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 **EXPLORING TEACHER LEARNING THROUGH THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN COURSE DESIGN: A CASE STUDY**

**(Điển cứu về hoạt động học chuyên môn của giáo viên qua việc tham gia thiết kế khóa học)**

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# PART I: INTRODUCTION

## 1. Rationale of the study

Recently there have been a large number of research focusing on various activities of teacher professional development; however, course design as a professional development activity seems to be under-researched. In reality, in many universities in Vietnam, the classroom teachers are often involved in designing courses for internal use, and the university in the present research is not an exception. I was one member of the task force that was assigned to design English for Academic Purposes courses in this university, and I learned certain knowledge and skills of curriculum development and of testing and assessment. Therefore, I was curious about what and how the other members of the task force learned through their involvement in the course design project. This curiosity drove me to do search on teacher learning and development and explore teacher learning through their involvement in course design.

## 2. Aims of the study and research questions

This study is conducted with the aim of exploring what the involved teachers gain for their professional development and why teachers gain professionally through their involvement in course design the way they do. The overarching question is: *How does the participation in course design benefit university EFL teachers’ professional development in terms of professional knowledge and skills?*

In an attempt to find answers to the above-stated leading research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

1. What do teachers learn professionally from their experience getting involved in course design?
2. In what ways do teachers learn what they learn during their participation in course design?
3. Why do teachers learn in the way they do during their participation in course design?

## 3. Significance of the study

The study is significant in the way that its findings are likely to help conceptualize course design as a professional development activity for EFL teachers in a specific context. Although no generalization of the findings is intended or expected, transferability of the findings to other similar contexts is possible. Such conceptualization is hoped to facilitate individual teachers in their professional learning as well as institutional managers in designing professional development activities.

# PART II: THE STUDY

# CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

## 1.1. English language teacher education and development in Vietnam

It is evident from the teacher education curriculums that the subject of teaching methodology mostly focuses on techniques to teach language skills while the theoretical foundations for those techniques or research-based knowledge is not emphasized and such contents as materials development and language assessment just account for a small part of the subject. The same situation happens to the teaching practicum – that is student teachers make an effort to apply the techniques taught at colleges or universities to their lessons.

Another noticeable feature of language teacher education in Vietnam is that the curriculum aims at training student teachers to teach at primary schools (grades 1 to 5), secondary schools (grades 6 to 9), and high schools (grades 10 to 12), not at college and university levels. Accordingly, most of them do their practicum at primary, secondary, and high schools. Nonetheless, a number of student teachers are recruited to teach at colleges and universities where they may need to develop the internally-used curriculum and/ or course books.

## 1.2. Course design project in an English Faculty

Since 2010, the English language teacher education program has been changed into the academic credit system. Until 2012, the program was required to be modified in accordance with Decision on Regulations of Opening New Educational Programs and Modifying Educational Programs enacted in 2012. Accordingly, the courses of English language skills within the program were required to follow the trend of prevalent international educational programs.

## 1.3. Chapter summary

The course design activity cannot be thoroughly understood outside the macro and micro contexts in which it is situated. This chapter has provided a contextual discussion on English language teacher education and development in Vietnam as well as the conditions in which the curriculum innovation was initiated.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1. Teacher professional development

It can be noticed from the review that different definitions of teacher development, professional development, continuing professional development, and teacher learning seem to emphasize different aspects in the same process. Some of the definitions focus on the outcomes of the learning process (Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Craig, Kraft, & Plessis, 1998; Lang, 1990; Leithwood, 1992; Richards & Farrell, 2005); some focus on the actions teachers do during the process (Day, 1999; Richards & Farrell, 2005); some emphasize the input and conditions for the development (Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Freeman, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Therefore, in the present study, teacher learning and teacher professional development can be used interchangeably without any semantic difference. Specifically, they refer to teacher participation in a social activity, which involves both teachers’ actions and their social and cultural experiences and which results in their growth in professional expertise. Even though different outcomes of the learning process are mentioned in the reviewed definitions, the present study just focused on the teachers’ development in professional knowledge and skills. Additionally, the development was not limited to theoretical knowledge but included the teachers’ understanding of practical knowledge as well as their awareness of the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge.

