Title of Project:

English Teacher Agency: A Case of Vietnam

Researcher:

Le Duc Manh University of New South Wales manh.le@student.unsw.edu.au

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Anne Burns University of New South Wales



Le Duc Manh

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

The impetus for the research project presented in this doctoral thesis results from my experiences as a teacher trainer of English primary teachers during my five-year participation in the Vietnamese National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (commonly known as NFLP 2020 or Project 2020).

This professional experience enabled me to meet and work with English primary teachers from different regions in Vietnam and listen to their stories about their classroom lives during the implementation of the NFLP2020 language curriculum. Through these teachers' discussions and reflections, I became empathetic towards the myriad of challenges they encountered in their daily teaching practices, such as heavy teaching workloads, overloaded teaching content, rigid curriculum specifications, low student motivation, low salaries, tight administrative supervision, and insufficient professional support and resources. Although the list seemed endless, I was particularly interested in their stories of how they overcame the constraints they encountered in order to accomplish their teaching responsibilities in the workplace, despite the very limited support they appeared to receive from policy stakeholders.

The stories that the teachers told illustrated in various ways their personal manifestations of teacher agency. I became inquisitive about how and why the English primary teachers I encountered exercised their agency under the constrained conditions they described, despite the imposition of new policies. Clearly, teachers are not empty vessels (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). They have funds of knowledge (Graves & Garton, 2014), theories for practices (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2007), and teaching passion (Day, 2004). They mediate classroom practices "through the values, beliefs and attitudes that underlie professional actions" (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2007, p.9).

The overarching purpose of this thesis is to explore Vietnamese primary teacher agency enactment in response to a new language policy. In particular, this case study research examines how a group of English primary teachers in the urban, rural, and island region of a province in Vietnam exercise their agentic power in response to the primary English language curriculum

introduced as part of the NFLP 2020. The study aims to shed light on teacher agency in a centralized educational system.

Research Questions

- 1. How do English primary teachers in each selected region exercise their agency in response to the language policy?
- 2. What are the similarities and differences in teachers' enactment of agency across the selected regions?

Research Methodology

The research presented in this thesis is a case study that explores teacher agency in the teaching of English following its introduction at the primary education level in the Vietnamese context, as part of the NFLP 2020 policy. It is a micro-level policy study that considers the perspectives and experiences of teachers. The study is also a multisite study conducted across three different school contexts—urban, rural, and island in one province of Vietnam.

A descriptive-exploratory multi-case study research design was selected (Duff, 2008; Yin, 2014), in order to gain insights into the perspectives of teachers who are charged with implementing the curriculum and data were collected via in-depth interviews and classroom observations. Before the case studies in each site were conducted, analysis of policy and curriculum documentation was carried out. This analysis aimed to frame the teachers' perspectives and to embed their insights within the broader policy perspective. In particular, a group of English primary teachers, school principals, and regional English managers in a province in Vietnam were selected as study participants. By exploring the interplay between individual and systems-level mechanisms, this study aims to provide understanding of language policy implementation in this context (Hopkins, 2016).

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1: How do English primary teachers exercise their agency?

The English primary teachers in this study were found to exercise their agency in three main contexts: (1) misalignment between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, (2) inner desires and motivation, and (3) symbolic responses to the policy mandates.

Context 1: In terms of the misalignment between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, the findings reveal the following: the teachers exercised their agency as a consequence of what they perceived as the policy's ignorance of contextual and learner factors and also because of their own educational backgrounds (Graves, 2016). First, the teachers adapted the policy mandates because they felt that their students' needs were not met. Examples supporting this claim could be found across four language policy components (textbook use, teaching content, teaching methods, and assessment). For example, in the three study contexts, textbooks were required as a *de facto* curriculum (McGrath, 2013), which the participant teachers were mandated to strictly implement. However, taking into account their students' needs and interests, all the teachers complained about the overloaded content and inappropriate resources (e.g., pictures or vocabulary). As a result, the participant teachers adapted the textbook to 'suit the needs, abilities, and interests of the students' (Graves, 1996, p. 27).

