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## **Examining Agency Among Teacher Educators: An Action Research In The Context Of Vietnam**

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*Abstract: Teacher agency is an important topic in educational research, but its theoretical observations have not filtered down into practical Vietnamese teaching contexts. The action research project described here showcases a training-based intervention for teacher educators in various disciplines at eight universities in Vietnam. The intervention aimed to develop teaching skills and increase knowledge for teacher educators by helping them explore their students' learning needs and facilitate their professional development. This study occurred within the context of changing Vietnamese political, cultural, economic, and social ways of being. Eight Vietnamese teacher educators of different cultural backgrounds, and working across a variety of subjects were invited to participate in the project. Two stages of research sought to help educators in higher education reflect on their exploration and perception of their teacher agency. The first stage involved training sessions that offered educators necessary knowledge and skills to exercise agency effectively. In the second stage, educators' promotion of their agency in classrooms was analytically observed. Data collected included observation notes, reflective journals, and recordings from semi-structured interviews. Analysis of this data suggested that educators became more knowledgeable, intercultural, and inspirational agents in their classrooms after the educational intervention. Educators exhibited that the more positive attitudes, the more active participation. Conclusions discussed the benefits of fostering teacher agency and how this can be facilitated through professional development.*

### **Introduction**

The construct of agency is becoming more and more popular with researchers in the field of Social Science. Agency can be especially helpful for marginalized people to successfully engage in culturally diverse discourses (Canagarajah, 2007; Morita, 2014). In order to become a successful communicator, individuals are supposed to exercise agency with strong effort. During this process, communicators need to account for different cultural and social influences to understand their speaking role, which helps them to achieve their personal and shared goals (Morita, 2014; Rainio, 2008). Following Canagarajah (2007) and Morita (2014), teacher

agency is central to educational research because of its practical and sustainable values to all teachers themselves, educational policy-makers, leaders, curriculum and assessment writers, and students' academic and non-academic development (e.g., Ishihara, Carroll, Mahler, & Russo, 2018; Kay-Aydar, 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017; Rudolph, 2013). Literature on teacher agency has been widely covered, ranging from privileged to under-privileged educational contexts.

In the context of Vietnamese education, teachers appear as passively engaged. Multiple factors contribute to this perception, such as one-way teaching due to stagnant curriculum, top-down traditional pedagogies, and large-sized classes (Engle & Faux, 2006). Teachers are required to strictly follow particular curriculum and instruction policies without any freedom (Boaler & Greeno, 2000). Also, teachers have very few chances to address their weaknesses in adapting curriculum to meet students' wide-ranging needs. Moreover, curriculum developers are not likely to produce relevant resources or guidelines for teachers to utilize learners' cultural backgrounds. Thus, teachers are unable to know how to explore and consider students' backgrounds and prior knowledge when deciding and designing the suitable curriculum. Scholars have outlined how exercising agency provides valuable knowledge and insight beyond popular teaching and learning experiences. In response to a growing body of literature on teacher agency in other dominant discourses as stated above, discourses are heavily influenced by sociocultural contexts and the students of educators. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature on teacher agency in Vietnamese educational contexts by exploring the extent that Vietnamese teachers of different subjects (e.g. English, Literature, Geography, Chemistry, Biology) developed and exercised agency to strengthen their commitment and professionalism after a training-based intervention – hereafter an educational intervention. Also, the paper seeks an explanation on how educators' teacher agency impacts student academic performance and cultural well-being. However, it is contested that the teacher agency of Vietnamese teachers is partially influenced by Vietnamese sociocultural changes.

Therefore, the research question to fill this gap will be placed on teacher agency as a result of an educational intervention:

- *How does a perceived sense of agency in an educational intervention facilitate teacher educators' different roles and students' academic development?*
- *How effective was an educational intervention in fostering this agency?*

## **Teacher Agency**

In the last few years, agency is a topic that has attracted scholarly attention, but the definition has not been consistent. However, Ahearn (2001) refers to agency as the capacity to act, while Roger and Wetzel (2013) argue that agency is better described as “purposefully and reflective on [his/her] world” (Roger and Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) in sociocultural settings. According to Ahearn (2001) and Lantolf and Pavlenko (2006), agency is believed to evolve continuously because individuals may change their life intentions and goals, so it is said that agency is complex and multifaceted. Before Ahearn (2001), Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency depends on an individual's prior experiences, present decisions, and future intentions. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) further discuss that agency is a “temporally constructed engagement by actors” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). They specify that agency is not possessive, rather, it “is something that people can do.” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). As a result, various features of agency, such as cognitive, affective, and bodily schemas, will