## 2.2. Theoretical perspectives on teacher professional development

That teacher learning or teacher professional development is defined in different ways (See Full text, Chapter 2, section 2.1) reflects different theoretical perspectives on learning and development, including behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. In the present study, teacher learning was viewed as participation in a social activity; accordingly, socio-constructivism, which focuses on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the construction of knowledge, was adopted as its theoretical perspective. (For the summary of the key features of these perspectives and the reasons for choosing socio-constructivism, see Full text, Chapter 2, section 2.2)

## 2.3. Course design

### 2.3.1. The concept of course design

The meaning of curriculum, course, program, and syllabus is often overlapped and may cause confusion to the reader. Many scholars discuss this issue and propose the way to distinguish these terms (e.g. Dubin & Olshtain 1986; Graves 1996; 2008; Mckimm 2003; Messick & Reynolds, 1991; Musingafi et al. 2015; Richards 2013; Wiggins and McTinge’s, 2006). However, Graves (1996), argues that the distinction among these terms is not practical as some teachers may consider their course as ‘curriculum’ and others consider their curriculum as syllabus. In this study, these terms are used interchangeably, and course design follows the process postulated by Graves (1996):



***Figure 2.1: The process of course design for teachers***

### 2.3.2. Course design as a professional development activity

As mentioned in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1, in order to develop a course, course designers need to do a number of steps from need analysis to course evaluation and modification. It is similar to the case of hunting analyzed by Leont’ev (1981): the hunting activity comprises of many actions which might not have the same object or motive like “frightening a herd of animal and sending them toward other hunters, hiding in ambush”. The activity itself can be done individually, in which one teacher covers all of the actions (i.e. steps of course design) or collectively, in which different teachers fulfill one or more actions. In either cases, teachers have an opportunity to have meaningful experiences during the process of course design shown in Figure 2.1 (Graves, 1996). This reflects the principle of continuity proposed by Dewey (1938) for a meaningful experience. Moreover, during the process the teachers need to interact with their colleagues and students. This reflects another feature: interaction. In essence, course design can be considered as an experience that stimulates teachers’ learning and development.

## 2.4. Studies on teacher professional development and course design as a professional development activity

### 2.4.1. Studies on teacher professional development in other countries

The review of the previous studies on professional development activities reveals a number of highlights. First, besides being categorized into individual and collaborative learning activities (Alvalos, 2011; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002), teacher learning can be grouped as formal and informal activities (Alvalos, 2011; Borko, 2004; Eekelen, Boshuizen & Vermunt; 2005; Lohman, 2000; Meirink, Meijer, and Verloop, 2007; Wubbels, 1992, to name but a few). Up to now, some formally structured professional development activities as reflective teaching, action research, team teaching, and online discussion forums have received more research attention. Meanwhile, informal and incidental professional learning, particularly that through involvement in course design has been under-researched.

Second, previous research findings indicate that teacher learning can be affected by many factors: commitment (Leithwood, 1992, cited in Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992), attitude, (Day, 1999; Curtis, 2001, cited in Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Freeman, 1989), clear goals, content focus, and duration (Borko, 2004; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 1994; Little, 1982; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007, cited in Bausmith & Barry, 2011), context (e.g. Desimone, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005; Herner-Patnode, 2009; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008), collaboration (e.g. Brody, & Harder, 2015; Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009; Garbin, Garcia, Ferreira do Amaral, Silva, & Ridruges de Abreu, 2015; Herner-Patnote, 2009; Santacroce-Tejedor, 2011; Williams, 2010),

### 2.4.2. Studies on teacher professional development in Vietnam

The very first highlight of research on teacher professional development in Vietnam is that it much focuses on pre-service teachers’ teaching practice or practicum (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013; Dang & Marginson, 2013; Dang, 2013; Hudson, Nguyen, & Hudson, 2009; Le, 2013; Nguyen, Dekka, & Goedhart, 2007; Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen, 2015; Tran & Huynh, 2017; Vo, Pang, & Wah, 2018; to name but a few).

Secondly, in order to address the needs of enhancing teachers’ quality, the primary focus has been placed on building effective models of professional development or evaluating the professional development activities. Many professional development forms have been investigated by Vietnamese researchers, including training (Vo, 2017; Vu & Pham, 2014), mentoring (Hudson, Nguyen, & Hudson, 2009), professional learning community (Ho, Nakamori, Ho, & Ho, n.d.; Vo & Nguyen, 2009), team-teaching (Dang, 2013; Le & Nguyen, n.d.), online learning modes (Ho, Nakamori, Ho, & Lim, 2014, Mai & Ocriciano, 2017). However, none of the reviewed studies in Vietnam were done on curriculum development as a professional activity for teacher learning.