Second, the teachers exercised their agency when there was a conflict or tension between the policy mandates and their beliefs, prior knowledge, and expectations. The teachers were not empty vessels (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Instead, they used their knowledge (Graves & Garton, 2014) to address the perceived curriculum—policy conflicts. They adopted teaching techniques and materials they believed were right for their own classroom circumstances, given their repertoires of knowledge. For example, in all three contexts, the English primary teachers believed that students' outcomes were their priority. Although the policy mandated them to employ 'child-friendly' activities, the teachers decided to use various alternatives such as translation, repetition, substitution, and reading aloud, all of which derived from their training or previous experiences as language learners. Teachers employed their own theories for practice, 'by which the teacher mediates classroom practices through the values, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie professional action' (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2007, p. 9). With these methods, it can be said that the teachers' personal theories led them to surmount the structural orders or 'the systems in which they worked' in the light of their expected outcomes or goals (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2007, p. 5).

The teaching content mandates also provided another example of the conflicts between policy expectations and teachers' practices. Although the policy expected English primary teachers to focus on developing students' communicative competence in two language skills—speaking and listening—the participant teachers interpreted and implemented the curriculum differently. In all three regions, they tended to focus on linguistic content. For instance, the urban teachers focused on vocabulary, structures, and grammar because of their orientation towards the test. Rural teachers focused on vocabulary because they believed that this aspect of language was more important to their students. The island teachers taught the linguistic content because of their interpretation of their duties. In all three contexts, teachers' beliefs and expectations mediated their orientation towards, and choices of, teaching content.

Third, the teachers exercised their agency when they had to meet the requirements of a prescribed curriculum with little clarification of its contents from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Department of Education and Training (DOET), Bureau of Education and Training (BOET), and schools. Consequently, they had to make sense of and interpret the policy based on their own knowledge and understanding, which, in some cases, did not reflect the original intention of the policy. For example, due to lack of training, rural and island teachers interpreted formative assessment as the writing of student reports on a weekly or monthly basis, rather than the need for daily feedback on student learning in the classroom.

Context 2: In terms of teachers' inner desires and motivation, the findings reveal the following: the teachers exercised their agency when they desired to apply or experiment with something new. In particular, the participant teachers exercised this kind of agency when they felt passionate, motivated, inspired, or supported (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2007; Enever, 2017; Moore, 2007). Under such conditions, they devoted themselves to making lessons interesting, with much investment in gathering resources and preparing activities for their students. For example, one of the urban teachers, Thanh, was inspired about teaching pronunciation. Her interest came from her observations that many of her colleagues found it challenging to teach. Therefore, she decided to challenge herself by voluntarily presenting a demonstration on this language aspect at her school and invested time into locating resources and activities for it. Her dedication finally brought success and she is now well-known for teaching pronunciation in the region. An island teacher, Hong, narrated a success story based on her love of teaching. She

decided to invest considerable time in studying the lesson carefully and building lesson goals. She incorporated some child-friendly activities to motivate her students despite previously perceiving these techniques as unsuitable for her student age group.

Context 3. In terms of teachers' symbolic responses to the policy mandates, the findings reveal the following: the participant teachers exercised their agency when they chose to symbolically respond to the policy mandates. "Symbolic responses" refer to the way teachers react to policy messages in the appearance "but not the substance of their work" (Coburn, 2005, p. 33). This kind of agency occurred when the teachers responded to policy mandates in constrained conditions that were brought about by teaching workload, overloaded content, class size, job insecurity, administrative supervision, or rigid mandates. Many examples of teachers' symbolic responses could be found in this study. For example, the teachers in these three contexts symbolically responded to the test mandates by complying with the format transferred to them. They incorporated speaking skills in the test even when teaching this language skill was deliberately avoided by the urban and rural teachers. Similarly, island region teachers did not teach the speaking skill but still included it in the test. These teachers' responses indicated that they aimed to appear to comply with the imposed structural rules.

However, in practice, the teachers flexibly or "creatively" implemented the speaking skill in a manner that suited their teaching conditions and learners. For example, the urban and rural teachers tested only one or two out of four tasks in the speaking section mandated by the policy documents. The island teachers modified the speaking task as a short answer section to make it simpler for their students.