appropriately be adapted in response to engagement in “different [pieces of] formative experience” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 981). In connected to teachers who exercise agency, teachers are likely to have many opportunities, such as continuous professional development, better pay, supervisory and collegial support, in order to develop their careers. This suggests that teachers with the opportunities listed above can exercise their agency better than those with fewer opportunities (Toom, Pyhalto & Rust, 2015). However, current research on agency and how agency is exercised across contexts appears to be inadequate. Specially, in the field of education, teacher agency has been highlighted as essential due to its growing popularity and acceptance by educational researchers and teaching practitioners (Edward, 2005; Edwards & Protheroe, 2003; Priestley et al., 2012; Roger & Wetzell, 2013; Schwartz & Okita, 2009). Therefore, this study explores Vietnamese non-native teachers’ exercise of agency under the framework of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) *Ecological view*. The employment of teacher agency is influenced by teachers’ engagement in their own historical backgrounds, current roles, and pictured future selves. Additionally, this study stresses the recognition of teachers’ social lives in the web of *logics of practices*, which I view that teachers are normally granted the privilege to improve their sense of agency while building capital, such as economic, social, and cultural capital. Also, regarding the context of this study, I consider that manifold sociocultural factors are critical in two ways (St. Pierre, 2010; van Lier, 2008). Firstly, for the classrooms in which they teach, many enterprise classrooms are open and inclusive. In enterprise classrooms, both educators and learners are empowered to utilize and share opinions and beliefs that are influenced by history, institutions, and society (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) in order to explore what agency means. By doing so, they learn the meaning of teacher agency and they can translate it into practice. Secondly, sociocultural factors impact the essence of teachers who should focus on international education agenda and practice. While teachers can learn about agendas and practices, they should also be able employ teacher agency to conduct self-reflection and self-evaluation. Self-awareness contributes to how they can utilize past experience, current abilities, and future desires. Only then, can the educational agendas and practices be applied into teachers’ classrooms in support of their students’ academic success. Grounded on the importance of sociocultural factors as indicated above, teachers are naturally on course to grow their sense of teacher agency and become the teachers of the twenty-first century (McNay, 2004; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson, 2015).

## **Teacher Identity**

It has been shown that teacher agency is a component of teacher identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Teacher identity encompasses what teachers think about themselves and how they are perceived by others (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Thus, with a clear sense of teacher identity, teachers can fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and implement successful action plans (Varghese, 2006). However, the idea that teachers only need to understand themselves is not enough, as they should also learn and understand about the cultures of others that they may interact with. If teachers can foster an understanding of different cultural identities that belong to themselves and others, they should be able to adapt in numerous intercultural classroom settings. This is important, because in their classrooms, students hold various cultural backgrounds and interests. Therefore, teachers should develop their intercultural competence in order to implement job-related accountability, and personal dedication, and readiness to

confidently make their classrooms engaging, enjoyable, and equitable. More specifically, teachers are encouraged to understand their students by examining students from their shoes, challenging cultural stereotypes, and equipping themselves with the worldviews that cultures are diverse and equally important (Bennett, 1993). In this process of intercultural engagement, teachers should be able to construct identities as a result of their interaction with students from different sociocultural backgrounds. The stated cultural views explain how teachers can create relationships with others in a given sociocultural context in this research.

Theoretically, teacher identity is associated with communities that they are engaged in and the practices they are involved in (Wenger, 1998). As a natural tendency, individuals can not only identify their abilities (e.g. strengths and weaknesses), but they can also become aware of roles they take on in certain situations. As a result, they are able to select what practices are suitable under specific circumstances. Parallel to teacher agency, teacher identity is also multi-dimensional and evolving in response to cultural contexts. Thus, aligned with the teacher agency, teachers should be able to actively seek and formulate different identities over time.

In conclusion, teachers are supposed to plan for, and implement initiatives so as to inspire themselves before they can inspire and empower others. With inspiration, teachers can transform their teaching practice and construct their identity according to the diverse communities they practice in.

### **Relevant Studies on Teacher Agency**

Research has provided insights into how teacher agency takes place in various educational settings (e.g., Kay-Aydar, 2015; Leal & Crookes, 2018; Rudolph, 2013; Tao & Gao, 2017). Firstly, Tao and Gao (2017) specifically view teacher agency among Chinese teachers in the wake of educational reform. Under the sociocultural contexts that are believed to impact English teachers' professional development, teachers claim that they find both constraints and opportunities related to continuous learning, sustainable teaching, and research endeavors. Tao and Gao (2017) also point out that teachers' identities can be fully developed in their professional lives, which triggers their sense of how to mediate agency effectively.

Similarly, another study by Rudolph (2013) examines a non-native English speaking teacher under the post-structuralism perspective. According to Rudolph (2013), the teacher's agency is influenced by varying identities they hold as a result of her career-related experiences. The findings reveal that the teacher discusses that she uses agency in order to cope with cultural gaps, inequalities, and dichotomies. This study proves that teachers' confidence and beliefs are two factors behind their abilities to translate agency into teaching practices in order to gain career success.

Furthermore, Kay-Aydar (2015) strongly confirms that teacher identity is seen to support teacher agency, in response to changing social and cultural contexts. To make this transition possible, teacher participation in professional development activities (PDA) (e.g., mentoring) is essential. That is because, with the help of PDA, teachers can have trust and support from others, which results in lasting established relationships.

Lastly, Leal and Crookes (2018) discover that teacher agency of a female English teacher helps to form her identities effectively. In the lens of social justice, Leal and Crookes (2018) find that the model, which stresses *reflexivity*, makes the teacher become accountable for understanding her students' backgrounds. This understanding can enable the teacher to know

how to develop essential knowledge and skills for her students' development. It is also observed that she respected her students' backgrounds (including education, culture, sexual orientation, and personality), allowing her to decide what to teach her students effectively. Through this study, it is clear that teacher agency can increase the effectiveness of teachers' decision making process. This benefits both the teachers' teaching intentions together with the students' academic development and personal interest.