### 2.4.3. Studies on course design as a professional development activity

It is revealed from the literature that many reports on teachers as course developers did not focus on teacher learning but other curriculum-related issues (Nunan, 1987; Graves, 1996; Shawer, 2009). Besides, these reports were about course design at the classroom level (Nunan, 1987; Graves, 1996; Shawer, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2017), which meant the teacher mostly worked as an individual course developer for a small target group of learners. What is revealed serves as a gap in literature, which leads to the need of conducting the present study: teacher learning through their involvement in course design; in this design project teachers worked both individually and collaboratively to design courses used by all teachers in an English Faculty.

## 2.5. Approaches to research on professional development

Based on various methodology books and articles, Desimone (2009) summarizes the situations in which each of these methods is useful. The author’s summary indicates the importance of how appropriate the data collection methods for the purpose of a specific study. However, another review of more than 50 studies on various professional development activities reveals that reflective writings or narratives have not been used by many researchers.

## 2.6. Theoretical framework for the present study

The theoretical framework of the present study is activity theory Engeström (1987).



***Figure 2.2: Human activity system (Engeström, 1987, cited in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)***

Contradictions constitute a key concept activity theory (Engeström, 2001). In the analysis of human activity, four levels of contradictions may be identified: (1) primary inner contradiction within each constituent component of the central activity; (2) secondary contradictions between the constituents of the central activity; (3) tertiary contradiction between the object/ motive of the dominant form of the central activity and the object/ motive of the culturally more advanced form of the central activity, and (4) quaternary contradictions between the central activity and its neighbor activities (Engeström, 2015, p.71-72).

In short, the course-design activity system in the present study is as follows:



***Figure 2.3: Course-design activity system (built upon Engeström, 1987)***

## 2.7. Chapter summary

It can be seen from the literature that most of the studied professional development programs are intentional designs, which means that certain goals are determined beforehand and certain activities are chosen to satisfy the predetermined goals. Meanwhile, learning can happen incidentally, or through teachers’ social experiences either consciously or unconsciously (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Desimone, 2009; Patton et al., 2015; Tynjälä, 2008). In this sense, course design is an informal and incidental learning activity in the workplace, which is likely to facilitate teacher professional development. In addition, it is revealed in the literature that many authors argue that course design empowers teachers in a meaningful way, that is, engaging them in a professional experience for their ongoing learning and development (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Desimone et al., 2002; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2007), yet few studies examine it as a professional development activity. Further, until now a huge number of studies have investigated models of effective professional development and impacts of professional development activities with the focus on what-questions. Whereas a few studies have shown researchers’ interest in how- and why-questions, using narratives as a data collection tool.

These lacunas in the literature and practical issues (i.e. classroom teachers in a university may be involved in developing internally used courses at any time) lead the present study to looking into what teachers may develop when involving in course development. The study neither aims to evaluate the effectiveness of course design as a professional activity nor intends to investigate teachers’ voices in a certain context. It aims to explore what and how teacher learned from their involvement in such a professional activity and why they learned that way. Viewing learning through the lens of sociocultural theories, the study adopted activity theory as a framework for data analysis and discussion. Chapter 3, which follows this chapter, discusses the research methodology and provide information about the research procedures in this project.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1. Contextual considerations

### 3.1.1. The research conditions

The course design project started in 2012. During the process many meetings were held, but the meeting minutes were not written in detail. The research was initiated in 2016 when the courses were in the revision process and most of the teachers involved in the course design project still teaching the corresponding courses in the Faculty.

### 3.1.2. The role of the researcher

I was one of the key members of both Team 2 and Team 3; therefore, I mostly understood the perspective on which these courses were built up. Therefore, I used my knowledge about the project and the information collected from the informants (the Heads of Divisions A and B), as a sort of simulation for more responses from the participants if necessary.

## 3.2. Theoretical considerations

Mertens (2005) defines the paradigms in reference to three questions posed by Lincoln and Guba (2000) about the way of looking at the world: (1) ontologically - “what is the nature of reality?”; (2) epistemologically - “what is the nature of knowledge and relationship between the knower and the would-be known?”; (3) methodologically - “how can the knower go about obtaining the desired knowledge and understandings?” (p.8).