Research Question 2: What are the regional similarities and differences in the way participating teachers exercise their agency?

Data reveal regional similarities in the three different contexts, and the participating teachers responded that they conformed to the policy mandates, which included textbook use, teaching content, teaching methods, and assessments. The participant teachers positioned themselves as policy implementers because they believed that they, as teachers, should follow the policy mandates and prescriptions. This kind of positioning was categorized as first-order positioning (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) because English primary teachers attempted to remain within a moral space.

However, English primary teachers in the three contexts did not entirely take this positioning for granted. Instead, they repositioned themselves in different ways as resisters, adapters, negotiators, and strugglers. That is, they could accept, resist, struggle, negotiate, or adapt the policy mandates imposed according to their interpretations, preferences, choices, and current teaching conditions. This act was categorized as second-order positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) in that the teachers challenged and reversed the structural order. The teachers' self-positioning and repositioning showed that even when they claimed that their implementation conformed to the policy mandates, this conformity did not mean that they were all scrupulously followed. As their positions embraced a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), it can be inferred that the teachers exercised their rights and freedom as teaching professionals to perform their duties in ways that may or may not have aligned with policy prescriptions. Indeed, the teachers claimed their rights and agency and exercised them in response to the policy mandates.

The participant teachers' self-positioning and repositioning also indicated that their positions were not fixed. They navigated between different roles (implementers, strugglers, resisters, negotiators, and adapters) depending on teaching environments, students, and pedagogical intentions under the same language policy components (i.e., textbook use, teaching content, teaching methods, and assessment). Therefore, it can be inferred that the teachers' positioning was fluid and that teacher agency was sporadic and changeable. This positional fluidity also reflected their dynamic policy implementation.

Rural and island teachers were found to exercise their agency in more constrained working environments with 'minimal support' (Wedell & Grassick, 2018, p. 4) than their urban counterparts, though constrained conditions manifested differently. First, the participant teachers received very limited support from schools, parents, and other educational providers. The rural teachers, for instance, complained that they were not provided with essential resources that accompanied the textbooks, such as flashcards, large colorful pictures, or digital resources. As a result, the teachers had to use their personal funds to obtain these resources. Similarly, the island teachers received very limited support from their school. Hong, for example, stated that she even had to insist that the school leaders provide textbooks. Alternatively, Hai compensated for the deficits in teaching resources with online searches.

Second, the rural and island teachers, especially the latter, exercised their agency with very limited professional development. The rural teachers felt that their professional development (PD) participation was insufficient and expected to have more PD opportunities to take up. Similarly, the island teachers admitted that they were rarely selected to participate in PD activities because of their schools' characteristics (two school levels and English as an optional subject). Due to this limited professional support, the rural and island teachers tended to struggle and resisted the policy mandated textbook use, particularly in the context of textbook revisions, on a frequent basis. In addition, the island teachers in particular seemed to lack the motivation and commitment to teach English to primary students because they were simultaneously assigned to teach junior high school students. They considered their responsibility for English primary teaching as optional or additional work. Therefore, their agency manifested through their resistance and struggles against the policy mandates.

Third, the rural and island teachers perceived themselves as under greater administrative supervision from either their school leaders, DOET, or BOET inspectors, without advance notice of inspections. For example, the rural teachers revealed that their school leaders might come to the class unexpectedly to see how their lesson was going. An island teacher, Hai, also described their experience when being inspected by DOET. To protect their positions and avoid criticism, these teachers chose to follow the policy mandates as closely as possible. Therefore, it can be inferred that in most cases, their capacity for agency remained dormant. This manifested as their failure to take risks and their perception of themselves as conformists with the policy mandates. In contrast, the urban teachers appeared to exercise their agency in a more favorable manner, which is reflected in professional training opportunities and school leaders' support. In relation to professional development, these teachers felt that they became confident with their teaching skills as a consequence of their participation in PD workshops. Although they were not formally trained as English primary teachers, they had opportunities for PD activities on English primary teaching methods offered by DOET. Their frequent participation in DOET PD activities reflected the situation that 'formal support is frequently available to only some teachers, who may then be expected to cascade training content to colleagues in their local context' (Wedell & Grassick,

2018, p. 4). As presented in Section 6.3, these teachers were frequently selected (by DOET) to give teaching demonstrations to other provincial English teachers. In addition, urban teachers also enjoyed on-site professional training by private educational providers who had close relationships with the school. These opportunities supported the urban teachers to advance their professional knowledge and English primary teaching skills.