## **The Present Study**

### **Research Context**

The current study took place in Vietnam, a multilingual and multicultural country in Southeast Asia that houses more than 50 different ethnic groups. Education is beneficial and enriching to Vietnamese people's symbolic capital, which leads to upward social and economic mobility. Vietnam has proposed "a critical strategy for advancing human capital development in the government's strategies for socio-economic development" (Le, 2019, p. 8) in the event that sociocultural and sociopolitical changes have heavily influenced theories and practices concerning Vietnamese education. At the same time, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2008) is largely responsible for the majority of educational aspects, including but not limited to curriculum and assessment development. However, the Vietnamese education culture has traditionally followed a *one-size-fits-all* approach that discourages teachers from taking agentic action. Based on this approach, teachers are likely to fail to consider the cultural backgrounds of their students when they decide what to teach because they often excessively rely on the available content in textbooks without any appropriate adjustment. Moreover, learning content should be relevant to learners' academic and life-related goals. Learners should know and understand what they can apply into their real life practices. Especially, Vietnamese learners are increasingly mindful of meaningful learning content, and are adapting to the nationally economic integration into the global environments. Thus, they need support from education in the form of capital development. However, their teachers, who also hold an important role in student development, are unable to practice effective strategies. Therefore, education research in Vietnam needs to have more attention from policymakers and teachers regarding teacher agency to help them both establish unique educational expectations and meet the needs of ethnic and cultural populations (Le, 2015).

### **Research Methodology**

I employed action research to conduct this study. Action research has several advantages that allows practitioners to be engaged in research and developmental activities in order to address educational problems and achieve certain educational values (Meyer, 2000). As a researcher who develops teacher educators' agency of various disciplines, I was inspired to conduct this study because of my research experience on *teacher agency* as a lecturer, as well as my professional observations of local teacher educators in the eight selected universities. During my work in those Vietnamese universities, I found a lot of problems that prevented teachers from developing themselves. Specifically, the teacher educators in those universities were confronted by a wide range of challenges that enabled them to know what agency means and how it can be applied into practice. Also, as it was stated above, they had no room to have access to specific

guidelines of how to exercise agency through professional development activities. For example, curriculum writers do not recommend how to adopt the curriculum to make the curriculum relevant to learners. Therefore, it is clear that they had limited awareness and willingness to innovate and transform their teaching practices for the development of their university students.

With this sense, this study serves as an educational initiative to promote significant improvements, and to broadly inspire more related research on teacher agency in Vietnamese higher education. With an educational intervention which provided teacher educators with knowledge and skills regarding how to develop teacher agency and room for teacher educators to practice in reality, teacher agency was seen to motivate teachers to explore problems in their educational contexts, as well as seek, plan, and monitor educational solutions. This study is methodologically grounded in action research. In this study, I relied on teacher educators' reflections and semi-structured interview data on their learning outcomes following an educational intervention and their processes of changes. The participants composed of academics I have known for a quite long time, and who I found had low exposure to PD activities to support their students. A total of eight teacher educators were recruited, including my professional connection and some recommendations from the colleagues. All intended participants were provided with consent forms and with detailed plans of the project (e.g., purposes, timeline, benefits, and responsibilities). They signed on the consent forms and agreed to have data to be used for research only. Regarding the requirements of the participating teacher educators, they were observed to be from large cities, have at least a local or international Master's degree, and be currently employed at the university level, have good academic standing, with good subject-related and language backgrounds (B2 - C1, IELTS 7.0-8.0), and have teaching experience ranging between 5 and 11 years.

Participant demographics are listed in Table 1.

Information	Participants (Teacher Educators)							
	English (E1)	English (E2)	English (E3)	English (E4)	Chemistry (C)	Biology (B)	Literature (L)	Geography (G)
Experience	9 years	8 years	5 years	9 years	10 years	7 years	10 years	8 years
Qualifications (Master's degree)	M.A	M.Ed	M.A	M.A	M.A	M.Sc	M.A	M.A

**Table 1: Demographics of teacher educators**

### Data Collection

Data for this study included weekly reflective journals, class observations, and narrative interviews. I, as an independent researcher, planned and developed the project for the eight teacher educators, worked with five special guests on topics, and reviewed the training contents and materials with the specialist trainers (in Phase 1). The project aimed to discover how the teacher educators enhance their professional development as a result of teacher agency, such as improving pedagogy-related skills and others necessary competencies (e.g. dealing with conflicts or lack of resources in school/teaching contexts) in case of very few opportunities given at their university. Throughout the project, the eight teacher educators were able to understand what agency is and how to exercise agency. The training involved two main phases: knowledge-building (phase 1) and action-taking (phase 2).

In Phase 1 (October 2016 – January 2017), the teacher educators participated in intensive training in ten continuous weeks which include ten 2-hour digitally-recorded and synchronously-Zoom sessions on a weekly basis. The training involved several topics about the global views on how to develop competencies associated with teaching and research. The typical topics included *Teacher educators' knowledge and sense of local culture; Teacher educators' intercultural (communicative) competence; Teacher educators' perspectives of agency; Teacher educators' construction of teacher agency; Teacher educators' reflective practices in teaching; Teacher educators' collaboration across disciplines*. The above topics were relevant to teacher agency and were instructed by five special trainers. The trainers all held PhD degrees, were experienced teacher educators and were curriculum writers in the field of PD activities for teacher educators in higher education. I closely collaborated with them on finding the topics for the training sessions, combined with instructional methods that could fit the participating educators' preferences and availability. The specialist trainers also coached the teacher educators to plan for the individual project during the Phase 2 and provided feedback on progress. Participants were required to keep journals by writing a 200-word paper which described how each weekly session helped them develop their understanding of teacher agency to apply in Phase 2 and find out what competency was the most important.