## 3.3. Methodological considerations

With the aim of understanding the complexity of teacher learning under the influence of numerous contextual factors (e.g. the activity of course design they were involved in, the setting of the activity, the working conditions they were experiencing), the present study adopted qualitative approach.

## 3.4. Research methods

The present study adopted qualitative case study approach. The data consisted of written narratives (either in English or Vietnamese) of each teacher about their life and work in general and their experiences of designing course(s) in particular and oral narratives (after the quick analysis of the written narratives). All the oral narratives were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Besides, information from the two Heads of Division, the meeting minutes, and the relevant course materials were used as the stimuli to elicit the participants to tell more detailed stories if necessary.

The data analysis and interpretation were guided by activity theory. The findings of the study were reported by themes.

## 3.5. Data collection and analysis procedures

### 3.5.1. Data collection procedures

The process of collecting data is summarized in the following table:

***Table 3.1: A process of data collection***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Method** | **Aim** | **Time** |
| Written narrative 1 | To get to know about teachers’ personal life, academic background, the context of the design project, and any surrounding factors which may affect their working in general and their design process in particular. | Teachers were provided a guideline and wrote their first narrative in one month. |
| Written narrative 2 | To investigate what teachers did in the design process, who they met or talked to about the design activity, and whatever changes and/ or feelings they experienced during the process.  | Teachers were provided a guideline one week after they sent the first written narrative back. They wrote their second narrative in one month. |
| Oral narrative(s) | To collect further information for interpretation about teacher learning. | Teachers were contacted for interview arrangement at least two weeks after they sent the second written narrative back. Initial analysis of teachers’ written narratives was made before the oral narratives. The first oral narrative was conducted at least one month after the second narrative was sent back. |

###

### 3.5.2. Data analysis procedures

Following Duff’s (2008) proposal of an overall process of conducting a qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation of the current study follow a number of steps: (1) transcribing the oral narratives; (2) coding (both written and oral narratives); (3) inducing themes (pre-determined and emerged themes); (4) member-checking. Contradictions are identified according to the coding rule by Murphy and RodriguezManzanares (2008) and put into a table as in the following example:

***Table 3.2: Coding example***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Contradiction | Definition | Evidence | Resolution |
| Subject – division of labor | Unequal power relationship | She (Hong) named the skills that were needed for the 3B Listening-Speaking sub-course, the topics (which were the same or similar to those of the 3B Reading-Writing sub-course), and the list of materials that she already had. What we needed to do was to find more materials that matched with the given skills and topics… Hong probably had a lot of experience in course design. Additionally, I found her reasons [for her initiated ideas] quite convincing. She talked gently, but the arguments were rational. (Follow-up interview) | None |

In short, the answers to the three subsidiary research questions (see Part 1) based on the components and principles of the activity theory (See Chapter 2, Section 2.6) were summarized in the matrix postulated by Engeström (2001, p.138):

***Table 3.4: Matrix to summarize the answers to subsidiary research questions***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? |  |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  |  |  |  |  |
| What do they learn? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How do they learn? |  |  |  |  |  |

##

## 3.6. Evaluating qualitative research

In qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability should be used as criteria instead of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (cited in Merriam, 2009). In the present study, how these criteria were guaranteed is discussed (See Full text, Chapter 3, section 3.6).

## 3.7. Chapter summary

This chapter has presented the research design and explained the choice of data collection and analysis methods which were employed in the study. It is argued on the theoretical foundation that case study (e.g. Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) as well as narratives (e.g. Barkhuizen, 2014; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) were appropriate to reveal individual persons’ social and historical life. Besides, approaches to coding and analysis have been described to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. In the following chapter, Chapter 4, I will present the results of data analysis.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

## 4.1. Teachers’ motives: an attribute for successful learning

Unlike the other teachers, Hong and Hue could overcome their personal and social conditions and learn about competence-based approach to curriculum development, material selection and development, and subject matter knowledge (i.e. conceptualization of EAP courses). With clear motives, they kept reading about what was needed for their course design and reflecting what they did, hence significant learning. These two teachers’ learning was summarized in Table 4.1 and 4.2.

## 4.2. Professional communities: A resource for learning

Thu and Thuan were much influenced by the communities which they were in. On the one hand, the communities helped them learn more about defining course development approach, selecting materials coherent with the defined objectives or developing appropriate assessment tools. On the other hand, the communities seemed to discourage them from doing necessary research for professional development. Thu and Thuan’s learning was summarized in Table 4.3 and 4.4.