In terms of school leaders' support, the two urban teachers appeared to be encouraged to activate their agency by the school leaders. Unlike their rural and island counterparts, urban school leaders placed great emphasis on English and considered it to be a strategic subject. The urban teachers did not feel under administrative pressures in relation to teaching content and their school leaders were willing to provide them with essential teaching resources. However, the urban teachers experienced other factors that both facilitated and constrained their agency. First, parents' high expectations appeared to compel urban teachers to devote themselves to their teaching activities. Both teachers felt that the parents who monitored their children's learning progress might send feedback on their teaching practices to school leaders. This parental involvement might also cause urban teachers to give symbolic responses. Second, while the competitive school working environment was another important motivating factor for teachers to exercise their agency to fulfill their responsibilities at the highest level, it also constrained their collegiality. In particular, the working environment made the two urban teachers feel that they had to give their best for good treatment at work. This competitive working environment impeded effective interaction between colleagues because they did not want to share their professional skills and knowledge

Implications

Implications for macro-level actors: MOET.

Language policy development in Vietnam takes place within a hierarchical structure that is characterized by ministry power and responsibilities devolved to teachers. However, there is a mismatch between reform initiatives and the local context. MOET is currently embracing an extensive number of language policy initiatives – a situation that can lead to so-called "reform syndrome", which refers to "so many concurrent reforms on the education system" (Cheng, 2009, p. 75). There are three main conditions for reform syndrome to occur: (1) "the system is eager to achieve the reform targets in a very short time and implement many initiatives in parallel; (2) the reforms themselves often ignore their own cultural and contextual conditions during the implementation process; and (3) too many parallel reforms can lead to chaos and multiply the chances of reform failing" (Cheng & Walker, 2008, p. 514). The result is likely to be confusion, passivity, and co-dependence among subordinate actors, which constrains their autonomy, creativity and agency in implementing the policy mandates. Therefore, rather than viewing policy making as the property or right of the macro-level, language policy could be seen more constructively as a practice in which all the relevant actors, including teachers, are policy constructors.

In addition, in relation to the policy making process, top-down policy makers should be aware that teachers possess the capacity to act as agents in response to language policies. As Freeman (1996) observes:

Teachers have considerable autonomy in their implementation of high-level decisions, which leaves room for significant variation in the way they put the plan into practice on the classroom level [...]. Considering teachers and administrators as planners allows an understanding of how practitioners potentially shape the language plan from the bottom up (p. 560).

Policy makers should also be aware of the regional differences and the need to empower and provide teachers across the regions with sufficient professional support and resources when the policy is transferred and translated into classrooms. If teachers in the marginalized regions (i.e., rural, or island) feel discriminated against or isolated, they may respond negatively to the policy mandates. Therefore, the topic of equity (Chinh et al., 2014; Phyak & Bui, 2014) should be placed on the agenda for the policy-making process to narrow the regional gaps.

In addition, policy makers should take account of teachers' inner worlds to foster their positive agency. It is common that the policy documents comprise rules, regulations, guidelines, and instructions imposed on teachers for their implementation without considering what they think and feel. If teachers are not motivated by the imposed mandates, they tend to resist them. Therefore, such topics as teachers' thinking, dispositions and sociocultural conditions should be put forward in the policy-making agenda.

Implications for meso-level actors: DOET, BOET, and schools.