Phase 2 (March 2017 – May 2017) also happened virtually, due to the different workplace regions of participants. We, including the specialist trainers and I, together planned carefully and proposed the content of Phase 2 with the educators. We discussed how to pair the educators. The participants were paired to work on an interdisciplinary project (e.g., two different disciplines) and apply the knowledge and experiences they gained in Phase 1 into their intended project. There were four pairs of participants, including Pair 1 (English & Biology), Pair 2 (English & Geography), Pair 3 (English & Literature), Pair 4 (English & Physics). Pairing educators who had different areas of expertise was to help them identify the common goals, learn about another subject, and provide them with the opportunity to comment on one another's work. Each pair was required to choose a critical topic to discuss in their local work settings with based on their current teaching problems, such as *How to choose appropriate curricula and teaching practices to accommodate the needs of culturally diverse student population?*, or *What should be done to achieve the balance between teaching for knowledge and teaching for standardized tests?*. For the final project in Phase 2, they were asked to write a detailed course plan, both individually and collaboratively, for the Fall 2017 semester based on their teaching in university. Pairs also had to develop the course objectives in which they can use teacher agency to enhance their teaching pedagogies. The teaching pedagogies should encourage them to use authentic teaching/learning resources, while employing culturally competent teaching strategies that involve their students' cultural backgrounds. The pairs' final projects were carefully reviewed and continuously monitored, on a bi-weekly basis by the five instructors involved in Phase 1. Moreover, the third reflective journal required the teacher educators to comment on how they used their experiential learning in Phase 1 to inform their instruction. Also, they shared suitable strategies they sought to employ to perform better.

The other forms of data (field notes and interviews) were collected between July and December 2017 after Phase 2, when the teachers returned to teaching classes and were implementing teaching practices. Firstly, field notes were observed through several permitted class visits. The purpose was to see how well the teacher educators enacted teacher agency, instructed, and actively sought, in order to achieve learning goals and address students' learning difficulties. Additionally, the participants were scheduled for digitally recorded narrative

interviews, lasting 1-1.5 hours, for the teacher educators to share their project experiences and how those experiences shaped their teaching practice. The interviews were open-ended, but based on both prepared and open-ended follow-up questions, in an exploratory manner. The interviews provided relevant data by which the teacher educators reflected on how they developed teacher agency in Phase 1 and teaching practice in Phase 2 (Dornyei, 2007). Consistent with the pilot interviews with two teachers excluded from the present study, Vietnamese language was used to stimulate confidence to communicate ideas and nurture rapport between the educators and researcher (Zhao et al., 2010). All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and data reported in this study was accurately translated to English by the author, who is proficient in both English and Vietnamese.

### **Data Analysis**

This action study adopted thematic and inductive analysis (Guest, McQueen & Namey, 2012). With inductive analysis, specific and detailed data can be sorted into categories (Creswell, 2013). Data was open for me to read and place into observed themes, rather than adhering to fixed codes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Open data was specifically targeted to examine the teacher educators' growth of cultural sensitivity, teacher identity, teacher agency, and critical thinking to translate knowledge into practice. After triangulating various forms of data, data was analyzed in a way that I read the transcribed data carefully and connected the sets of code that frequently appeared. Also, I decided to take additional steps to validate the data with current literature. Due to the large volume of data (observation, reflective notes, and interviews) from multiple cases (eight participants), data analysis was conducted by within-case (working independently in Phase 1) and cross-case (working with a teacher of different disciplines in Phase 2) (Duff, 2008; Yin, 2014) to understand how the educators perceived and conceptualized teacher agency (Engle, Conant, & Greeno, 2007). Data analysis was initiated from the eight participants' engagement in knowledge building and action taking. I also tried to access the teacher educators' personal backgrounds, and teaching/school settings to comprehensively understand the teacher educators' voices from their reflections. During reflections, the educators identified new areas of knowledge after they engaged in the project, and how they applied that knowledge to teaching. My written notes from class observations and the teacher educators' shared perspectives were transcribed in Vietnamese and subsequently understood through sociocultural perspectives. Via sociocultural perspectives, part of the transcription for data analysis was translated into English and I ensured accuracy of the translation with each educator. After reconciling data from multiple notes and documents, the in-depth form of analysis helped me write up a draft after member checking with the teacher educators about their statements to ensure the meaning. Finally, I found three themes as evidence of the educators enacting their teacher agency more effectively and confidently. The data was transcribed, analyzed, and reported in the final report.

### **Research Findings and Discussion**

Based on the findings in this project, it appears that the teacher agency was evolving. The educators were placed in subjective contexts and expected to follow fixed norms, although they were also entitled to acts based on personal attitudes. Thus, the empowered educators were

offered an abundance of opportunities, rights, and privileges to exercise teacher agency. Out of eight participants, all agreed that the educational intervention benefitted them in a number of ways. An intended and observed impact included helping the educators understand themselves and others in different disciplines. One of the reasons I aimed to achieve this impact was because the participating educators are now acquainted with cultural differences as part of their self-perception and what they should deliver in their classrooms. Teacher educators' awareness of cultural differences was significant, as they reported that they would like to cater to learners from diverse backgrounds and a wide range of academic and career-related needs. This described impact is consistent with the need to change curriculum which should not be fixed at all times. Another justification behind this impact came from the fact that the educators focused on challenging themselves to break free from the traditional views on pedagogy and the resistance of change. I investigated the teacher educators' sense of agency through various forms, including their intercultural experiences that they gained from the educational intervention, class observations, reflective journals, as well as semi-structured interviews on offered training sessions and the final project. These experiences enabled the educators to become aware of who they and their students are – representing their culturally ethnic groups. Particularly for the interdisciplinary final project, this experience was meaningful because the educators learned to identify and plan to accomplish the goals for themselves and others. Data suggested three themes, that teachers were knowledgeable, intercultural, and inspirational agents. Without considering teachers' prior backgrounds and the students they teach, the present study is limited in the exploration of how the teacher educators exercised agency to inform different roles in the classroom as a result of the intervention.