## 4.3. Trust: Is it an incentive for professional learning?

Huong and Duong showed complete trust in the team leader during their participation process. They claimed their knowledge gained by doing the project, but with such complete trust in their leader or more experienced teachers, how they benefited from their participation was questionable. Huong and Duong’s learning was summarized in Table 4.5 and 4.6.

## 4.4. Challenges emerging on the learning journeys

Five out of ten teachers involved in the present study, namely Xuan, Bach, Diem, Duong, and Thanh just gained the practical knowledge of curriculum development procedure thanks to their leader’ step-by-step requirements. It was possibly because of the role they played in their team (unequal task division) and of the available resources (inadequate social interaction, lack of incentives and awards, and time constraints).

## 4.5. Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings of the present study with reference to the interaction in each activity system. The data show that all of the teachers in the study could, more or less, learn from their participation in the project; however, different teachers could learn different things, depending on the tasks they needed to fulfill directly as well as on their own motives. In general, these teachers could learn mostly practical knowledge of curriculum development (i.e. development process, approach to curriculum development, material selection and development, testing and assessment), and awareness of EAP curriculum. These teachers also learned in different ways: discussing and acquiring the shared knowledge (Thu, Thuan, Xuan, and Bach), doing as demanded (Huong, Duong, Diem, and Thanh), and actively reading and critically reflecting (Hong, and Hue). There are many social and historical factors that affect their learning: the teacher’s needs of developing curriculum design competence (all ten teachers), self-determination and clear motives (Hong and Hue), the teacher’s trust (Duong, Huong, Hue), nature of the community (Thu, Thuan), unequal labor division (Diem, Duong, Thanh), financial conditions (Hong, Diem), and time (Hue, Thu, Thuan, Huong, Duong, and Thanh).

***Table 4.1: Hong’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Hong as a team leader |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  | - The classroom teachers complained about the course materials- Teachers as course developers in Team 1 had different view on EAP | - Being a serious learner- First being involved as an ordinary member who did not know much about the intentions and process- As a new leader, having little understanding of the available materials- Teaching the 4B course- Observing a lesson by a novice teacher and listening to the other colleague’s comments- Attending an appraisal meeting on Team 1's course materials | - Contradiction between prior knowledge and experience as a classroom teacher and the raw collective object: designing an EAP course - Contradiction within subject: prior knowledge and new knowledge- Contradiction between theoretical knowledge and practice- Contradiction in conceptualizing the course content between the subject and the other course developers |  |
| What do they learn? | - Awareness of the linkage between prepared materials- Awareness of the curriculum development process - Skill of ordering the course contents- Conceptualization of EAP |  |  |  | - Expansion of object from following the informed steps to better understanding of the given materials and process- Expansion of object from completing the design activity to conceptualizing the course and producing better quality materials  |
| How do they learn? |  |  |  |  | - Review the previously prepared materials (of the 3B and 4B courses)- Reflect the finished tasks - Review the available EAP textbooks- Reflect the teaching experience |

***Table 4.2: Hue’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Hue as a team leader  |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  |  | - Being a serious learner- Attending the training on aligning tests with CEFR- Being involved in the design project as a team leader- Attending the trainings on competence-based curriculum and writing up course objectives - Finding hard to teach the first version of the 4B course | - Contradiction within subject: practice and theoretical knowledge of competence-based curriculum and of test development- Contradiction in the conceptualization of EAP courses between the subject and the other course developers |  |
| What do they learn? | - Theoretical knowledge of competence-based curriculum- Conceptualization of EAP courses- Awareness of limited capacity of test development |  |  |  | Expansion of object from completing the design activity to reconceptualizing the course that reflects the nature of EAP |
| How do they learn? |  |  |  |  | - Attend the trainings on writing up course objectives- Reflect the practice on writing the objectives of the other courses- Reflect the teaching experience of the given version of the 4B course- Reflect the prior knowledge of and experience with EAP - Analyze the available EAP textbooks- Critically read the CEFR documents |