Because teachers' policy implementation is directly impacted by these meso-level actors, their roles are decisive. To be effective, Vandeyar (2015) suggests that meso-level actors should be provided with skills "as appropriators, interpreters, and learners of policy" (p.358). In particular, they should be equipped with sound knowledge of the curriculum policy, teaching methods, assessments, and materials. Without this expertise, meso-level actors may become co-dependent on MOET and adopt a passive position. If they engage in policy interpretation with limited expertise, the design or intent of the original policy may be distorted, leading to failure in implementation (Honig, 2006) or failure to establish a strong professional community of practice for teachers in the region. According to Vandeyar (2015):

If within a developing country context, districts and provinces actually constrain and hinder policy implementation, the argument may prevail as to whether they serve as legitimate systemic structures. Thus, principals and teachers may be skilled to receive and interpret policy makers' intent with intermediaries. (p. 357)

In a centralized political system like that in Vietnam, the political mechanism operates through different administrative layers. Therefore, no administrative body is ever abolished, even when it performs its responsibilities poorly. In 2017, there was a public discussion about whether the BOET level should be abolished because it seemed to be redundant and imposed more administrative burdens on schools and teachers (Luan, 2017). In a newspaper article, however, a representative of the national assembly pointed out that this level was part of the political mechanism and could not be removed (Luan, 2017). If this bureaucratic level continues to exist, BOET supervisors should be equipped with sound knowledge of curriculum policy so that they can fulfill their role of supporting teachers.

It is well-documented that the school is the unit or center of change (Fullan, 2007) and school culture is the essence of sustained success (Hattie, 2012). Kennedy (2011) also stresses

the important roles of an institution which may "produce local counter-language policies from those proposed at macro levels" (p.11). At the institutional level, the role of school leaders is vital. School leaders can support teachers both psychologically and with resources (Fullan, 2007), lead cultural change in the school (Emore, 2004), and treat teachers well (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). In the centralized Vietnamese education system, primary schools are closely controlled by higher administrative bodies such as DOET and BOET. Therefore, their autonomy in managing curriculum policy is likely to be limited.

Despite this administrative constraint, schools can play an active role in maintaining teachers' commitment and passion for teaching, which activates teachers' agentic power and sustains their positive agency. In addition, school principals can develop a supportive working environment in which every teacher feels safe and motivated to have the greatest positive effect on student learning and achievement. To this end, school leaders should be well-informed about educational change and policies so they can support teachers more effectively. Unless principals understand the dimensions of change in beliefs, teaching behavior and curriculum materials, they will not be able to understand teachers' concerns and support them in policy implementation (Deng & Carless, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Wedell, 2009).

Implications for teachers' professional development.

Professional development is important for teachers to exercise their agency because, without appropriate expertise, they can fall into the trap of false clarity (McGrath, 2013) (see Section 9.3, Chapter 9). Teacher development does not exist in a vacuum but is situated in a particular context, with particular people who have particular needs, purposes, and goals (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Hence, it is both inappropriate and impractical to provide the same training content to teachers from different regions. However, PD activities in Vietnam are centralized with prefabricated training workshops for all English primary teachers. In addition, Hai, an island teacher did not find a PD workshop that he attended valuable and considered it an opportunity to relax. Therefore, the current mode of PD activities should be changed to embrace regional differences and differences in teachers' levels of experience. Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012), which enables English primary teachers to learn in their school context or communities of practice, seems to offer a useful alternative for English primary teachers to address their context-specific concerns, especially for those in rural and island locations. Hargreaves (1997) also suggests that teachers' professional learning should address issues of interests to teachers and not issues raised by others. Therefore, teacher trainers are advised to arrive at the local schools or communities and work with teachers for their specific needs in particular contextual environments. It is assumed that English primary teachers would promote their agency if they gain confidence in making use of contextual constraints.

In addition, to promote teacher agency, it is crucial to recognize and foster their capacity for reflection and inquiry. Action research is a potential tool to promote teachers' professional knowledge and capacity for agency. Freeman (2016) argues that teachers can "address their agency by thinking heuristically about how they teach" when they are encouraged to engage in research activities (p. 143). Action research in particular has been identified as a powerful tool to empower teachers to grow professionally and agentically (Edwards & Burns, 2015; Moore & Bounchan, 2011). Effective teachers can become reflective practitioners who adopt an inquiry position on their practice (Burns, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). In a recent study, Vaughn et al. (2014) assert that even rural educators

can gain significant benefits for the unique needs of their students through engagement with action research, which could bring potential applicability to the teachers in disadvantaged areas.