### Teachers as Knowledgeable Agents

Knowledge is critical to the first mentioned theme. It is beyond what teachers think they have to transmit to learners. It also includes their skills for the educators to deliver knowledge in different ways to offer learners alternative perspectives. Classroom settings have become much more diverse, hence it requires teachers to possess the trained skills to react positively to diversity. After the training intervention, the educators revealed that they were increasingly aware of collaborative learning, which should have been discussed in pre-service teacher education programs when they were trained to become teachers. It is imperative that teachers can effectively negotiate their identities and then enact agency in contexts if they can interact with diverse populations in communities of practice (school, community, etc.), which can offer good places to construct opportunities to build learners' experiences in different contexts (Wenger, 1998). Also, according to Moore's (2006) suggestions on learners' development as independent agents to think and act, collaborative learning can allow critical insight into the challenges involved with actors' current knowledge and the knowledge produced by institutions. An excellent example of this can be found in the following excerpts.

*We came to the training sessions with intentions and hopes, and then worked voluntarily in projects for our individual context [...] We gradually saw that we are not lower than others in terms of social power because now we are equal participants (Interview with the English educator 2).*

*We have our own understanding of our language, culture [...], team-building activities. [...] We are trained to explore how [...] how the cultural values shape us individually, and people's agency. [...] we were encouraged that each of us*

*when using our language shows what our mind says [...] We feel prouder of our voices [...] (Reflective journal from the English educator 4).*

*I care about all students regardless of race. I had my sympathy for the people of under-resourced ethnic groups [...] (Reflective journal from the Literature educator).*

Aligned with collaborative learning and the collectivist learning atmosphere, they could help the educators reflect on some stereotypical images of those from other cultures. For example, the educators might perceive that certain student behaviors were not allowed in the classroom, but the educators often failed to realize that those behaviors are widely accepted within students' regions and cultures. To demonstrate this, Bourdieu (2001) refers to cultural, social, and economic capital, so teachers utilize mutual support from other members in any platform (face-to-face, computer-based, field work & discovery) to exchange their ideas, increase their membership, manage ownership, and mitigate separation from their intended community for economic gains and cultural attachment. Therefore, the traditional classes were teacher-centered, which the educators have now attempted to transform it into student-centered learning classes after they learned from their project engagement. However, teachers cannot create this transformation alone, and they should collaborate with their students. This is why various researchers like Lantolf and Pavlenko (2006), Schwartz and Okita (2009) firmly argue that both teachers and learners should be motivated together to mediate their beliefs with agency, and discuss with each other their plans in order to reach a shared voice. Meantime, it is not appropriate in this study in the sense that Vietnamese teachers are passive and unconfident. More importantly, despite the complexities and tensions of society that these educators might face, those complexities and tensions were internally what can make the educators develop fast in order to act comfortably and conveniently. This is expressed in the excerpt below.

*I bring what I have heard from the trainer to my school. At first, it was challenged, but then it became much easier [...]. My students are the main constructor of knowledge in the class. They help their weaker peers. They back their friends up without disappointed faces. [...] We are more than delighted to stay together daily to develop things, create culture, make our parents proud, and try to learn at their most effort (Interview with the Biology educator).*

Another thing to take into consideration is the educators' ways of choosing teaching resources. This is important because the educators should plan for alternative teaching resources so that they can motivate students to learn, besides using the standardized books. To have these alternatives, teachers and learners should collaborate to design these resources based on their shared purposes. If the educators can accomplish this, it means that they have good teacher agency after they know their identity. Following Priestley et al. (2012), it is right to say that teachers are the facilitators who showcase relevant pedagogy to learners if it suits their preferences.

Besides that, if the educators are curious about bridging connections with learners via engaging dialogues, they should be dedicated to increasing the quality of education by employing various techniques. One of them is to motivate learners in taking part in communities. According to research findings, these communities were found to develop three areas of competence: positive attitudes towards collaboration, active participation in collaboration, and accepting differences during collaboration. A small number of those educators suggested that:

*I, and some of my colleagues, give special emphasis on what students would like to learn, like between the Kinh or non-Kinh cultures [...]. Well ... they do so*

*well! I am glad that they are interested in their own cultural facts – not artifacts. I hope they would make better devotion to their regional success (Interview with the Literature educator).*

*Despite the prominent importance of the grade, we still want to see more about my students' progress. I try to motivate students to talk [...], name them as innovative designers of curriculum. They think and act on what they chose (Reflective journal from the Biography educator).*

*I found that teaching Science is easier. They were asked to prepare something before class, like making questions and raising concerns to talk in the class (Interview with the Chemistry educator).*

Perspectives towards cultural differences are a natural phenomenon. Regardless of familial and social backgrounds, it was advised that the educators should be concerned with students' life histories, including students' past history, present engagement, and future experience because these experiences shaped them uniquely. Therefore, as McNay (2004) recommends, finding solutions to help teachers link students' backgrounds to learning content is of growing concern. According to McNay (2004), it is common that teachers' and learners' experiences are interwoven in a way that teachers are able to use their personal experience to understand learners' expectations. Therefore, in order to help teachers plan practical knowledge sufficiently, it not only encourages both teachers and learners to make decisions which should be relevant to the learning objectives, also including decisions on how to teach and assess. Moreover, teachers ought to have empathetic views on other cultures. For example, the General English, Academic English, or English for Specific Purposes educators can work with someone in another field, although they still believe to be able to sustain their personal identities. During the final project, the educators shared in the interview that they agreed on the essence of not only recognizing their values and practices, but also being willing to step back and listen to the others' views different from theirs. From this example, it is clear that if the paired educators can have different experiences in separate roles, they are more competent to position themselves better in work. Specifically, they could position themselves either as a learner, a teacher, or a researcher and it could serve to help them view themselves differently, and this allowed them to succeed in various settings. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Tao and Gao (2017) regarding the necessary flexibility of changing roles of teachers.