***Table 4.3: Thu’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Thu as a team leader (when developing the 2B course) |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  |  | - Not being interested in reading about TESOL- Being confused about the design task as the other team members- Lack of material resources- Lack of relevant trainings | - Contradiction between the subject’s prior knowledge and the raw object: designing the course in a new approach- Contradiction within subject: prior knowledge and new knowledge- Contradiction between the raw object and the organizational rules (time and resources) |  |
| What do they learn? | - Awareness of the importance of course objectives- Understanding of the coherence of the materials with the course objectives- Awareness of the importance of theoretical foundation in a professional activity |  |  |  | Expansion of object from completing the design activity to selecting the textbook that could cover the defined objectives |
| How do they learn? |  |  |  |  | - Based on prior teaching experience (including the experience of teaching the 1B course)- Read the CEFR document (many times)- Discuss with the team for shared knowledge |

***Table 4.4: Thuan’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Thuan |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  | - classroom teachers’ practice different from the course developers’ intentions- debate among the team members about the difficulty level of each test item | - not being trained on curriculum development when studying at university- being involved in the first meetings about curriculum innovation- taking part in reviewing the old English course- being trained on backward design- observed the other teachers’ lessons using the designed materials- being required to design a test for a target level, based on test specifications- lack of knowledge in test development- trainings on test item writing (for the other project) were held in time and some members were trained | - Contradiction between the subject’s prior knowledge and the object: (develop a course in backward design approach; designing test for a target level)- Contradiction within subject: prior knowledge and new knowledge- Contradiction between the course developers’ intention and the classroom teachers’ practice- Contradiction between the mediating artifacts and the object- Contradiction among the course developers on the interpretation of item difficulty |  |
| What do they learn? | - Theoretical knowledge of backward design- Awareness of the application of backward design in the institution- Awareness of item difficulty in test development |  |  |  | - Expansion of object from completing the design activity to designing new course materials that match backward design approach- Expansion of object from completing the design activity to ensuring the difficulty level of the test as a whole and of each test item |
| How do they learn? |  |  |  |  | - Attend the trainings- Reflect the theoretical knowledge of backward design and the classroom teachers’ practice- Discuss with the team for shared knowledge |

***Table 4.5: Huong’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Huong |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  | - debate among the team members about the difficulty level of each test item | - No theoretical knowledge of curriculum development- not be trained on curriculum development- had complete trust in and admiration for the leader/ more experienced teachers- perceived her role as ordinary and needed to obey the leader’s requirements- preferred learning by doing than by reading | - Contradiction between the subject’s prior knowledge and the object- Contradiction within subject: prior knowledge and new knowledge- Contradiction among the course developers on the interpretation of item difficulty |  |
| What do they learn? | - Awareness of curriculum development process- Awareness of item difficulty in test development |  |  |  |  |
| How do they learn? | - Adopt the leader’s and the more experienced teachers’ knowledge |  |  |  |  |

***Table 4.6: Duong’s learning***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activity system as unit of analysis | Multi-voicedness | History | Contradictions | Expansive cycles |
| Who are learning? | Duong |  |  |  |  |
| Why do they learn? |  |  | - being determined but not ambitious- no theoretical knowledge of curriculum development- not being trained on curriculum development- lack of experience in teaching listening and speaking skills- having complete trust in the leader- perceived her role as ordinary and needed to obey the leader’s requirements  | - Contradiction between the subject’s knowledge and the object- Contradiction within subject: prior knowledge and new knowledge |  |
| What do they learn? | - Awareness of curriculum development process |  |  |  |  |
| How do they learn? | - Adopt the leader’s and more experienced teachers’ knowledge |  |  |  |  |

***Table 4.7: Summary of teachers’ learning***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | What do they learn? | How do they learn? | Why do they learn? |
| Thu | - Awareness of the importance of course objectives- Understanding of the coherence of the materials with the course objectives- Awareness of the importance of theoretical foundation | - Discussing and adopting the shared knowledge- Reflecting | - Not being interested in TESOL- Not being interested in theories- A lack of organizational support- Concurrent relevant trainings |
| Thuan | - Theoretical knowledge of backward design- Awareness of the application of backward design in the institution- Awareness of item difficulty in test development | - Attending trainings- Discussing and adopting the shared knowledge- Reflecting | - Time constraints- Workload- A lack of organizational support- Concurrent relevant trainings |
| Huong | - Awareness of curriculum development process- Awareness of item difficulty in test development | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Trust in the leader- Perceived role as an insignificant member |
| Xuan | - Awareness of curriculum development process | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Task involved & motives- Inadequate social interaction |
| Bach | - Awareness of curriculum development process | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Task involved & motives- Inadequate social interaction |
| Hong | - Awareness of the linkage between prepared materials- Awareness of the curriculum development process - Skill of ordering the course contents- Conceptualization of EAP | - Reading- Reflecting | - Being a serious learner- Tasks involved & motives- A lack of organizational support |
| Duong | - Awareness of curriculum development process | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Time constraints- Trust in the leader |
| Diem | - Awareness of curriculum development process | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Incentives and awards- Task involved & motives |
| Hue | - Theoretical knowledge of competence-based curriculum- Conceptualization of EAP courses- Awareness of limited capacity of test development | - Attending trainings- Reading- Reflecting | - Having a strong desire for good quality- Tasks involved and motives- A lack of organizational support |
| Thanh | - Awareness of curriculum development process | - Adopting the shared knowledge | - Task involved & motives- Inadequate social interaction- Time constraints |