While I support the argument that English primary teachers could also engage in research, I believe that more commitment to educational change is required from policy makers, educational administrators, and teachers themselves. Teachers are likely to resist educational changes if these changes do not make sense to them. They cite different reasons for not engaging in research, such as insufficient resources or heavy workloads (Moore, 2011), lack of motivation, time, professional training support, and equipment (Stroupe & Kimura, 2011), lack of power, or absence of reward (Moore & Bounchan, 2011). As well, in Vietnam (as elsewhere in the developing world), "research culture" is a novel concept. From his personal experience with English teachers in a developing country, Moore (2011) observes that very few teachers are keen to undertake research: "professionals are curious about understanding research but not particularly interested in doing research" (p. 341). Moore's (2011) concerns raise the question of how to activate teachers' power of agency in relation to their engagement in research for professional development, which would be an interesting topic to explore in future.

Implications for English primary teacher education.

In the long run, pre-service English primary teacher education is important to ensure qualified English primary teachers for Vietnamese language policy implementation. To nurture teacher agency, it is argued that pre-service teachers should become critical thinkers (Freeman, 2016; Hult, 2018). Priestley et al., (2012) also assert that when humans exercise their agency under concrete situations, they are reflexive and creative in response to the problem. Therefore, thinking skills should be fostered in the pre-service teacher training program. However, during the first two years the current teacher training program focuses on general education courses, such as Hochiminhism, Marxism, educational psychology, English language subject-matter knowledge such as phonology, grammar, discourse analysis, as well as the four language skills (Le, 2011; Nguyen, 2017). During this training period, pre-service students do not have opportunities to develop their reflective thinking skills about their future profession. Even in the third year of training when the pre-service students are offered courses on teaching methodologies, reflective practices seem to be limited.

Kumaravadivelu (2001) criticizes current models of teacher education which tend to "transmit a set of preselected and preselected and presequenced body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the prospective teacher" (p. 551). To promote teacher agency, preservice English primary teachers should not be trained merely to become teaching workers who faithfully follow one fixed teaching methodology or approach. Rather, they should be helped to develop critical capabilities through critical reflection and thinking.

Language education is argued to be currently in the era of post-method (Akbari, 2008; Bell, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2006) where post-method practitioners are expected to practice their profession with competence and confidence (Akbari, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). In the post-method era, teachers are autonomous individuals who can "build and implement their own theory of practice that is responsive to the particularities of their educational contexts and receptive to the possibilities of their sociopolitical conditions" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 548). In the post-method world, thinking entails freedom - and indeed responsibility - "on the part of the teacher to articulate her choices and decisions and thus to work out her own method" (Freeman, 2016, p.138). Therefore, the current teacher training

program in Vietnam should provide a space for pre-service teachers' mental activity to be nurtured and developed. Pre-service teachers could be given opportunities to practice and rationalize their choices and decisions among different ways of doing things in the classroom.

With such in mind, the current teacher training program should incorporate one course on critical perspectives on language education issues, which could give pre-service teachers opportunities to critically reflect on contemporary issues in relation to the language education. Roleplay scenarios (Hult, 2018) are proposed to be one of the potential learning activities for this kind of course. Hult (2018) investigated the effectiveness of using roleplay scenarios as an initiative to develop and foster pre-service teachers' critical and reflective thinking on language policy implementation. His study showed that roleplay scenarios enabled his students to critically engage with LPP topics. He also asserts that without critical capacities, there is a risk of teachers' blind adherence to policy mandates.

Roleplay scenarios are also argued to be a potential solution for pre-service teachers to reflect on language curriculum topics such as textbooks, assessments, teaching contents, and teaching methods. For example, all the participant teachers predominantly relied on textbooks in their teaching. Critical reflections on textbook materials are crucial for teachers to creatively exploit the textbook. While a course on textbook evaluation and use is worth considering, Graves and Garton (2014) argue that this proposal is important but insufficient. They suggest that preservice teachers need to have had a successful experience of textbook use. Therefore, roleplay scenarios may offer a beneficial alternative for pre-service teachers to gain hands-on experience and reflective skills on language curriculum topics, including textbook materials.

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