To summarize, the educators were knowledgeable as a result of their engagement in settings where they can work with someone of a different discipline. Also, the educators were able to increase cultural knowledge, which they believed that learning about cultural differences could largely impact their learning to a large extent. This cultural knowledge was important in motivating them to enact curriculum in an engaging way, leading to their students' increased motivation. Findings also showed that the teacher educators could manage changing emotions when faced with challenges that asked them to take on different identities. The educators should be able to utilize their experiences to use their capabilities to move towards their established plans. From this vantage point, increased acquisition of knowledge, however, was not sufficient because the teacher educators were required to have better intercultural competence. This will be discussed in the next theme, with regards to how teacher agency could engage the educators to seek, think about, understand, and address cultural stereotypes in order to have intercultural experience.

### Teachers as Intercultural Agents

Following discussions with participants, it was clear they had inadequate access to teaching resources due to numerous reasons, such as teaching experience, students' level of input, and university facilities. The teacher educators shared that their learners felt bored because they had to learn about so many cultures they were either unfamiliar with, or saw as insignificant. At the same time, they were unable to perform cultural practices that made more sense and interested them. Besides their role to study, students are the breadwinners of their families, and their study was frequently threatened by financial difficulty. Therefore, the intervention has, to a certain extent, offered teachers some useful ways to incorporate their cultural knowledge. These ways are also shared by Moller and Nugent (2014). One of the ways that Moller and Nugent (2014) suggest is that teachers or teacher educators should involve students to explore cultural knowledge of themselves and cultural knowledge that they find the most important. This exploration has potential to make student learning more relevant and culturally responsive. This way requires many steps, one of which is to encourage students to have critical thinking abilities. As the educators shared after the intervention, their students were surprised by the social reality that is more astonishing than they could imagine. As the Literature educator explained:

*We do not place more special attention to the cues which look for the "right" or "wrong" replies. Rather, we design ways to stimulate the class, by talking to each student as much as possible. They can feel free to present what they know from family that elucidate the writers' and reporters' implicit meanings (e.g., beauty), and then we can give them extra grades when they talk. We had students' opinions, and encouraged them to write and discuss with their partners. They can stand and share. We find it as a rewarding experience. (Interview with the Literature educator).*

Furthermore, without the ethno-relative inclinations, teaching science is not meaningful, so a Science educator shared, "I teach science which cannot rely purely on textbooks. We need more science in life." Similarly, the Geography educator reflected that his applied practices benefitted learners who accepted that different cultures exist. He indicated that:

*I learned about culture in different disciplines. I want to share it with my students. We, with other educators, promote seeing things in local and next-by areas. We can organize trips and tell them what is useful. They see real things, so we expect they have wider ranges of life understandings. They will give up criticizing others (Interview with the Geography educator).*

The educators claimed that their viewpoints changed positively. They explored the differences between students' cultures and their own, so they could quickly adapt and make complex contributions. This is consistent with Leal and Crookes (2018) that when having teacher agency, teachers can consider divergent and convergent perspectives in classrooms in order to easily realize their new identities. Based on this, the findings suggested that the educators were better able to manage conflicts with other people inside (the classroom students) and outside (the project member) school settings when attempting to effectively respond to changes (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Varghese, 2006). Pairing the teacher educators of different disciplines was an excellent way to help them cross their epistemological boundaries, which resulted in enhancing educators' current knowledge and transforming their self-perceptions. Educators should be able to step in other's shoes to see their "selves" in "others" and vice versa. The findings are consistent with Bennett (1993) that educators can gain experience because they know various ways to construe lived experiences. Doing so successfully requires teacher

educators to create tight-knit collaboration with learners in classroom contexts. Ultimately, students can positively perceive the cultures of others and thus deal with cultural misunderstandings when working on particular task-based or project-based activities. Teachers' and learners' broad exposure to local academic environments and international social networks can increase their possibilities to recognize other embodied life experiences and appreciate their voices.

*I benefit from teaching different cultures via English poems. My students like to know cultures. I liked to learn a long time ago. Cultures talk about the voices of poets. Poets wrote what they thought and how they had connected their motivation and their seeing. I let them talk as they feel. They feel inspired and they feel the value of lessons (Interview with the Literature educator).*

*We explain Chemistry in uncomplicated ways. We have knowledge which seems hard, but I figured out how to make it understandable. I get my students to practice learning difficult things and present it in a simple way. We rely on experiments, but we reflect and write down what we see. Reflection is key and, yes, it is important for students to reflect (Interview with the Chemistry educator).*

In parallel, the educator shared in the interview that students were likely to grow in their academic English proficiency thanks to her meaningful platforms to generate a multilayered interaction. Clearly, students could use skills they learn in class in order to interact more with others who could have different varieties of English. Thus, they could improve their future negotiation skills and, more importantly, express appreciation for other cultures. In this sense, intercultural teachers could construct their classroom in a way that they desired to provide students with personal life-changing experiences based on storytelling activities. Also, intercultural agents could help assist learners in seeing gaps in approaching theory and practice in English grammar. Through storytelling, they carefully chose works and did the best they could. They translated knowledge from reading and listening skills to do better in speaking and writing skills. Besides yielding good scores, they were positively engaged in learning.