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter 4 presented the findings in relation to the teachers’ learning journeys through which the learning incidents could be seen throughout their participation process. As mentioned in Chapter 2, activity theory (Engeström, 1987) was adopted as the theoretical framework of the study; accordingly, a case or a unit of analysis was an activity system in which each of the teacher participants was the subject (Figure 2.4).

Importantly, contradictions – one of the tenets of activity theory, are of importance: they may result in change and development when they are recognized and resolved (See Chapter 2, Section 2.6). Therefore, looking into the emerging contradictions during the teachers’ participation in the design activity and how these contradictions were resolved helps to understand what teachers learn, how they learn, and why they learn that way simultaneously. In other words, a more comprehensive understanding of each teacher’s learning was revealed. In this chapter, the discussion will be presented in relation to different types of contradictions which were identified during the teachers’ participation as well as the role of those components in determining the quality of an activity. Accordingly, course design as a professional development activity will be conceptualized.

## 5.1. Contradictions in teachers’ design-activity systems: resolved or unresolved?

### 5.1.1. Primary inner contradictions

Primary contradictions can be seen within subject and community. One example of contradictions within subject was between the teacher’s prior knowledge and new knowledge (Thu, Thuan, Huong, Hong, Duong, and Hue).

One example of contradictions within community was among the teachers-as-course-developers (within Team 1, and between Team 1 and Team 2) as well as between the community of teachers-as-course-developers and the community of classroom teachers.

### 5.1.2. Secondary contradictions

Secondary contradictions can be seen between the subjects and the objects and between the objects and the mediational tools of the activity. Most of the teachers in this study experienced the contradiction between subject and the raw object, specifically between the prior knowledge and the object of developing courses in a new approach (Thu, Thuan, Huong, Hong, and Duong), the object of developing tests of an outcome-based course (Hue, Huong, and Bach). To a certain extent, this contradiction in different activity systems was resolved with different mediational means; however, it seemed common that the mediational means were not adequate.

## 5.2. Teachers’ motives and professional development

None of the teacher participants volunteered to design EAP courses. The team leaders were offered to be members of the task force by the Head of the Division, and the team leader who believed in their responsibilities and abilities involved the team members. As a result, most of the objects in the design activity were collective objects which were created by the outsiders (i.e. those who were not directly involved in the project). It could be said that none of the teacher participants had a motive for learning about curriculum development, and they gained practical knowledge from their doings instead of learning systematic theoretical knowledge in the field. This finding is similar to the finding of the other researchers (Freeman, 1989; Curtis, 2001; Desimone et al., 2002; Desimone, 2009; Truong, 2015; Vu, 2011). In other words, there was a tension between the collective object generated by the outsiders or the whole team and the individual teachers’ newly-developed object. When this tension could not be resolved, professional learning hardly occurred.

## 5.3. Contradiction resolution: a need of appropriate and sufficient mediation

The data of the study showed that there were a variety of mediating artifacts in this design project, including the CEFR document, available published EAP textbooks, team meetings, appraisal meetings, and short trainings. However, many of the contradictions were not fully resolved, and teacher professional development was limited. The reasons might be the appropriate mediating artifacts were not provided timely or sufficiently, or the participants did not utilize the artifacts appropriately, or the other mediational means (in relation to subject, rules, community, and division of labor) were in need.

