactional purposes.