*I used plenty of materials from language sources like on the internet, magazines, cultural websites, and so on. The materials talk about culture. They motivated me to learn about culture among students and students had my full support to pick what websites are useful (Interview with the English educator 4).*

The majority of educators who responded to this item reported that they could fully exercise agency. They felt disinterested in seeing teaching in an ethnocentric way in which their culture is superior to others. Consistent with Rudolph (2013), when teachers have sympathy towards different cultures, they can integrate themselves in the present while knowing each culture requires them to have differing levels of participation.

Intercultural skills are necessary for the educators because, as indicated above, they taught students from various cultural backgrounds. Thus, finding the common voices among learners and developing engaging and inclusive learning environments can be very important. Relevantly, the theoretical voice of Bennett (1993) offers sound knowledge regarding how teachers should make their efforts in promoting student-centered learning experiences to fully engage students interactively, encourage them to take their selves into consideration, and make sure no learners are left behind or isolated. By doing so, both teachers and learners are active agents who can dissolve their ethnocentric predispositions in their quest to possess personal empathies towards cultural and intellectual variability. Teachers can hold intercultural skills to

understand their learners and act professionally. While exercising agency, intercultural agents can create meaningful teaching and trust based on their appreciation of learners' cultural differences. Moreover, intercultural skills among the educators can enable the voices of learners to be heard. Unlike in teacher-centered classrooms, students can contribute and co-design teaching and learning content. Voices pave engaging ways to inspire students' autonomy, which is protected by the facilitating roles of teachers. Both teachers and learners do not tend to discriminate against one another as each contributes to the learning environment conducive to inclusion and equity. Student choices are raised, individually or collaboratively, via reflections and discussions. It is important for teachers to identify ways to contribute to relevant discourses and take pride in themselves, and as a consequence, motivate their students' learning progress. Despite constraints at the institutional level, a little action change can inspire a more prolonged effect, as long as it is put into action. Taking on a role as an intercultural teacher is challenging, but the educators' positive attitudes can be translated into their meaningful actions.

### Teachers as Inspirational Agents

Inspiring agents are additionally a pivotal perspective in this study, which is probably a consequence of knowledge enrichment and intercultural competence in teacher educators. The most meaningful consequences of teachers' continued self-reflection are not only their increased awareness of their current students, but also their commitment to future learner generations. Also, they have time to step back and think about what motivated them to become an educator and why they continued in the profession. The participating educators described that they had a lot of complaints towards social expectations, institutional goals, limited access of students, to facilities. Despite those, their strong wills to make small changes handed them courage which led to various intentions ready to pursue. The results of this study were comparable to the findings of previous works. Following Edward (2005) and Edwards and Protheroe (2003), it is clear that success is a celebration that everyone wants, but failure is what drives people's agency. That is, lessons are manifested as the quest for stories which glue teachers' cultural selves, personalities, and histories. It implies that the historical background of individuals cannot be lacked to form and develop teacher agency, according to Bourdieu (2001). In other words, the understanding of histories sets a prerequisite for teachers to be able to identify possibilities for themselves and increase their freedom. On top of it, it is helpful to design tasks of reflection and team-based inquiry in order to respect and utilize educators' knowledge, background, and cultural understanding. Such knowledge allows teachers to exercise agency in maneuvering cultural aspects, which can be understood by translating their thoughts, beliefs, and teaching practices to teacher agency. To demonstrate this, the three educators in this study shared that:

*I do not mean to look down on standard tests. However, my opinion is that I would see how curriculum is evolving in the program and its connection to practical use. Also, I prefer students working in groups and developing their and other cultural backgrounds. In this way, I am respecting what my students are bringing into the classroom and they are not shocked to know their voices are listened to (Interview with the English educator 1).*

*We are empowering students. We transform our status quo. We are changing things. We see things connected. We examine cultures influencing each other. No culture is better. We value where they come from, what is good to know about their hometown, what is interesting about their favorite places. We start our*

*curriculum from what they like (Reflective journal from the Geography educator).*

*We are teaching and studying science in an open way. It is no longer important to claim students are doing right or wrong, but they need to be read as learners of how they learn from observations they have and from reading they enjoy. Also, they are able to learn from working in teams. They have support from friends and they believe they are not alone along their learning journey (Reflective journal from the Chemistry educator).*

Continued professional development is driven by how educators exercise agency. Agency is exercised in a way that is also impacted by the voices of others, including students in this case. This is consistent with Roger and Wetzel (2013) that teachers who can “act purposefully and reflectively on [his/her] world” (Roger & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) trust themselves and trust others’ perspectives. The educators decided that others’ voices should be fully included when considering their intended actions. They said so because they believed student development is a central goal of their profession. The educators were eager to inspire their learners’ contributions in the sense that their voices are what they looked for in their future and what could keep their motivation or commitment to learning. Their students were inspired to work on their desired roles, while the educators tried to show them how to build rapport between them. Unlike the intercultural teachers, inspirational teachers do not show learners how to manifest themselves in an intercultural way. Rather, learners are advised to perceive, understand, and commence their work in an open way with their peers, thus being able to view their colleagues’ backgrounds in a respectful and responsible manner. To specify, the Biology and Chemistry educators discussed that:

*If we believed memorizing things was a good idea, it is no longer suitable. With science, we prefer students understanding the concepts and how they are related to experience that they had in the past. We do not take advantage of knowledge available in the field, but we should be able to challenge why it is not the opposite (Reflective journal from Biology educator).*

*Science knowledge is building our community. Learners are in different roles. We will be innovating and making change (Interview with the Chemistry educator).*