In short, a contradiction could be resolved by means of personal active participation, involving active reading, and critical reflection (e.g. Hong and Hue), or of shared knowledge (e.g. Thu, Thuan, and Huong). However, in some cases, those mediational means were not sufficient for systematic and continuous learning. For example, more theoretical support was needed as a guidance for the teachers to take actions. To a certain extent, the teachers themselves could search relevant readings for theoretical foundation, but they might be discouraged if they was lacking in time for their daily work and life or if they had financial hardship. Therefore, it would be better if the Faculty Board and/ or the Governing Board organizes more trainings with invited experts as well as provides more financial and administrative support. This confirms Tynjälä’s (2008) idea that there should be a close link between organizational factors (e.g. the way in which the activity is organized, and the support from the institution) and individual factors (e.g. personal autonomy, thanks to which the teachers will actively read and do research on the needed issues).

## 5.4. Chapter summary

It is evident from the findings that activity theory is a framework through which inner interactions within an individual as well as external interactions with other individuals and the world are likely to be uncovered. Specifically, in the present study, the factors that affect teacher learning were analyzed in their intertwined relationship to reveal what the teacher learned, how they learned, and why they learned that way. The findings of the present study suggest that a learning activity could lead to a good outcome if the following factors are guaranteed: (1) the object is meaningful to inspire the subject to take right actions, (2) the subject is an agent who is willing to learn, has abilities to utilize the givens, and practices reflection regularly, and (3) the mediational means need to be appropriate and sufficient.

# PART III: CONCLUSION

## 1. Summary of key findings

It is evident from the findings of the study that course design is a meaningful activity for teacher professional development. However, like the other professional activity, course design as a professional development activity cannot be effective to all of the teachers involved. The quality of the activity is affected by many conditional factors. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 5, these factors are interactional; it means that two or more factors interacts in different ways may exert a divergent influence on what and how the teachers learn.

## 2. Implications for teacher professional development

### 2.1. Implications for teacher participants

The study provides substantial evidence that it is necessary to raise the teachers’ awareness of incidental learning opportunities and of how to make use of those opportunities. All of the participants of the study claimed that they could learn via their involvement in course design. Nonetheless, whenever there was a need of theoretical support or further self-reading most of the teachers believed in collective knowledge of the community and/ or their own experiential knowledge. That the teachers act in this way can limit the potential knowledge they may gain from the activity. Equally importantly, it is recommended that the teachers be aware of the relationship between theoretical knowledge and their experiential knowledge.

### 2.2. Implications for professional development design

In order to promote teacher learning in any form of professional development, it is necessary to create one or more meaningful object for the participants. Division of labor also has a considerable influence on the activity operation (e.g., how much the participants involve in the activity and/ or their attitudes towards their own roles). As a result, along with the preparation and organization of a professional development activity, monitoring the power relationship between members or exercising appropriate leadership is also important for teachers’ growth. Moreover, in order to support an individual’s learning of theoretical knowledge, an activity monitor is of critical importance.

## 3. Limitations of the study

The first limitation of the study was that the project lasted from 2012 to 2017 while the data were collected in 2018. Therefore, it might be argued that the design project was implemented a long time before the study was conducted. In fact, up to 2018, the teacher participants were still working on the course materials even though the revision was limited to mechanical revision. Importantly, these teachers were still teaching these courses, which is believed, more or less, stimulate them to recall their related activities in the past.

The second limitation of the study was that it used only one method of data collection: teachers’ narratives. In fact, data triangulation was guaranteed to a certain extent. First, the first written narrative was a collected a period time after the second written narrative. This process helped to triangulate the information about the context and the operation of the project. Second, more than one member of each team was involved in the research. Their stories about the same events could be seen as another evidence of data triangulation.

## 4. Recommendations for future research

- Use theory/ perspective triangulation (Patton, 1999) to enhance the credibility of the study

- Conduct research on incidental learning (through involvement in course design as well as other professional activities) in various universities to have better understanding of teacher professional development in Vietnam

- Use activity theory in designing and researching professional development activities

# LISTS OF PUBLICATIONS/ PRESENTATIONS

Nguyen, T.C. (2017). Sociocultural theory in practice: Implications for teacher professional development. Graduate Research Symposium (p.63-70). Hanoi: VNU Press.

Nguyen, T.C. (2018). Course design as a professional development activity: A case study in a university. International Graduate Research Symposium: Linguistics – Foreign Language Education Interdisciplinary fields (p.84-98). Hanoi: VNU Press.

Nguyen, T.C. (October, 2019). Understanding of teachers-as-course-developers through the lens of activity theory. International Graduate Research Symposium: Hanoi: VNU Press.