It is noteworthy that these excerpts were associated with the educators’ beliefs. Indeed, the educators tended to translate their beliefs into decisions in classes, such as through teaching practices. Their beliefs varied according to time and context, which consequently increased their tendencies to make better decisions. This finding is similar to Kayi-Aydar (2015), who studies a teacher whose beliefs guides her to behave differently. Also is echoed by Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), it shows that the teachers’ positions are taken into consideration as they deliberately manage decisions to act in light of structural social changes as they fall into dense “relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 74), such as teachers generating good learning environment in support of learner development. In this sense, the data findings suggested that communities of practice were built and mathematically equated with three components (expertise, power, commitment). Furthermore, if information that teachers provide to learners is sufficient to help students be able to explore their intended knowledge and the meaning of their actions, the quality of teaching and learning become positive. For example, as previously mentioned in the literature, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as “temporally constructed engagement by actors”, but not what “people can

*have*” because “it is something that people *do*” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970), confirming that teachers and learners are not dichotomous actors. Instead, they are co-designers of the curriculum and accountable for one another’s success. Therefore, it is clear that learners’ success relies on others – in fact, they are advised by teachers to learn about others – and not only peers but also someone with higher social status.

Within the three emerging themes reflecting how the teacher educators performed right after they were back to university and enacted change, they showed optimistic attitudes towards their students’ development. Especially, the most noticeable finding came from the educators’ instructional plans for their final projects which were built on their intended goals to transform their classroom climates and innovate their teaching pedagogies. The intended goals required the teacher educators to pay attention to students’ lived experiences (e.g., family & cultural backgrounds) as well as their personal traits, characteristics, aspirations, and motivations. These goals were able to be strengthened by the educators who were supposed to connect their developed instructional materials with practical values which matter to their learners. However, while educators exercised teacher agency, there were obstacles that teacher educators might have when identifying similarities and differences of cultural backgrounds among learners as well as between learners and them. This was because this identification depended on many factors, including learners’ and educators’ characteristics, educators’ understanding of agency, teachers’ exposure to pedagogical knowledge (e.g., in teacher education or teacher professional programs), and educators’ subjects. However, the weight of these existing factors and how they were connected were unclear, which can be considered as potential avenues for future research on teacher agency among the teacher educators.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

The research findings have found three thematic areas, which are teachers as knowledgeable agents, intercultural agents, and inspirational agents. In this sense, it is clear that the current teacher educators were socially dynamic agents. They could confide in others and were naturally prone to stay engaged with the transformational trends in a tech-driven domain. In the field, very few studies have considered educators’ exercise of agency that inspires their personal and professional motivation. The present study sought to understand how the teacher educators developed agency with various identities as a result of the educational intervention. While teacher agency appeared in different categories, they emerged to overlap and influence each other. As the three roles were found, teachers should not be considered as passive knowledge transmitters now. Instead, they made every effort to exercise agency to make positive contributions in their classrooms. Despite some weaknesses, the educators took active roles to compromise themselves of personal benefits to promote their learners’ development.

In the context of Vietnam, educational reforms have initiated significant changes in response to the interconnected world. Still, those reforms are unable to be immediately adapted to the Vietnamese context, particularly to develop Vietnamese teacher educators. Our findings confirmed that the offered training on teacher agency, the final projects to allow them to practice teacher agency, and the continued reflection on how the educators could employ teacher agency in a long time were useful because the teacher educators understood their individual dispositions. While the offered training and the final projects provided them with an opportunity to imagine and enhance their competency, reflection was utilized for recalling personal experiences and

possessions in order for them to manage internal and external conflicts, and define their own and outside worlds in a critical way. The study showed that the participating educators possessed strong capabilities to communicate interculturally. Those capabilities enabled the educators to establish and carry out actions appropriately.

The current research aimed to acknowledge the extent that the educators' participation in the offered training, the final project, and reflection could impact their teacher agency, identity, and professional development, as well as their students' success. These elements were observed after they joined in this 1-year project. Collected data led us to conclude that teachers' abilities grew in terms of enacting teacher agency and growing sensitivity to work well in intercultural teaching settings. Also, a temporary consensus was reached that has previously never been defined about the definition and how teacher agency was developed in Vietnamese higher education. Teachers were more cognizant of showcasing their agency in their professional careers. They were recognized as globally accountable participants in 21<sup>st</sup>-century education. The present study has posed some limitations, including the small number of participating teacher educators. Secondly, I have not examined the extent to which the exercise of agency was driven by their varied educational and professional backgrounds, as well as their power to make decisions and enact their practice under national and institutional policies, which informed their professional development and classroom practices. This can be useful for future research based on this study's contribution to inspiring teacher educators and other teaching and non-teaching stakeholders in a number of educational contexts.

In the context of teacher professional development in general, education for teacher educators and pre-/in-service teachers never ends, it needs to be continuously revised, developed, expanded, and embedded into different parts of the world. Education for every teacher is of growing importance and urgency because she or he is typically an influencer of a certain student population in education. Moving onto the learners, learners should be ready to take on various challenges, possess language competence communication skills, have good subject-related skills, acquire intercultural awareness and sensitivity to succeed in the interconnected world. Simply speaking, research on teacher agency in all disciplines should not be underestimated. Based on this study on the educational intervention to promote teacher agency for the university educators, further caveats need to be carried forward. In light of sociological and psychological aspects that are absent from the Bennett (1993)'s ideas emerging from the second theme, we urgently call for more attention from educational leaders, policymakers, publishers, local researchers, practitioners, teachers, and learners to be cooperative in exploring these certain areas. Future research should be aimed at investigating the best practices to promote the teacher agency and intercultural sensitivity, as well as questioning whether the two either influence each other or work individually.

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